



STRATEGY 2026-2028

Addressing Relationship Distress

Message from our CEO and Chair

We are social beings. Our survival has always relied less on strength and more on our ability to connect, cooperate and build trust. Modern science confirms what people have always known: relationships are central to health and wellbeing.

The World Health Organization has identified loneliness and social isolation as urgent public health challenges, with impacts as serious as smoking, obesity or lack of exercise¹. Disconnection is linked to heart disease, dementia, depression and premature death². By contrast, people with strong social ties live longer, cope better with stress and enjoy better health³.

Relationships take many forms – partners, families, friends, colleagues, neighbours and mentors. Each of them matter. They shape how safe we feel, how we respond to challenge and how hopeful we are about the future.

Across NSW and Australia, many of these connections are under strain. More than five million Australians say they often feel lonely⁴. Cost of living pressures and mental health concerns are weighing heavily on relationships, while trauma and disadvantage can make it even harder to access safe, supportive connections.

For more than 75 years, Relationships Australia NSW has responded to these

realities. We support individuals, families and couples in distress, assist victim-survivors of violence, and help people rebuild confidence and community after isolation or loss. This strategy reflects our conviction that connection is fundamental, not optional.

By elevating social impact, investing in a highly skilled workforce supported by smarter systems, and providing more accessible pathways to support, we commit to a future where every person in NSW can access the help they need to thrive.

When relationships are strong, people are healthier, more resilient and better able to face life’s challenges. That is the work of Relationships Australia NSW – and it remains as vital today as ever.



Elisabeth Shaw
Chief Executive Officer



Dr Stephen Hollings
Board Chair

Acknowledgement of Country



Relationships Australia NSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work.

We acknowledge their ancestors who first walked on this land, and pay respects to Elders past and present, for they carry the cultural wisdom, the stories, the traditions and the dreaming.

With a commitment to reconciliation, we acknowledge the enduring impact of past policies, and practices, and commit our endeavours to creating a just society and sector that celebrates the ongoing resilience and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

¹ World Health Organization, From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies. 2025. ² AIHW, 2024. ³ Waldeinger and Schulz, Harvard Study of Adult Development. 2023. ⁴ Relationships Australia, Relationship Indicators Survey 2024.



Acknowledgement of Lived Experience



We know no two relationships are the same. We welcome and support the unique contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, people of all ages, life experiences, cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, language abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions.

We acknowledge the lived experience of children, families, friends and communities who carry the impacts of relationship distress, estrangement, loss or breakdown – and those who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence. We also recognise the pain endured through institutional abuse and displacement, and the strength of those continuing to navigate these challenges today.

We respect the voices of people with lived and living experience and deeply value their role in shaping the services we deliver and the strategy we pursue.

The Strategic Environment

In May 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognised social connection as essential to public health and called for coordinated global action. WHO's Commission on Social Connection findings highlighted the risks of disconnection – from disease and early death to poor mental health – with significant social and economic costs.

Closer to home, the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee report, released in August 2025, found that “many people in New South Wales are experiencing loneliness for ongoing periods, with significant impacts on their physical and mental health, social behaviour, and educational and employment outcomes.”

The pressures people face today are systemic and complex:

- + The rising cost of living, housing stress and poor mental health are placing more strain on relationships – at home, at work, and in communities.
- + Social disconnection is growing, and loneliness is now recognised as a serious public health issue.
- + Services can be difficult to find or navigate, particularly for those in regional areas, marginalised communities, and younger people in crisis.
- + People are looking for support they can trust – delivered with dignity, empathy, and in ways that are easy to access.

