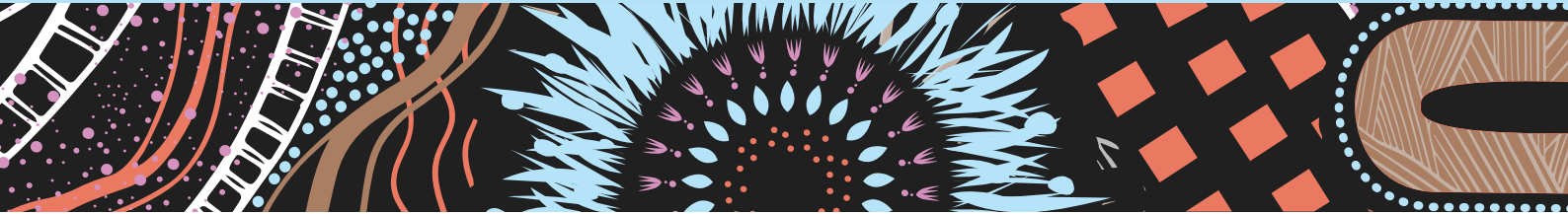




Connection between family, kinship and social and emotional wellbeing

Summary paper



This paper is a summary of the *Connection between family, kinship and social and emotional wellbeing* publication by Pat Dudgeon, Shol Blustein, Abigail Bray, Tom Calma, Rob McPhee and Ian Ring. This publication was commissioned by and published on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse. It can be accessed online at <https://www.indigenouismhspc.gov.au>.

Some people may find the content of this report confronting or distressing. If you are affected in this way, please contact **13YARN (13 92 76)**, **Lifeline (13 11 14)** or **Beyond Blue (1300 22 4636)**.

Key findings

- For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people strong and healthy connections to family and kin underpin social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and protect people from suicide and suicide-related behaviour. However, trauma from colonisation, compounded by socioeconomic marginalisation, family violence, substance abuse and the persistent impacts of racism have disrupted healthy connections to family and kin.
- High rates of suicide in the Indigenous population are influenced by the ongoing impact of colonisation.
- Family connections are affected by child removal, family violence, incarceration and the pervasive effects of intergenerational poverty.
- For Indigenous Australians, wellbeing is not an individualistic concept. SEWB is the foundation of physical and mental health for Indigenous Australians, comprising 7 interrelated domains: body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, Country, and spirituality.
- In all programs and services, Indigenous governance is vital to success.
- Cultural continuity, that is, connecting to one's culture through engaging in the practices and values of one's indigenous heritage, is recognised as a foundation for suicide prevention.

What we know

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Death by suicide for Indigenous Australians is around twice the rate of the non-Indigenous population (ABS 2019a; AIHW: Kriesfeld and Harrison 2020).

Healthy, supportive, loving and nurturing connections to family and kinship networks are vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to flourish and continue their culture. However, trauma from colonisation, compounded by socioeconomic marginalisation, family violence, substance abuse and the persistent impacts of racism have disrupted healthy connections to family and kin.

Strong and healthy connections to family and kin underpin social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and protect people from suicide and suicide-related behaviour. Cultural connections refer to the relationship Indigenous Australians have with key features of their culture, including (but not limited to) language, family, community and Country. Restoring healthy cultural connections to family and kinship networks is central to resilience and wellbeing (Healing Foundation and Emerging Minds 2020).

Trauma and issues affecting family and kin

Historical trauma and the intergenerational transmission of this trauma combined with entrenched socioeconomic marginalisation and the persistent impacts of racism have been linked to issues facing Indigenous families. These issues include high psychological distress, family violence, child abuse and neglect, binge drinking, lack of secure and safe housing, food, access to services, education, and employment.

There is wide recognition in the research literature that high rates of suicide in the Indigenous population are influenced by the adverse impact of colonisation (Wexler et al. 2015). Exposure to direct and secondary trauma in the family has been linked to increased risk of suicide among youth. Exposure to direct trauma is strongly linked to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Dudgeon et al. 2016; Nadew 2012; Ralph et al. 2006).

Family connections are affected by child removal, family violence, incarceration and the enveloping effects of intergenerational poverty.

Generations of children, families and communities have been traumatised through the forced removal of their children (the Stolen Generations) (Healing Foundation 2013; HREOC 1997). The Healing Foundation and Emerging Minds (2020) report found that intergenerational trauma caused a comprehensive disconnection, not only from family and kinship systems, but from Country, spirituality and culture and parenting practices.

