

**Submission  
No 19**

## **INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Java Group Programs Inc.

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# Java Social: Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation

A proposal for the inquiry into the prevalence,  
causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

Submitted by Dr. Kristine Theurer

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*“In the traditional institutions people often live out their lives in a kind of collective loneliness, desperately anxious in their isolation. Even today, some forms of intervention seem to have the nature of short-term fixes, without regard for lasting attachments.”* — Tom Kitwood

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*Term of reference (b): the identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation*

The World Health Organization has declared loneliness as an urgent public health concern.<sup>1</sup> Despite best efforts, loneliness is especially prevalent among older adults and among those living in residential aged care.<sup>2-5</sup> Many older adults face losses and feelings of loneliness yet refuse invitations to participate in activities no matter what is offered.

Typical programs offered to address loneliness, focus on entertainment and distraction, rather than opportunities for meaningful relationships or contribution.<sup>6</sup> These include activities such as larger get togethers, or bingo, bus trips, movie nights and games. The ‘cruise ship living’ approach to programming involves being entertained and chore-free but hinders meaningful connections and opportunities to give. The fact that the well-meaning staff typically organize and lead these programs, contributes to the problem. While

numerous interventions have been developed to reduce loneliness, there is little evidence to support their effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

*Term of reference (c): evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on people...*

The associated health risks of loneliness are significant and include falls, premature mortality and poorer health, the progression of dementia, and disease outcomes such as cancer, stroke, and heart disease.<sup>1,8,9</sup>

*Term of reference (d): evidence linking social connection to physical health*

Social connection improved loneliness, depression and increases in engagement in community, all of which improves physical health.<sup>8,9</sup> Once we solve loneliness and social isolation we solve a host of other physical problems as well.

*Term of reference (f): the financial costs of loneliness*

The financial costs associated with social isolation and loneliness are significant.<sup>10,11</sup> In the US, a shocking \$6.7 billion of Medicare costs are directly attributed to social isolation.<sup>10</sup> There is also a causal relationship between loneliness and dementia. Older adults who feel chronically lonely have 2.5 increased odds of developing dementia.<sup>12</sup> People living with dementia increase staff burden as they require more help. Furthermore, dementia related responsive behaviors are a significant predictor of care-aide/certified nursing assistant burnout, which leads to increased turnover and absenteeism.<sup>13,14</sup> Seniors who are lonely are more likely depressed, and people with depression are more likely to fall. Between 45% and 61% of nursing home residents experience a fall each year.<sup>15</sup> Like loneliness, social isolation negatively impacts mental health, health behaviors, physical health and mortality. Social isolation costs on average \$74.50 USD per resident/month in a skilled nursing facility.<sup>10</sup>

*Term of reference (g): the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organizations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation*

Peer support and peer mentoring is the provision of social and emotional support and empathetic guidance to someone sharing a common experience or characteristic. People engaged in peer support and mentoring draw substantial benefits from these connections; however, this approach is rarely used on an ongoing basis.

### **The Science Behind Java**

Research in Canada has examined peer support and peer mentoring in residential aged care as an intervention called Java Mentorship to address loneliness that is ongoing and not associated with any condition.<sup>16-18</sup> Community volunteers and residents (mentors) formed a team that met weekly, received training, and then paired up to visit residents identified as lonely or socially isolated (mentees) and invited them to peer support groups. In a mixed-methods feasibility study, community mentors ( $n = 65$ ), resident mentors ( $n = 48$ ) staff facilitators ( $n = 24$ ) and mentees ( $n = 74$ ) were enrolled in 10 residential aged care communities. Results indicated a significant reduction in loneliness scores ( $p = .01$ ;  $d = .23$ ) and depression scores ( $p = .05$ ;  $d = .30$ ) among resident mentors; reductions in loneliness ( $p = 0.02$ ;  $d = .76$ ) and depression ( $p = 0.02$ ;  $d = .76$ ) among mentees; and a 60% increase in the

number of monthly programs attended ( $p = 0.01$ ;  $d = .37$ ). See [The Science Behind Java - Java Group Programs \(javagp.com\)](https://javagp.com)

In their interviews, residents described the importance of their shared experiences and how helping others brought meaning and purpose to their lives. Those receiving the support shared how the connection with their peers helped to reduce a sense of isolation: “*I like to feel that someone cares. I can be so lonely at night*”. Other preliminary research regarding the Java Music program in particular, indicates increases in happiness among the Java participants.<sup>19</sup> Thus residents themselves represent a largely untapped resource to address loneliness and social isolation.