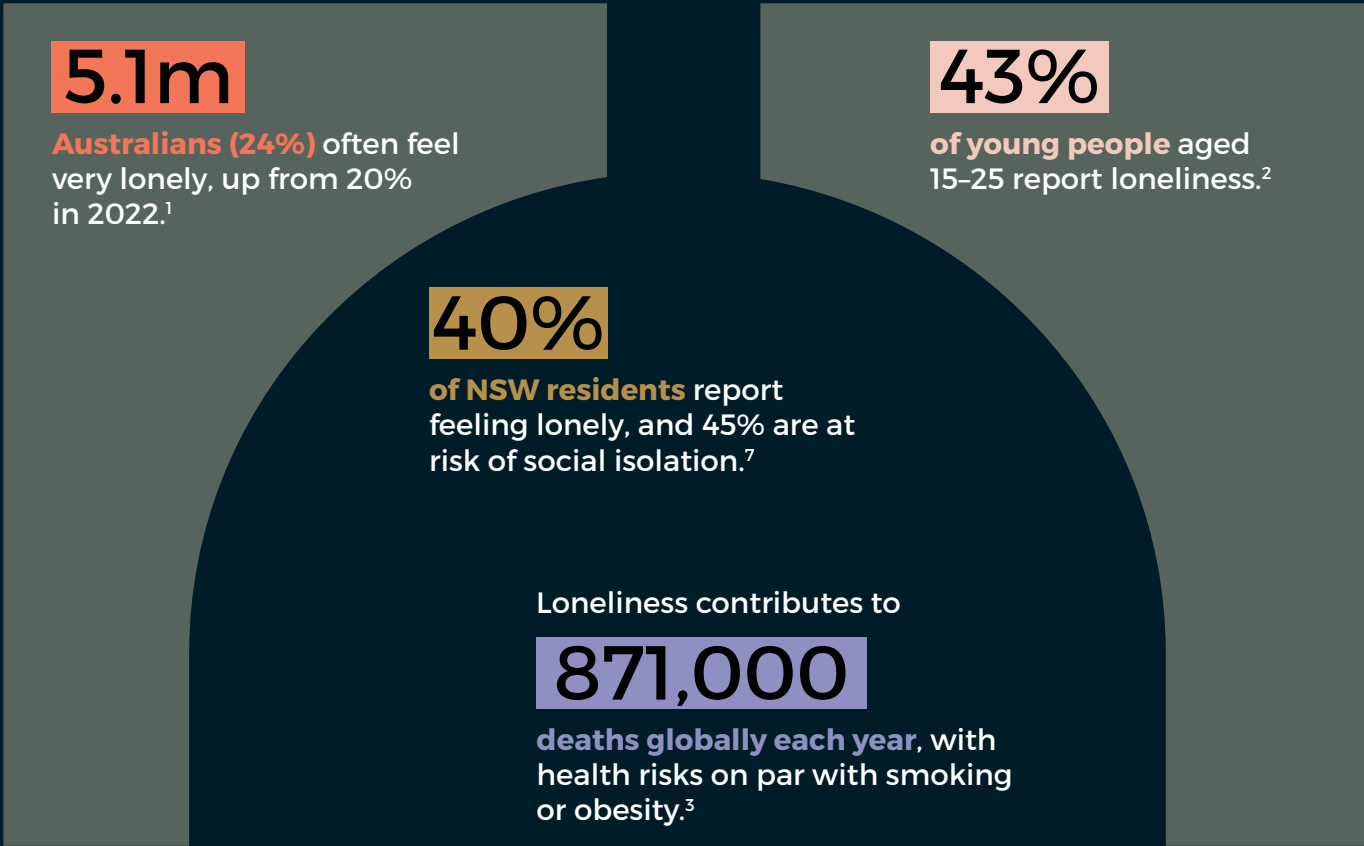
These challenges cannot be treated as secondary. The ability of individuals, families and communities to thrive depends on their capacity to connect.