Drivers such as intergenerational trauma, institutionalised racism and socioeconomic disadvantage contribute to children being placed in child protection (SNAICC 2019). Vastly disproportionate rates of Indigenous children are on child protection orders and in out-of-home care. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), which aims to enhance and preserve Indigenous children's connection to family and community and sense of identity and culture, has been adopted in varying forms by all states and territories. However, by 30 June 2019, only 62.7% (854 of 1,363) of children had been placed in out-of-home care in accordance with the Child Placement Principle (AIHW 2020). New generations of children are being traumatised by the process of separation from their families.

It is also widely recognised that Indigenous Australians are incarcerated at much higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians. Incarceration re-traumatises people, puts them at further risk of suicide and suicide-related behaviours. The chronic incarceration of Indigenous children and youth is causing a systemic breaking of connections to family, kinship and culture, impairing the wellbeing of children (RCBIPDCNT 2017).

Indigenous Australians also experience high unemployment, which reinforces intergenerational poverty; in 2018-19, Indigenous Australians were 1.9 times as likely to be unemployed as non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2019b). A lower socioeconomic position during childhood is correlated with adverse childhood experiences (Bunting et al. 2018; Walsh et al. 2019).

The breakdown of Indigenous families through entrenched intergenerational poverty can be understood in the context of this evidence. Indigenous Australians are 32 times as likely to be hospitalised for family violence assault as non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2019a). Family violence also impairs the protective connections between family and kin. It drives the transmission of trauma across generations and has been linked to a range of adverse life outcomes, mental health challenges, as well as suicide and suicide-related behaviour (Australian Human Rights Commission 2020; Langton et al. 2020).

Cultural connection, identity and wellbeing

For Indigenous Australians, wellbeing is not an individualistic concept. Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is the foundation of physical and mental health for Indigenous Australians. SEWB comprises 7 interrelated domains: body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, Country, and spirituality (Dudgeon et al. 2017). Optimal SEWB occurs when there are harmonious and healthy connections across all the domains.

The cultural determinants of health encompass the cultural factors that promote resilience, foster a sense of identity and support good mental and physical health and wellbeing for individuals, families and communities (Department of Health 2017). Arabena (2020) has identified family, kinship and community to be one of the 6 cultural determinants of Indigenous wellbeing.

The protective benefit of connection to family and kinship is fundamental to wellbeing. These connections are an important resilience resource for all Indigenous peoples.

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004–2009 (PM&C 2017) identifies risk factors to the SEWB domain of family and kin. Examples of risk factors include absence of family members, family violence and child neglect and abuse.

Cultural continuity, that is, being connected to one's culture through engagement in practices and values of one's indigenous heritage, is recognised across the literature as a foundation for suicide prevention (Chandler and Lalonde 1998; Dudgeon et al. 2020; Ketheesan et al. 2020). National and international literature indicate the protective benefits of healthy family and kinship connections are best achieved by:

- strengths-based sustainable, holistic, culturally safe, place-based approaches, by Indigenous-governed parenting programs
- family-focused, place-based Indigenous run healing programs for men and women
- postvention support for suicide impacted families
- strengthening culturally safe connections between families, schools and services
- overcoming inequities in the determinants of family wellbeing such as housing, employment and education.

In all of this, Indigenous governance is vital to success (Dudgeon et al. 2016).

Relevant policies, programs and initiatives

Policy context

The right of Indigenous people to determine, protect and build connections to their family and kin is recognised in international law. In Australia, there are several key national policies and frameworks that are dedicated to Indigenous mental health and preventing Indigenous suicide and suicide-related behaviour. Aspects of these policies advocate improving SEWB by strengthening connections to family and kinship.

Three overarching policies and components relevant to this topic are:

- Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan – with priority area 4 identifying improving mental health and reducing suicide among Indigenous Australians as a national priority, and promoting Indigenous leadership as a core action to support this aim.
- National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing – the importance of SEWB domain of connection to family and kinship is stressed, with Outcome 2.2 of Action Area 2 Promotion of wellness, including strategies ensuring that families are strong and supported.
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy – with Action Area 2 identifying the need to strengthen connections to family and kinship through 'building strengths and resilience in individuals and families' (Department of Health and Ageing 2013).

States and territories have also implemented policies for Indigenous suicide prevention which are outlined in Appendix A of the full publication.

