



# THE BIG ANXIETY

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## MEDIA RELEASE

### Australian researchers pioneering a new approach to building Empathy and reducing stigma

Launched at **The Big Anxiety Festival** as part of **The Empathy Clinic, Course of Empathy** <https://courseofempathy.org/> is a web-based app for cultivating empathy.

**Course of Empathy** has been developed by a team of arts and psychology researchers led by Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Fellow, **Professor Jill Bennett (UNSW)** whose ARC-funded Felt Experience & Empathy Lab (fEEL) is focused on addressing the impacts of stigma.

**“Empathy and kindness ... drive social change. These are not just sentiments, they are tools.” - Jacinda Ardern, PM of New Zealand**

**Course of Empathy** tests the idea that empathy skills are tools that can be cultivated by anyone. It offers a more practical approach than the didactic anti-stigma campaigns used in mental health. “Challenging people’s beliefs or telling them what to think is not enough -- we also need to focus on building empathy skills”, says Professor Bennett.

As a woman with dwarfism, contributing artist and psychology lecturer, **Dr Debra Keenahan’s** daily experience confirms that many people are uncomfortable with visible difference. Research shows that we typically direct empathy to people we like or “in-groups”, and we tend to withhold empathy from people we perceive as different. “We need to provide options for actions” Dr Keenahan says.

**Unless we can imaginatively ‘step into someone else’s shoes’ we cannot empathise.**

**Course of Empathy** is unique in combining insights and resources from both science and art. It features newly commissioned artworks/videos offering unique insights into mental health, disability and marginalization, along with interviews with psychologists and other specialists.

“Imagination and perspective sharing is critical to empathy – and the arts give us the means to understand another’s experience” says Prof Bennett. Those taking the Course can do it online and also access innovative new artworks and virtual reality experiences at the Empathy Clinic exhibition <https://www.thebiganxiety.org/the-empathy-clinic/>

Empathy is the theme of **The Big Anxiety Festival**. Related outputs include the Listening Panel recording: <https://www.thebiganxiety.org/events/art-after-hours/>

For more information visit:  
[www.thebiganxiety.org](http://www.thebiganxiety.org)

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**Media Centre:** Background information, images, biographies of key personnel and the full program can be accessed at: <http://bit.ly/TheBigAnxietyFestivalMC-19>

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