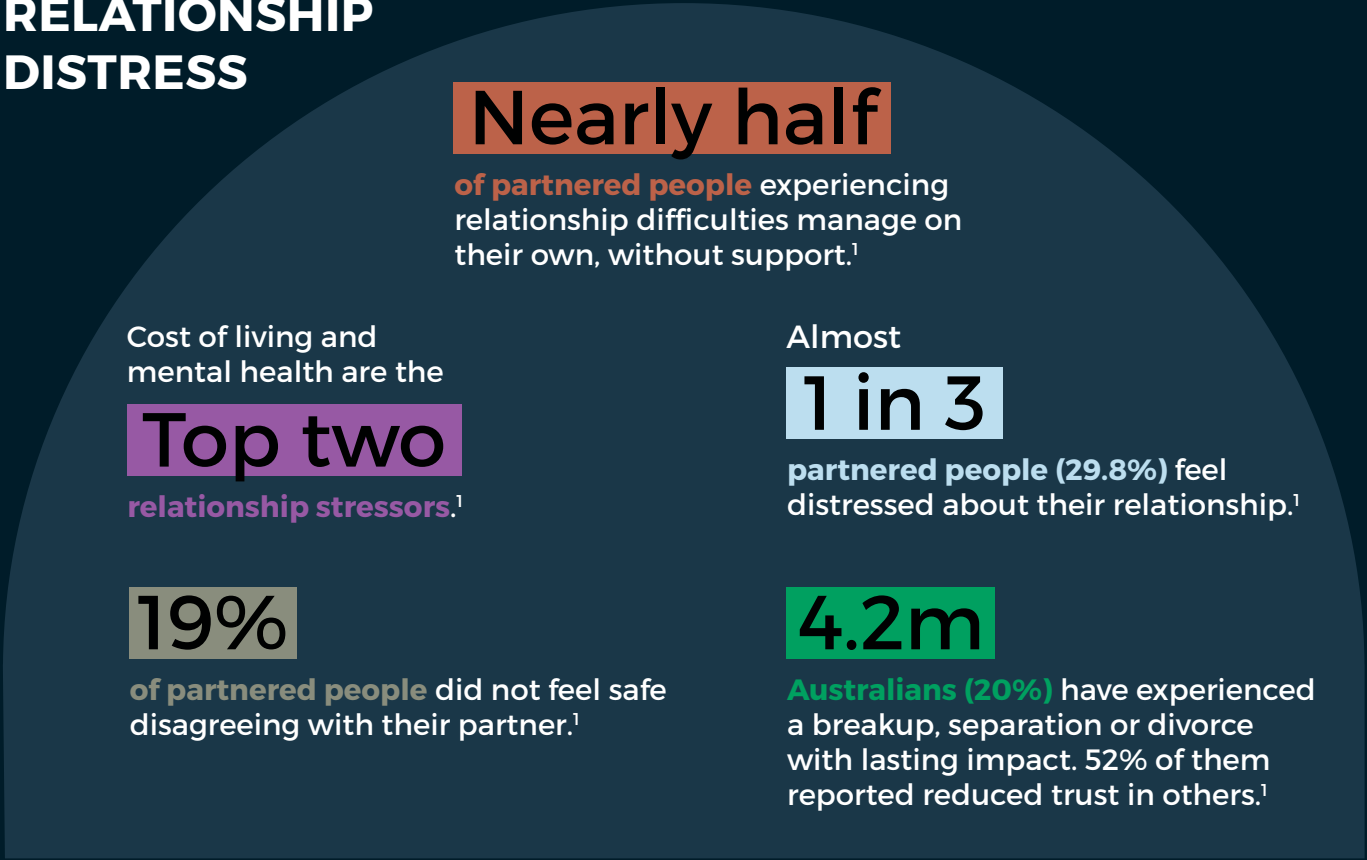
Relationship Distress, Abuse and Loneliness in Australia

Relationships are under strain. Growing financial pressures, social disconnection and the impacts of trauma are leaving more people isolated, distressed and at risk.

