

Intergenerational Trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide

This fact sheet describes the impact of intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide



An Overview

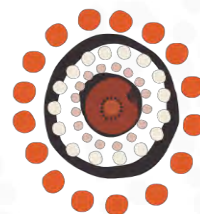
To fully understand and effectively address the complex reasons for the growing rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' suicide, we need to view the issue through a **trauma-informed lens** and within a **historical and social context**.

The combined effects of **colonisation** and **oppressive policies and practices** have had a profound and enduring impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and social and emotional wellbeing. The devastating impacts of past events, including **massacres** and **forced removals** from family and Country, remain in the minds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹.

Current policies are still contributing to the **over-representation** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in **out-of-home care** and the **justice system**, which contributes to **continuing intergenerational trauma** (also known as transgenerational trauma).



Trauma is one's emotional response to a major catastrophic and/or overwhelming events². **Intergenerational trauma** refers to the kind of trauma that "is passed down from the first generation of survivors who directly experienced or witnessed traumatic events to future generations"³.





Trauma Contributes to Many Challenges

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and leaders have long asserted that the trauma resulting from colonisation is at the root of many challenges experienced by **individuals, families, and communities**. These challenges include

- increase in suicide attempts and deaths
- alcohol and drug abuse, and
- domestic violence

These in turn lead to **further trauma and intergenerational trauma**.

High rates of suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA) have been described as a *“contemporary expression of distress in response to chronic trauma exposure, underpinned by the legacy of historical unresolved trauma and grief”*⁴.

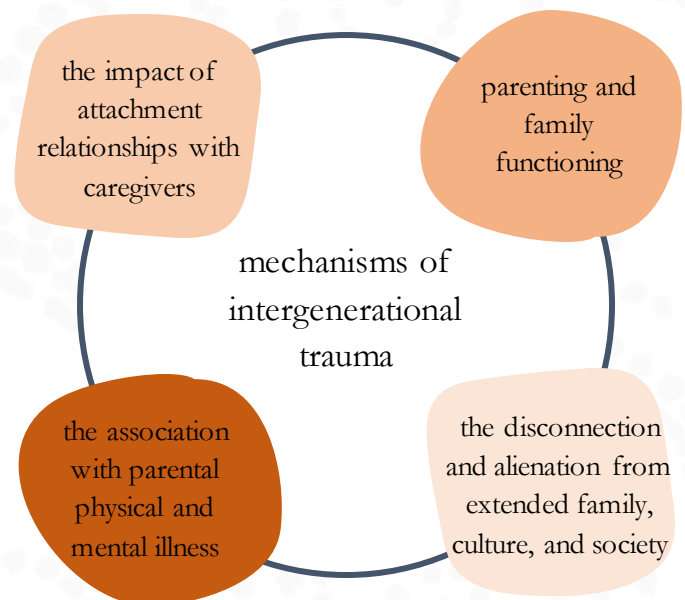
The WA Coroner’s inquiry into the deaths of 13 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples in the Kimberley identified intergenerationally transmitted trauma as a key contributing factor in all deaths (See Fact Sheet on children and young people).



Intergenerational Trauma

Aboriginal psychiatrist Professor Helen Milroy proposed a variety of mechanisms through which intergenerational trauma operates⁵. Exposure to high levels of stress and trauma enhances these effects later in life⁴.

Since the physiological and psychological effects of stress and distress through which historical trauma associated with colonisation can be epigenetically transmitted⁵, the intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation may become a vicious cycle.





How is Trauma Transmitted across Generations?

Aboriginal academic, Professor Judy Atkinson, mapped the transmission of trauma in a 6th generation traumagram in a family⁷. This suggests an association between historical events of colonisation and:

- being the victim or perpetrator of violence,
- mental health difficulties,
- suicidal ideation and behaviour, and
- substance abuse

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?⁶

Trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples not only refers to **diagnosable post-traumatic stress disorder**, but also involves **additional, multiple, complex, and severe levels of stress**. These stressors are compounded by:

- the inability to identify and overcome the sources of stress,
- the presence of cumulative stressors, and
- the knowledge that many stressors are inflicted by people in authority.

Trauma can:

- deeply undermine a person's sense that the world is a safe place, eroding their trust in people and creating fear, anxiety, and mental exhaustion,
- overwhelm coping skills and the ability to regulate emotion and control anger, and
- lead to reactive thoughts and emotions that one cannot integrate or process, so that they remain 'stuck' in the traumatic event.



Diagnosing and Healing Trauma



Step 1 in healing is **diagnosis**, which ensures the identification of people who needs help. The Australian Aboriginal Version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (AAVHTQ)⁷ is a culturally appropriate measure of specific traumatic stressors and symptoms⁷.



Step 2 involves **professional help** to emotionally process and integrate the traumatising event into a new sense of self that is functional and mentally well. Conventional clinical management by a psychologist or psychiatrist using medication, therapy, and behaviour modification techniques may be required, whilst cultural healers and other forms of healing can also play a role.

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





Overcoming Individual and Community Trauma

People are more likely to overcome trauma if ⁴:

- 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 restore, reaffirm, and renew a sense of pride in cultural identity, connection to Country and participation in community, or
- there is a focus on connecting Stolen Generations members to their families and communities, truth telling, acknowledgement, and apology.



References

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