

Submission  
No 123

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

**Organisation:** SPOKE International

**Date Received:** 8 November 2024

---

# SPOKE INTERNATIONAL

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

Paul Dolby - Founder of SPOKE International



**Loneliness is a positive emotion,  
designed to protect us...**



**By learning to listen to loneliness, we can rediscover  
the Superpower of Human Connection.**

We would truly appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the discussion regarding the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales, and to collaborate on strategies to reduce its effects on individuals, organisations and communities.

## **Background – The “Spoke” origin story**

My name is Paul Dolby and in 2014 I was diagnosed with a brain tumour. This was the catalyst for an unexpected journey into loneliness. A journey I’m still trying to navigate.

As a direct result of my illness, I lost my marriage, my career, my identity, my security and my purpose. This led to me attempting suicide in 2018 (I was saved by a pair of my daughter’s socks) and again more recently, in October of last year. That was a mistake I shouldn’t have made. The combined load of my physical and financial challenges saw me transition from transient to chronic loneliness.

Sadly, much of my time and energy over the past decade has been spent having to deal with insurers, lawyers and my ex-employer, in a desperate attempt to survive financially and access support that I was legally entitled to. The organisations that should have supported me, in a time of crisis, became a major contributor to compounding the impacts of my diagnosis.

There is an opportunity to change corporate culture, and for corporate culture to have a resoundingly positive ripple effect in the broader community. We have a few ideas on how this can be done.

Over the past decade, despite being restricted by an Income Protection policy (and unable to earn any additional income without risking losing my remaining cover) I continually looked to find purpose, through volunteering and supporting not-for-profit organisations, predominantly in the Mental Health space.

I have witnessed first-hand how the approaches of some heavily funded groups are potentially, and unintentionally, having a detrimental effect on the individuals they were established to help. Something needs to be done differently.

Combined with Research & Funding, we believe stories of lived experience can be the catalyst to inspire a different narrative around loneliness, allowing early intervention and a shift towards individual responsibility (and even competitive corporate advantage!).

Corporate Australia has an opportunity and a responsibility to step up. And I'm happy to be out there telling them so.

We can turn the tide of what is now becoming recognised as the biggest social, health and economic issue of our time. Loneliness.

Chronic loneliness is something I have become well qualified in over the past decade. It sits as the foundation for so many of the issues we experience today, as individuals, families and organisations. Listening to loneliness, earlier and without stigma can be a game changer for so many.

Having shared my personal story as a volunteer and met with numerous brilliant and inspiring people, in 2022, I established SPOKE International.

### **Why “Spoke”?**

Spoke is built around the metaphor of the wheel. When your "spokes" are strong, the wheel can turn effectively. If your "spokes" are broken or weakened the wheel will struggle to move forward.

Spoke invites individuals and organisations to identify and recognise their "spokes", the most significant people in their family, community and workplace. Those who genuinely support us to keep the wheel turning.

Spoke encourages personal reflection on the concept of the "spokes" in your life; a reflection that actively leads to self-awareness, personal wellbeing and stronger intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

Whilst the term Spoke is used as a play on the concept of a wheel, it also connects to the importance of communication and the spoken word. True and meaningful connection through storytelling is the bedrock of Spoke.

As a species, we are curious by design. Programmed to ask questions. Desperate for information. That's almost certainly why Storytelling is a human universal. It exists in every part of the world, including remote tribes, and in every period of human history. We are the storytelling species, but why?

Studies have found the first real-world evidence that human beings evolved into storytellers because stories gave us an evolutionary edge. Anthropologists from University College London have discovered that indigenous tribe's best storytellers were more popular than the best hunters and foragers and had greater reproductive success. In other words, nature appears to be selecting for storytelling ability...

All of Spoke's interactions are designed to help individuals acknowledge and seek to understand more of their own story, in the hope that they will then take positive steps to ensure deeper connection, by understanding the stories of others.

And most importantly, we reinforce that LONELINESS IS A POSITIVE EMOTION, designed to connect and protect us. Storytelling and Acknowledgment are at the core of everything we do.

## **Our opportunity for change**

Being reminded just how fragile, fleeting and precious life is, has the potential to help us all appreciate just how important it is to identify what is truly important, who matters most, and to then find a way to tell those people what they mean to us.

Typically, it is during suffering, grief or loss that we truly appreciate what needs our focus and attention. By taking steps to address these connections during the "good times", we can minimise future regret and loneliness.

*"Family pathology rolls from generation to generation like a fire in the woods taking down everything in its path until one person, in one generation, has the courage to turn and face the flames. That person brings peace to his ancestors and spares the children that follow." — Terry Real*

By helping individuals understand the power of true connection, we can create a movement of positive change. Early intervention will ultimately lead to personal and collective emotional change, for generations to come.

**Response to TERMS OF REFERENCE** & where we may be able to help.

### **(a) The extent of loneliness and social isolation in NSW and how this is measured and recorded.**

Spoke is currently in discussions with both researchers and corporate organisations (in Australia and the UK) to establish how we can collect relevant information pre-, during and post our corporate (and community) events. We believe there needs to be a collaborative approach to understand what all parties (and this should include government) are hoping to learn, to ensure that everyone is equally invested in the process and the findings.

Corporate Organisations, that have an existing understanding of the severe financial and risk implications of inaction, still need to see evidence of the upside of any commitment to such processes and subsequent actions. I believe Spoke can help with identifying and connecting suitable organisations.