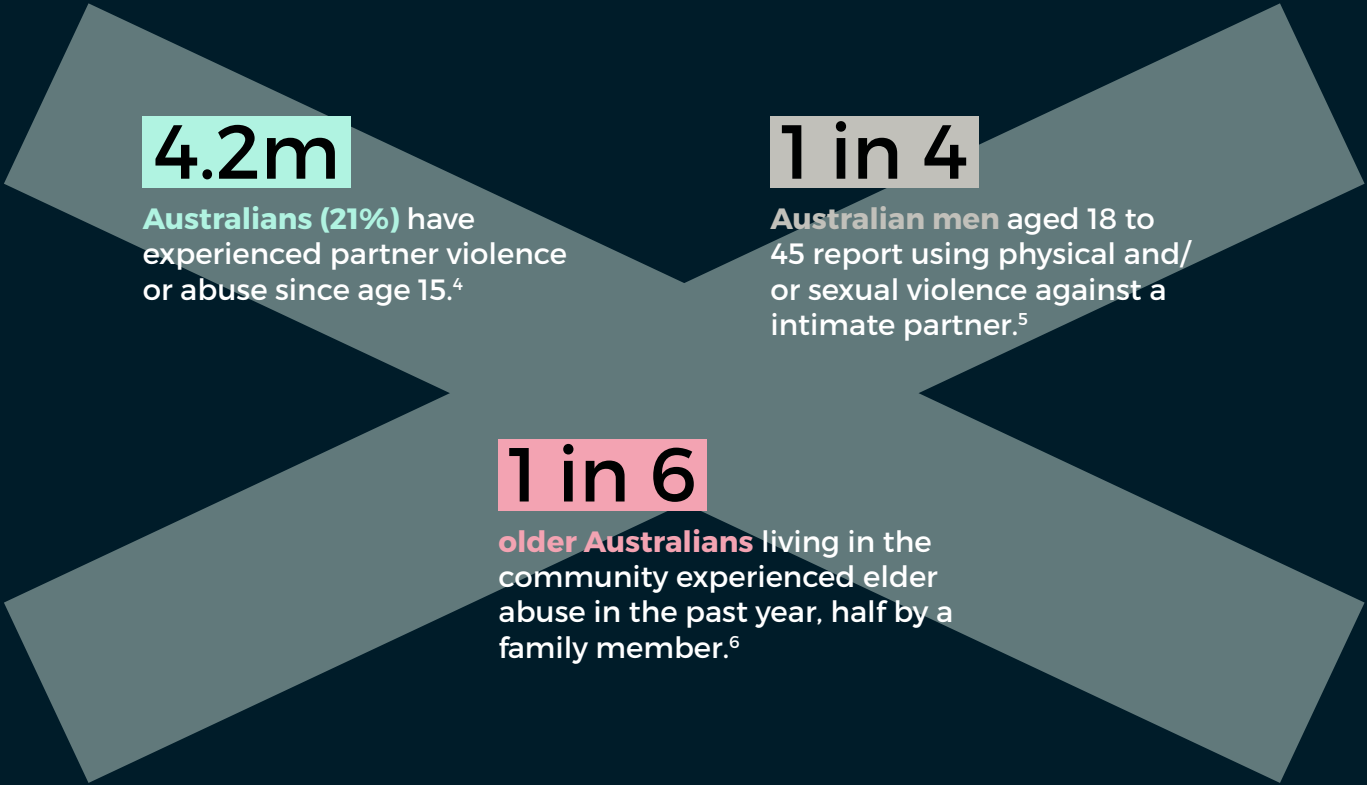
LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION



RELATIONSHIP DISTRESS



VIOLENCE AND ABUSE



THE CONSEQUENCES ARE CLEAR:

Disconnection and distress erode wellbeing, safety and community resilience. The need for trusted, relationship-centred support has never been greater.

¹ Relationships Australia, Relationship Indicators Survey 2024. ² Ending Loneliness Together, 2023. ³ World Health Organization, 2025. ⁴ ABS, 2023. ⁵ The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. ⁶ AIFS National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, 2021. ⁷ NSW Legislative Council, Report 65 on Loneliness, August 2025.

At-Risk Communities

Certain communities carry higher risks of experiencing relationship distress, chronic loneliness or prolonged disconnection. This includes people in regional NSW, young people, victim-survivors of violence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people living with disability and carers, and those experiencing disadvantage.

For many marginalised groups, barriers to support are compounded by distance, systemic inequities, or stigma. We want to ensure they too have access to quality support. These challenges play out differently across communities. For example:

- + **People in regional and rural NSW** face fewer services close to home, and distance often makes it harder to seek help early.
- + **Young people are reporting higher levels of loneliness** and mental health distress than any other age group.
- + **Victim-survivors of family and domestic violence** face heightened risks of harm, and need coordinated, trauma-informed responses.

- + **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** experience intergenerational trauma and systemic disadvantage yet bring deep cultural strengths and community connection that must be honoured through culturally safe services.
- + **Culturally and linguistically diverse communities** may face language barriers, stigma, or limited awareness of where and how to access support.
- + **People living with disability, and their carers**, often experience social isolation, financial stress, and a lack of accessible, inclusive services.
- + **Refugees or migrants, LGBTIQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities** are more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation.

