

The Hon Keith Wolahan MP
Joint Select Committee on
National Anti-Corruption Legislation
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Level 11, 257 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
PO Box 38
Flinders Lane VIC 8009
T: (03) 8662 3300

Dear Keith

Thank you for inviting the Australian Psychological Society (APS) to submit to the *Joint Select Committee on Anti-Corruption Legislation* on the issue of public hearings of corruption commissions.

We understand that you are interested in the impact of shame and reputational damage on an individual's psychological health, in the context of a public hearing. As Australia's peak body for psychology, representing more than 27,000 members nationwide, the APS is well placed to advise on this from a psychological viewpoint.

Reputation can be a powerful tool in forming an individual's status and influence within professional and social circles. People often work towards building respectable reputations, and they also work very hard to prevent their reputation from being challenged or weakened. Conversely, having a lowlier status – including by way of reputational damage – can limit people's agency and opportunities.

One's reputation is fundamental to their status, and social disqualification or damage/loss of that reputation can therefore be devastating. Shame and reputational damage can be incredibly harmful, with victims at risk of serious and life-threatening mental health conditions. Individuals who experience public humiliation and shame can suffer major depressions, suicidality, extreme rage, severe anxiety and even psychosis. These effects can continue over the long term and even for the remainder of that person's life¹.

People can begin to experience grief and alienation immediately after reputational damage or loss. Not only are they grieving relationships that are now estranged or irreparable, but they may also be grieving the loss of their own identity and place in the world. A victim tends to pass through different sets of responses, from a sense of bewildered helplessness to rage and from there revolt, resistance, or submission, which may also involve despair and self-destruction.²

Individuals involved in corruption commission inquiries are likely to be appearing in a professional capacity, for example if their employer or an organisation they are formally involved with in some capacity is subject to an investigation. For many people, their professional persona is core to their self-identity and any damage or threat to it is therefore amplified.

It should also be noted that there can be significant negative mental health effects on persons who are knowingly or unknowingly victims of corruption, with some examples being a harmful workplace culture and loss of potential business or wages.

¹ Severe Public Humiliation: Its Nature, Consequences, and Clinical Treatment; DOI: [10.1037/a0029271](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029271)

² Losing trust in the world: Humiliation and its consequences; DOI: [10.1080/14753634.2013.778485](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2013.778485)

Events surrounding reputational damage can be very distressing and potentially traumatic so, ideally, any inquiry should treat participants in a 'trauma-informed' manner. This would help ensure that anyone who is suffering from the damaging effects of reputational damage and/or humiliation are not 'retraumatised' during the subsequent investigations and inquiry process.

Regard for the mental health and welfare of participants during public hearings should be informed by psychological best practice, such as trauma debriefing, particularly when a high level of media interest is expected.

Given the potential for psychological consequences, the APS recommends that appropriate measures be taken to protect the reputation of participants in such hearings, particularly those who may unexpectedly find themselves caught up in an investigation by virtue of their employment with or for an individual or organisation being investigated.

For example, the APS considers it imperative that people involved in corruption commission inquiries are supported and educated throughout the process of providing evidence, to address uncertainty and to enable them to better manage the potential stress and anxiety associated with their participation and possible risks to their reputation.

The APS and our representatives would be happy to attend a committee hearing to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely

Ms. Tamara Cavenett FAPS GAICD
President