

Mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum: Factsheet for organisations

Our research team from the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research (The Australian National University) want to understand any concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have about their mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum. We also want to understand what mental health and wellbeing supports and resources would help. In April 2023, we talked to 84 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across six locations. This is a brief summary of what we heard, and we've included some links to existing support services.

This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome.

What we heard

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people told us they are experiencing extra sources of stress in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum, adding to the load that mob are already carrying. The proposed alteration to the Constitution is about recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means that conversations about the Referendum are tied to identity and can have deep and ongoing impacts.

“I go onto social media and I see people debating ... It's like who I am inside is the debate. It almost feels like entertainment for other people ... It's a direct attack on who I am as a person and how I relate to my world and family which, I think, is the part that people don't really understand.”

Participants told us they are experiencing increased racism. This includes unfair and harmful interactions in day-to-day life, overhearing racist comments, and negative messages in the media.

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Participants also told us that they are facing pressure to educate and inform non-Indigenous people about the Referendum. This can cause a heavy mental load. Repeatedly walking people through history can also be triggering or re-traumatising.

“It’s like they’re constantly putting that Blackfella hat back on us in the sense of having to educate constantly, which then is traumatising ... it takes a toll. Massive toll. Burnout.”

We heard that discussions about the Referendum are causing division and conflict between some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the non-Indigenous community, and within some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. This can have negative impacts on wellbeing for individuals, families, and communities, now and into the future.

These impacts are already occurring in community, and the impacts could be long-lasting. It is important to recognise these additional burdens and take action to reduce the negative impacts. Organisations have a key opportunity to contribute to wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

What can my organisation do?

Communicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are experiencing added stress, mental load, and racism during this period. Make sure members of your organisation are not adding to this burden, and are taking active steps to reduce this burden.

Provide education for your workforce about the Referendum, to reduce the burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide this education. You can refer staff to [this link](#) for factual information about the Referendum. You can provide information sessions for staff.

Equip your workforce to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and colleagues. Offer workplace training to empower staff to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a culturally safe way.

Support access to a holistic range of supports to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and clients. See this link for a list of mental health, counselling, social and emotional wellbeing, relationships, and other holistic support services. Ensure your Employee Assistance Program covers flexible access to culturally safe and holistic support services, and consider increasing the level of support available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Provide opportunities and mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to engage in activities that support connection to family, community, and culture, in order to protect wellbeing.

Establish pathways for reporting racism, and accountability mechanisms, within your organisation. Make sure your staff are aware of these pathways. If you don't have internal pathways within your organisation, in the first instance, see this link for information on where to report racism: <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/take-action/responding-to-racism>.

Empower non-Indigenous staff to be allies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Distribute the factsheet for non-Indigenous people, which is available [here](#). For more ideas, see the Ending Racism video and Check Up resources at <https://mk-engaged.anu.edu.au/ending-racism/>.