- + **People with low household income**, or living in disadvantaged communities disproportionately experience relationship distress, loneliness and DFV.

Equity is at the heart of our strategy. We are committed to making sure people at greatest risk have access to timely, respectful, and culturally safe support that helps them build wellbeing and connection.



PEOPLE IN REGIONAL
AND RURAL NSW



YOUNG PEOPLE



VICTIM-SURVIVORS OF FAMILY
AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES



CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY
DIVERSE COMMUNITIES



PEOPLE LIVING WITH
DISABILITY AND THEIR CARERS



MINORITY GROUPS

(Refugees, migrants, LGBTIQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities)



PEOPLE WITH LOW-HOUSEHOLD
INCOME OR LIVING IN
DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Relationships Are Essential

The evidence is clear: relationships are essential. They protect our health, strengthen our communities, and give life meaning. Yet across NSW and Australia, we know that connection is under threat. Loneliness has reached crisis levels. Cost of living and mental health pressures are placing unprecedented strain on families. Violence and growing social disconnection are eroding safety and trust. Loneliness is rising, and more people are struggling alone. The pressures are systemic, complex and urgent, and the need for safe, trusted, relationship-centred support has never been greater.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, which tracked individuals for more than eight decades, best demonstrates the essential nature of our relationships. Its conclusion is striking in its simplicity: the quality of our relationships is the single strongest predictor of our health, happiness and longevity. Strong social connections

provide emotional support, reduce stress and increase feelings of happiness and belonging, which in turn has beneficial effects on physical health and promotes longer and healthier life.

“ **Our ability to thrive, both as individuals and as nations, depends on our ability to connect with others. When we build relationships and nurture trust, we build stronger, more resilient societies.**”

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

From loneliness to social connection - charting a path to healthier societies: report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025. Harvard Study of Adult Development, Harvard Medical School, Department of Psychiatry.



We are uniquely placed to respond

For more than 75 years, Relationships Australia NSW has supported people through the full spectrum of relationship challenges – from conflict and separation to loneliness, violence and trauma.



We are trusted and inclusive.

People turn to us knowing they will be met with dignity, safety and compassion.



We are across NSW.

With centres, outreach and digital services, we reach communities in metro, regional and rural settings.



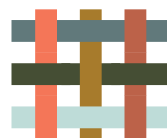
We are trauma-informed.

Our practitioners are trained to support people experiencing complex distress with care.



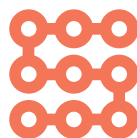
We amplify lived experience.

The voices of people with lived and living experience shape our services, our advocacy, and our strategy.



We work in partnership.

We collaborate across sectors, bringing relationship experience where it's needed most.



We deliver impact.

Our services don't just reduce distress – they foster skills, confidence and resilience.

When people face their greatest challenges, Relationships Australia NSW stands alongside them – helping them navigate relationships with confidence and care. By building their skills and strengths, we enhance wellbeing and help create resilient, connected communities.



Addressing Relationship Distress: 2026-2028 Strategy

Over the next three years, we will work to ensure more people in NSW can access relationship support and education, to build the strong connections they need to thrive. Our strategy focuses on four priorities for lasting impact.

OUR VISION:

A society where no one faces relationship challenges alone – where everyone has the tools and support they need to build strong, fulfilling connections.

OUR PURPOSE:

Through the power of relationships, we help people live happier, healthier lives – through every transition, struggle, or new beginning.



PILLAR ONE:

Clearer Pathways to Support



When people are experiencing relationship distress, long waitlists, confusing systems or siloed services can heighten their stress rather than ease it.

This pillar is about strengthening the foundations – improving how we operate and collaborate across teams and partners, so we can deliver consistent, high-quality support where and when it’s needed most.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES:

- 1. Optimise processes to deliver greater efficiency and coordination.
- 2. Grow our reach across NSW through new locations and partnerships.
- 3. Strengthen project management with centralised tracking of strategic priorities.
- 4. Embed robust governance standards to ensure consistent, high-quality services.

