



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Fact Sheet 4

Transgenerational Trauma and Suicide

There is widespread agreement that Indigenous suicide needs to be viewed through a ‘trauma informed lens’ and within a social and historical context if the complex reasons for the growing rates are to be fully understood and effectively addressed. The combined effects of colonisation and oppressive policies and practices have had a profound and enduring impact on Indigenous health and social and emotional wellbeing. The devastating impacts of events including massacres and forced removals from family and country, remain in the hearts and minds of Indigenous people¹. Current policies are still influencing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and young people in out of home care and the justice system—continuing ongoing generational trauma.

Indigenous people have long asserted that trauma is at the root of a range of population challenges including suicide, alcohol and drug use and family violence.

Trauma is an underlying cause of many challenges

Indigenous Elders and leaders have long asserted that trauma resulting from colonisation is at the root of many challenges experienced by individuals, families and communities, including increases in suicide, alcohol and drug misuse and family violence, which in turn lead to further trauma and intergenerational or transgenerational trauma.

Ralph and colleagues (2006) investigating the link between depression and the high rates of suicide among Aboriginal young people in the Kimberley found young people’s ‘*contemporary expression of distress in response to chronic trauma exposure, as underpinned by the legacy of historical unresolved trauma and grief*’².

The West Australian Coroner’s inquiry into the deaths of 13 Indigenous young people in the Kimberley identified intergenerationally transmitted trauma is a key contributing factor in all deaths ([Fact Sheet 6](#)).

Intergenerational trauma is the transmission of historical oppression and its negative consequences between or across generations whereas **transgenerational trauma** is acting via complex mechanisms across many generations.

Understanding transgenerational trauma?

Indigenous psychiatrist, Helen Milroy³ proposes a variety of mechanisms to understanding transgenerational trauma, including:

- the impact of attachment relationships with caregivers, parenting and family functioning,
- the association with parental physical and mental illness, and
- disconnection and alienation from extended family, culture and society.

These effects are compounded by exposure to high levels of stress and trauma in the present³. Recent research also suggests the physiological and psychological effects of stress and distress through with historical trauma associated with colonisation can be epigenetically transmitted.

How is trauma transmitted over generations?

Indigenous academic, Judy Atkinson, has mapped the transmission of trauma in one family over six generations, showing victims and perpetrators of violence, mental illness, suicidal behavior and substance misuse related to unresolved trauma linked to historical events of colonisation⁴. Trauma experienced by one generation can be transmitted to the next—a person challenged by trauma can behave in ways that traumatise others, especially children in their care.

What is the impact of trauma on a person?

Critically, trauma in Aboriginal contexts is more than Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it involves multiple, complex and severe levels of stress that are compounded by:

- The inability to identify and overcome the sources of stress
- The presence of cumulative stressors
- The realisation that many stressors are inflicted by people in authority².

Trauma can:

- Deeply undermine a person's sense that the world is a safe place, erodes their sense of trust in other people and creates fear, anxiety and mental exhaustion
- Overwhelm their coping skills and ability to control emotion and anger
- Lead to reactive thoughts and emotions that the person affected is unable to integrate or process; so that they effectively remain 'stuck' in the traumatic event/s⁴.

Diagnosis and treatment of trauma

The first step in healing is diagnosis... it is critical to recognise trauma related behaviours as symptoms and not independent problems in themselves.

Step 1 in healing is diagnosis to ensure people get help. Atkinson has developed the [Australian Aboriginal Version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire \(AAVHTQ\)](#) a culturally appropriate measure of specific traumatic stressors and symptoms².

Step 2 involves professionals helping the person with unhealed trauma to emotionally process and integrate the traumatising event into a new normal sense of self that is functional and mentally well. While conventional clinical management by a psychiatrist or psychologist using medication, group therapy and behaviour modification techniques may be required, cultural healers and other forms of healing may also play a role.

This process requires resources by governments and health services to provide these culturally and clinically appropriate treatments.

Overcoming individual and community trauma

The Healing Foundation suggests that a person's capacity to overcoming trauma is more likely if:

- Communities are supported and empowered to identify their own problems and ways to support their healing
- Programs draw on local cultural knowledge to build cultural awareness and a positive sense of identity
- Healing programs have an emphasis on restoring, reaffirming and renewing a sense of pride in cultural identity, connection to country and participation in community
- There is a focus on connecting Stolen Generations members to their families and communities, truth telling, acknowledgement and apology from the person/s who are traumatised can also support healing.

See the [CBPATISIP](#) website for information about suicide prevention and additional fact sheets.

References:

1. The Healing Foundation (n.d.) [Intergenerational trauma](#).
2. Ralph, N., Hamaguchi, K., & Cox, M. (2006). [Transgenerational trauma, suicide and healing from sexual abuse in the Kimberley region, Australia](#). *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 4(2), 117-136.
3. Milroy, H. (2005). Preface. In S. R. Zubrick, S. R. Silburn, D. M. Lawrence, F. G. Mitrou, R. B. Dalby, E. M. Blair ... J. Li (Eds.), [Western Australian Aboriginal child health survey: The Social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people](#). (pp. xii-xiii).
4. Atkinson, J., Nelson, J., Brooks, R., Atkinson, C., & Ryan, K. (2014) Addressing individual and community transgenerational trauma. In P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, and R. Walker (Eds.), [Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice](#) (2nd ed.), (pp. 289-305). Canberra, ACT: C'wealth of Australia.
5. Dudgeon, P., Watson, M & Holland, C. (2017). [Trauma in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population](#). *Australian Clinical Psychologist*, 3(1), 19 - 30.

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