### *Terms of Reference*

*(i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community;*

*(j) steps that community, technology/social media companies, organizations, and individuals can take to reduce impact of loneliness on individuals and the community.*

### **The Java Programs**

A standardized and scalable peer support and peer mentoring model provided with government support has much potential to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. Dr. Kristine Theurer, co-founder and president of Java Group Programs has developed 5 peer support and mentoring programs to address loneliness over the last 10 years. See [www.javagp.com](http://www.javagp.com)

These programs have already been implemented in over 2000 organizations across Canada and the US. Many of these were implemented through government grants. For example, LeadingAge California (a not-for-profit organization) successfully implemented three of the Java programs in 98 communities in 2021 through the Civil Money Penalty Reinvestment Grant program, and is preparing to implement Java in another 100 communities in 2025. The Java programs consist of:

- **Java Music:** peer support groups with music for older adults;
- **Java Memory:** peer support groups with music for people living with cognitive impairment;
- **Java Mentors:** a team made up of residents + volunteers who meet weekly to receive training and reach out in pairs to people who isolate;
- **Java Circle:** Java Music II/Java Memory II combined with another 52 new themes + music;
- **Java Social:** peer support for older adults living in the community - 52 new themes (no music to allow more time for discussion).

### **Java Social—Ending Loneliness, Spreading Happiness**

Up until recently most of the Java programs were implemented and evaluated in residential aged care organizations. In 2023, however, Dr. Theurer developed a new program called Java Social, which is an innovative approach using peer support and mentoring designed for older adults living in the community.

Java Social is a gathering of people who meet weekly in a peer support environment. The participants share with one another, building friendships, camaraderie and joy. The JAVA Social program, facilitated by staff, includes the following practices and resources:

- peer support, sharing and outreach
- discussion focused on 52 themes, related questions and photos to inspire discussion
- a facilitator's guide, icebreakers, handouts, a step by step guide
- Java Reflections booklets, Java Journals, a welcome sign and singing bowl
- training is 1.5 hours, recording provided and ongoing support

Peer support groups are offered in many communities but there are two important factors that make the Java Social approach unique:

1. Typical peer support groups offered are time-limited. They often last 6-12 weeks and then end, just when close relationships are developing. Java groups are ongoing.
2. Most peer support groups are associated with a condition or illness. The Java groups are offered as a fun social get-together with coffee (aka Java) offered. As there is no stigma attached to attending, it makes easier for people to give it a try.

Java Social contributes a unique perspective as it offers a social connection model that overturns a long-standing tradition and practices that focus on entertainment and distraction. Making a shift from staff as 'experts' to group members helping their peers has potential to revolutionize current practices addressing loneliness.

Imagine a community where an army of volunteers are trained through peer support groups and mentoring to build emotional connections with those in their neighbourhood. At the end of each group, a discussion is held about who may be struggling, who may be lonely, who used to come things and has stopped, who is just back from the hospital, or who just lost their spouse. Armed with training and support, group members pair up and reach out to their peers and do what we are hardwired to do—to help others.

### **The United Way—Java Social Pilot**

In July 2024, United Way initiated a pilot of Java Social in British Columbia, Canada: [What is JAVA Social? Introductory Webinar](#). The groups will be delivered on a weekly basis starting in September 2024 in 10 agencies serving seniors around the province and early feedback is in: [Java Social in Keremeos: From Tears to Belly Laughs! - Java Group Programs \(javagp.com\)](#)

The pilot includes training via Zoom (1.5 hours) and ongoing support for staff facilitators along with an initial evaluation consisting of feedback from facilitators and participants and a structured observation.

Java Social has much potential to reduce the impact of loneliness on individuals and the communities in New South Wales. Through reaching out and tending to the needs of others, group participants in Java Social can regain a sense of self and purpose and find out they are not alone, thereby improving quality of life for themselves and their peers.

## References

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<sup>19</sup>[The Power of Peer Support Project - Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care \(clri-ltc.ca\)](https://www.clri-ltc.ca/)