Families are also supported in the following national frameworks and policies:

- The Fourth Action Plan – a part of the *National plan to reduce violence against women and their children 2010–2022* (DSS 2019), the Plan acknowledges some Indigenous communities require additional support to address higher rates of family and sexual violence. It aims to support Indigenous communities to develop community-led solutions to preventing violence.
- Bringing Them Home 20 years on: An action plan for healing – recognises the trauma passed down to children and grandchildren as a result of the Stolen Generations (Healing Foundation 2017). The Plan notes that the majority of the Bringing Them Home recommendations have not yet been implemented, creating additional trauma and distress for many Stolen Generations members.

Implementing integrated suicide prevention

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) document *Implementing integrated suicide prevention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: A guide for Primary Health Networks* (Dudgeon et al. 2018a) offers specific guidance on Indigenous mental health and suicide reform for Primary Health Networks.

It advocates building community capacity through the use of participatory action research in SEWB and suicide prevention programs and activities. CBPATSISP advises self-determination and Indigenous governance, and the shifting of implementation to community-controlled organisations that have place-based knowledge of what works in specific communities. In this way, SEWB and suicide prevention activities become a way of strengthening connection to family and kinship.

Relevant programs and initiatives

The 18 programs described in Table 1 represent some of the innovative Indigenous therapeutic practices across Australia. Many of these programs address ways of overcoming the social determinants which contribute to suicide and suicide-related behaviours such as poverty and isolation. There is also a strong focus on overcoming mental health stigma, creating forms of culturally sensitive understandings of psychological stress and trauma, and using the expertise of people with lived experience.

More information on these programs is available in Chapter 5 and Appendix B of the full publication.

Table 1: Programs and initiatives strengthening mental health and suicide prevention

Name and brief description	Location / Indigenous-specific?	Evaluation
<p>Youth Empowerment and Healing Cultural Camp (YEaHCC)</p> <p>Healing camps for children and youth, which strengthen connection to community, family and Country and develop leadership skills and cultural knowledge (YEaHCC 2017).</p>	<p>Western Australia</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>YEaHCC 2019</p>
<p>Uti Kulintjaku Project</p> <p>Uti Kulintjaku means ‘to think and understand clearly’ in Pitjantjatjara (NPYWC 2021) and is based on the cultural principle of ngapartji ngapartji (reciprocity in relationships). The Project has the following objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to strengthen shared understandings of mental health between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal health professionals • increase help-seeking, strengthening health services’ cultural competency, and Aboriginal leadership. 	<p>APY lands</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Togni 2017</p>
<p>Marumali Program</p> <p>The Marumali Journey of Healing increases support for members of the Stolen Generations. The program has been developed, and is delivered, by a survivor of Australia’s removal policies. The workshops train service providers to recognise the impact of forcible removal in clients and understand paths for recovery, and to avoid re-traumatising members of the Stolen Generations. The workshops are delivered in a variety of formats, designed to meet the needs of different groups of participants.</p>	<p>Location not published</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes, with non-Aboriginal people also welcome at workshops</p>	<p>Peeters, Haman and Kelly 2014</p> <p>Evaluation completed in 2014 not publicly available</p>
<p>Yuendumu Warra-Warra Kanyi – Mt Theo Program</p> <p>Originally developed by Yuendumu Elders, this program operates under the auspices of the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation. It is a community-based youth counselling and mentoring service, which creates meaningful and positive futures for Warlpiri youth. The program has 5 main elements including community and family engagement (Mt Theo Program 2011).</p>	<p>Warlpiri, Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Shaw 2015</p>