### **(b) Identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation**

To make real change, we need investment, commitment and leadership from corporate leaders, to help supplement any investment made from elsewhere. At Spoke, based on our own lived experience, we are convinced that many corporate environments are absolutely a population at severe risk of loneliness and isolation. They can be a catalyst for change back into the wider population and other specific areas of risk.

### **(c) Evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness**

We can share a decade of documented and anecdotal personal evidence of the impacts of loneliness;

1. Within the workplace.
2. Within the family.
3. During a critical, life-changing event.
4. While trying to understand a diagnosis and navigate the healthcare system.
5. When attempting to interact with Insurers, Human Resources and the Australian Taxation Office.
6. When Living with a disability.

#### **(d) Evidence linking social connection to physical health**

We can share lived experience examples of this that would support much of the scientific and medical information available today. We can also discuss the significant implications of how a change in physical health and circumstance triggers chronic loneliness, related to self-worth, loss of purpose and the “rejection” from a previous environment.

#### **(d) Factors that contribute to the development of transient loneliness into chronic loneliness.**

We can share lived experience examples of this, directly related to points detailed under items (c) and (d)

#### **(f) The financial costs of loneliness to the NSW budget and the state economy**

There is, as there should be, huge investment being made by government and non-government organisations in the areas of critical health, including mental health, suicide prevention, domestic violence, alcohol and drug addiction and homelessness.

Upstream, early intervention focused on connection, we believe, has the potential to positively impact the severe levels of financial and social strain we see at the crisis end of the system.

The financial costs of Loneliness within corporations are becoming more apparent year on year. Identifying the ripple effect into the NSW budget and broader economy must consider healthcare, social services, and workforce productivity and the upstream costs associated to critical health, including mental health, suicide prevention, domestic violence, alcohol and drug addiction and homelessness.

There are undoubtedly significant hidden and unidentified costs that the state economy is experiencing as a direct result of the “loneliness epidemic”. By educating individuals, organisations and communities on the positive opportunities loneliness provides, we can generate a shift in how the associated costs can be understood, appreciated and changed.

#### **(g) Identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation.**

There are so many people working to make genuine change. Connection and collaboration of these organisations and individuals, and a shift to recognising loneliness as a positive experience, can lift stigma and open up an opportunity to lighten the load of loneliness and make huge and rapid change.

Spoke is engaged with The Centre for Loneliness Studies at Sheffield Hallam University, in the UK, who are at the forefront of loneliness research. We strongly believe that there is a critical role to play for Corporations to educate their leaders, on driving better employee engagement & productivity by creating safe spaces to discuss loneliness openly and building meaningful connections within their teams. The opportunity for a flow-on effect back into families and communities is tremendous.

#### **(h) Developments in other jurisdictions regarding the implementation of policies and initiatives relevant to the treatment of loneliness as a public health issue**

Spoke International was specifically created to focus on the challenges of disconnection in the corporate world, with a focus on both local and international organisations. We are connected with The Campaign to End Loneliness in the UK and have been discussing how we work together to make effective change on an international and local level, whilst measuring impact and gathering authentic data.

#### **(i) Steps the state government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community**

Loneliness is best tackled by embracing the techniques that have sustained us as a species for thousands of years. Having the NSW State Government help change the language and perception of loneliness, in partnership with organisations that understand this concept, would be an incredible step

forward. Empowering the individual to listen to and embrace loneliness and then sustain a small number of genuine and deep connections (spokes), can go a long way.

***“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”***

— Leonardo da Vinci

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

Whilst Spoke advocates heavily for simplicity and face-to-face connection, we also acknowledge that there is potentially a place for technology, as a part of the solution.

Social media and technology are being blamed, in some quarters, for being a major part of the problem. This is not necessarily the case. It's not the technology, it is the way humans elect to use the technology that is the underlying issue. High volume, low-value connection is not a solution for chronic loneliness. Whilst it may serve to quell transient loneliness, in some, for a period, it is no replacement for genuine human connection.

As an individual, I know that reaching out in the midst of chronic loneliness is almost impossible if the deeper human connections have been eroded. Community organisations and corporate offices are where we can ensure that sustainable practices, to strengthen connections, are maintained and reinforced.

Humans have always existed and thrived through social interaction and belonging to groups. Being an active part of a community or group gives individuals a sense of value, purpose and positive identity. Connecting through a shared interest or a common cause allows individuals to feel valued and to share their personal skills, experiences and talents. Contributing to a community creates a positive ripple effect of well-being and emotional connectedness. It has been proven over thousands of years.

**(k) any other related matters**

There is a danger that we overcomplicate this.

Loneliness will affect everyone, at some time or in some circumstance, during their life.

It does not discriminate. It is not there to hurt us; it is there to help us.

As a species, we are moving away from what has sustained us. Simplicity, honesty and connection. Human connection, face to face, in person.

*“Evolution is ruthlessly efficient. Any trait which does not confer a fitness advantage will be lost. Cavefish living in perpetual darkness lose the use of their eyes, while many birds moving to islands without predators lose the ability to fly.*

*Storytelling has been universal since the beginning of modern human cognition so is likely to confer an evolutionary advantage.”*

— Dr Dan Smith

Sincere thanks for your time and consideration and for listening to our story.

Paul Dolby  
Founder – SPOKE International  
[www.spokeinternational.com](http://www.spokeinternational.com)