CLIENT IMPACT STATEMENT

“It’s easier to find and access the services I need, when I need them.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS:

Greater reach, smoother referral pathways, and stronger program performance. Confidence that we can scale while delivering consistent, high-quality services that meet community needs.

PILLAR TWO:

Smart Digital Systems



Disconnected systems and clunky processes can make it more difficult for people to get support – and harder for staff to provide it.

This work is about removing friction. When our digital tools are accurate, intuitive and integrated, we save time, reduce stress, and make it easier for everyone to focus on what matters: delivering responsive, person-centred relationship support.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES:

- 1. Deliver a streamlined, integrated CRM with improved data capture and user experience.
- 2. Launch a centralised data warehouse with real-time reporting for faster, smarter insights.
- 3. Enable smoother client onboarding with self-service and digital autonomy options.
- 4. Automate manual tasks to support more consistent and efficient service delivery.

CLIENT IMPACT STATEMENT

“Onboarding tools are simpler, and support feels more seamless.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS:

Stronger systems mean clearer insights, faster reporting, and greater accountability – with more timely results, consistent delivery, and confidence in how we’re tracking impact across NSW.

PILLAR THREE:

A Supported Workplace

To create a workplace where people feel confident, capable and connected – where they understand their role, feel supported, and see the impact of their work.

This pillar is about building a culture where people feel safe, valued and aligned with purpose. When staff are empowered and well-equipped, the support we provide is more effective.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES:

- 1. Launch talent pipelines and career pathways to strengthen our workforce.
- 2. Embed values-led leadership and strategy-aligned KPIs across all teams.
- 3. Deliver training that builds trauma-informed, inclusive and reflective practice.
- 4. Strengthen staff voice, engagement and recognition to foster belonging.

CLIENT IMPACT STATEMENT

“Staff are capable and passionate. They have the skills to support my needs.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS:

You'll see stronger staff retention, a deeper practitioner pipeline, and confidence that our workforce can meet demand without compromising quality or wellbeing.

PILLAR FOUR:

Elevated Social Impact

When people experience disconnection, loneliness or relationship distress, their sense of safety, mental health and wellbeing can suffer – with ripple effects across homes, workplaces and communities.

We're advocating for policy changes that recognise relationships as critical to health and wellbeing, while deepening the impact of our work and partnerships.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES:

- 1. Forge cross-sector partnerships to embed relationship support across more services.
- 2. Embed lived experience into system and program design.
- 3. Demonstrate impact through Social Return on Investment and wellbeing measures.
- 4. Increase advocacy for relationship services as central to health policy.

CLIENT IMPACT STATEMENT

“I feel less alone, more connected, and better equipped to handle challenges.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR PARTNERS AND FUNDERS:

Together we are tackling the lasting impacts of loneliness, isolation and prolonged relationship distress on mental health. We're driving measurable improvements in connection, relationship skills and overall wellbeing.

Considered Growth: A Deliberate Pathway for Impact

We will deliver a phased approach to sustainable expansion, deeply anchored in client needs, public value, and systemic reform. Our approach prioritises:



Considered growth ensures that every investment, innovation, and partnership strengthens outcomes for people, supports vulnerable communities, and reinforces our role as a trusted, values-led sector leader.



Together we can build a more connected, resilient society

The facts are undeniable: the consequences of disconnection and prolonged relationship distress are severe. Yet the solutions are within our reach.

This strategy reflects our conviction that connection is fundamental. By creating clearer pathways to support, investing in smarter systems, backing a supported workforce and elevating our impact, we are committing to a future where every person in NSW can access support to navigate relationship distress and build connections that help them thrive.

We know we cannot do this alone. Relationships Australia NSW is one part

of a wider system of support – spanning families, communities, organisations and governments. Our strategy depends on strong partnerships, sustainable funding and supportive policy at every level.

Strong relationships help people feel seen, heard and valued. They foster collaboration, resilience and problem-solving. With 75 years of experience, a trusted presence across NSW, and a deep commitment to equity and lived experience, Relationships Australia NSW is ready to meet this moment.

Together with our partners, we can create a future where healthy, strong connections thrive.

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