Name and brief description	Location / Indigenous-specific?	Evaluation
<p>Telling Story</p> <p>This is a SEWB project to reclaim and document stories of survival and resilience and enable people to speak of future hopes and dreams (Wood and Coutinho 2016). The approach is based on narrative therapy, which believes that people make decisions based on good reasons and that one's history, biography, culture, and character determine what those good reasons might be (Fisher 1989). Telling Story uses digital technology to create an online archive of stories of hope and survival (Telling Story Project 2020).</p>	<p>Western Australia and Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – not published</p>	<p>CBPATSISP n.d.</p>
<p>The National Empowerment Program (NEP)</p> <p>The NEP Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program is a community empowerment project that works with communities to develop, deliver and evaluate programs that promote positive SEWB and address social determinants of health and reduce suicide. The NEP uses Participatory Action Research to identify factors influencing mental health and SEWB of communities; and to develop strategies to respond to these issues using the SEWB framework (CBATSISP n.d.).</p>	<p>Queensland and Western Australia</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Mia et al. 2017; Mia and Oxenham 2017</p>
<p>Kalka Healing: Healing starts with you</p> <p>This Indigenous-led suicide prevention program provides workshops that are practical, at the grassroots level, and culturally sensitive. The program has several objectives including to provide participants with the tools to lead a purposeful life while being connected to Country, culture, community and family.</p>	<p>Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Ongoing participatory action research, not yet formally evaluated.</p>
<p>The Enemy Within</p> <p>This program comprises customised workshops focused on suicide prevention, healing and strengthening SEWB. Its objectives include promoting a connection to self, land and community in participants and reducing the stigma of mental health challenges.</p>	<p>National</p> <p>Indigenous specific – not published</p>	<p>Not yet formally evaluated</p>
<p>GREATS Youth Services</p> <p>GREATS (Great Recreation, Entertainment, Arts, Training and Sport) Youth Services is a core service provider of Mala'la Aboriginal Health Service. It provides programs and services for young people, including a drop-in service, crisis-safe house, Youth Patrol and Outreach Program and school holiday programs, as well as coordinating the annual National Youth Week celebrations. The programs target disengaged and 'at risk' young people. When possible, they are delivered on Country in participation with local Elders.</p>	<p>Maningrida, Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Walker and Scrine 2015; Healthcare Management Advisors 2016</p>
<p>Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid (AMHFA)</p> <p>AMHFA is a course teaching participants culturally respectful ways respond to an Indigenous person experiencing a mental health emergency. It increases individual and community understanding of suicide prevention (MHFA 2018).</p>	<p>Location not published</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes, non-Indigenous family members can also participate</p>	<p>Day et al. 2021; Kanowski et al. 2009; Mental Health First Aid Australia 2018</p>

Name and brief description	Location / Indigenous-specific?	Evaluation
<p>Talking About Suicide</p> <p>Talking About Suicide emerged from the AMHFA courses. The short-course format is delivered by Indigenous AMHFA Instructors and teaches people how to support an Indigenous person who is experiencing suicidal thoughts (Armstrong et al. 2020).</p>	<p>Location not published</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Armstrong et al. 2020</p>
<p>Deadly Thinking</p> <p>This is a SEWB promotion program for rural and remote Indigenous Australian communities. It aims to improve emotional health literacy, psychological well-being and attitudes towards help-seeking. Workshops involve participants engaging with a series of videos and facilitated group discussions with other participants related to SEWB topics relevant to individuals and communities.</p>	<p>Location not published</p> <p>Indigenous specific – no (non-Indigenous people are welcome to participate)</p>	<p>Snodgrass 2020</p>
<p>Alive and Kicking Goals!</p> <p>This community-led youth suicide prevention project aims to prevent suicide through football and peer education, one-on-one mentoring and counselling.</p>	<p>Broome, Western Australia</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Tighe and McKay 2012</p>
<p>Stronger Smarter Yarns for Life</p> <p>This suicide prevention program takes a strengths-based approach to increase participants' knowledge, skills and confidence to have yarns with Indigenous people who are starting to show signs of distress or are facing a personal crisis (Almeda et al. 2019; ConNetica Consulting 2020).</p>	<p>Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – no</p>	<p>Martínez and Pérez 2019</p>
<p>Suicide Story</p> <p>Suicide story is an Indigenous-specific training resource providing community education and training in suicide prevention and coordinating the response to a death by suicide within the community (Department of Health 2014). This training resource increases understanding about suicide, improves the skills to work with people at risk, and builds a sense of hope for Central Australian Aboriginal communities.</p>	<p>3 sites in central Australia</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Guenther and Mack 2019</p>
<p>Wesley LifeForce Community Suicide Prevention Training</p> <p>This suicide prevention training program enhances community capacity and engagement, and helps increase community strength and resilience. Respectful knowledge sharing is at the heart of the program. Discussions are held as yarning circles with community members, with the focus on collective healing and knowledge exchange. The program is meant to be adapted according to the needs of individual communities (Wesley Mission n.d.).</p>	<p>4 sites in New South Wales and Northern Territory</p> <p>Indigenous specific – yes</p>	<p>Not publicly released</p>

Name and brief description	Location / Indigenous-specific?	Evaluation
<p>The Yiriman Project</p> <p>The Yiriman Project in West Kimberley assists young Aboriginal people within an immersion style cultural framework as they learn strategies to address problems such as substance abuse, self-harm and contact with the justice system. The Project involves trips on Country, which begin with a meeting between the local Elders, young people and Yiriman workers. Key cultural activities centre on restoring a healing kinship with Country through knowledge transfer via an immersion in cultural practices with Elders guiding the participants in these activities (Palmer 2013; KALACC 2020).</p>	<p>Remote communities</p> <p>Indigenous specific – no</p>	<p>Palmer 2013</p>
<p>Mowanjum – Connection to Culture program, including the Jubna Project and Keeping Place and Media Project</p> <p>This program involves sharing learnings and activities that connect young people to culture and Country, providing participants a strong identity for strength and as the source of their happiness, wellbeing and health. The program involves the transmission of cultural authority to empower participants to become agents of positive change within their communities (Golson and Thorburn 2020). Participants attend cultural camps in the Kimberley, where Elders pass on knowledge and cultural authority for an agreed specific ritual or cultural practice to culturally identified emerging leaders or Madjas (Golson and Thorburn 2020). The culture camps draw upon Jubna, traditional forms of storytelling through traditional song and dance (Davey et al. 2019, Dudgeon et al. 2018b).</p> <p>Keeping Place and Media Project is another initiative of Mowanjum - Connection to Culture and also operates under the guidance of Elders. Its purpose is to record the stories of people, places, language and perspectives for families and language groups in the Western Kimberley region. Using cameras, young people are encouraged to capture storylines, songs, and dance, and to interview each other (Dudgeon et al. 2018b.)</p>	<p>Mowanjum, Western Australia</p> <p>Indigenous specific – not published</p>	<p>Program evaluation is forthcoming</p>

What works

Strengthening cultural continuity has been identified in the literature as the most effective cross-cutting strategy among suicide prevention interventions (Dudgeon et al. 2016; Gibson et al. 2021). It is recognised as a mechanism for strengthening SEWB and resilience (Dudgeon et al. 2016).

Key protective benefits of cultural continuity identified in the literature (Busija et al. 2020; Chandler and Lalonde 1998; Dudgeon et al. 2016; Jongen et al. 2020; Prince et al. 2018; Yap and Yu 2016) include:

- the flourishing of families
- the reclamation of language, social and cultural capital, and cultural identity
- the empowerment of Elders
- stronger transmission of culture across generations
- supportive peer relationships
- cultural revitalisation.

Evaluation findings

Of the 18 programs reviewed, formal evaluations were not publicly available for 3 programs. The CBPATISIP has published assessments of all but 3 programs.

The majority of programs (12 of the 18) were identified as Indigenous specific. For the other programs this information was not always available; however, Indigenous Australians were generally the primary target group of participants.

Strengthening cultural continuity was a feature of all programs. Over 30 different cultural continuity pathways were identified, with many of these being key elements of the programs. For example, cultural camps for youth and leadership skills and cultural knowledge were essential parts of the YEaHCC program and Mowanjum Connection to Culture Program; art programs were in the Uti Kulintjaku Project and Keeping Place and Media Project; and engagement in cultural values and Lore was a part of the Yiriman Project.

Place-based healing practices were also strongly evident. Trauma-informed practice was a feature of the programs. The model for the Marumali Program, for example, was described as one which addresses issues in the local community and the workshops were based on culturally safe, trauma-informed practice.

Central to many of the programs is a reconnection with Country which is understood by Indigenous cultures across Australia as the source of spirituality, Lore (Law), and wellbeing. Country is also understood as kin or family. Connecting with Country is a way of restoring cultural knowledge and identity (Poelina et al. 2020).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) advocates a culturally appropriate strengths-based approach to suicide prevention programs and activities, recommending these activities include community-specific and community-led upstream programs focusing on healing and strengthening SEWB, cultural renewal, with an emphasis on trauma-informed care (Dudgeon et al. 2016).

Justice reinvestment is also advised, to divert young people away from the criminal justice system and fund improvements to mental health, alcohol and other drug services.

Interrupting the transmission of intergenerational trauma in families and kinship networks and strengthening intergenerational resilience is an important suicide prevention process. It is best supported by culturally appropriate programs and practices based on place-based knowledge of what works and what does not work for communities. It also recommends that strengthening connections to family is embedded in all suicide prevention activities and related policies.

Conclusions

The evidence-base for best practice healing programs, parenting programs, and community-based family empowerment programs could be strengthened. Evaluations of prevention strategies and programs are needed from an Indigenous standpoint. The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (Productivity Commission 2020) offers a range of strategies for improving the evidence base for Indigenous health promotion and intervention.

Finally, the absence of Indigenous-informed indicators and measures are key barriers to measuring progress. There are few, if any, tools to explicitly measure the domains of SEWB. SEWB or the elements of the SEWB model – including family and kinship – are rarely specifically addressed or measured with a nationally consistent approach.

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Cover art
Data & Diversity
Created by Jay Hobbs
Meriam-Mir and Kuku Yalanji man