

Finding roles and making space for Aboriginal men



Michael Mitchell

Some of our men have lost their way. They just haven't got strong roles in the world we're living in now and it's a real struggle for many of us. As a society we really need to take that seriously and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men of all ages can contribute properly to our communities, and get respect for doing it.

Things have changed so much. A lot of young men now don't know how to catch a fish, dugong or turtle, or catch a kangaroo or a sheep or a goat for bush tucker. That was one thing Aboriginal men always used to be able to do, and those skills are really important because they give men stronger self-worth, sense of control and pride if they're able to provide for themselves and their families.

So we have to get men back out to Country, including getting them away from phones and the Internet which cause so much distraction and stress and take us away from what's really important.

We need to think about men's work roles too. After colonisation our men worked as stockmen, ringers, jackeroos, camp cooks, drovers, shearers and saddlers. Then there was the pay dispute when men walked off the land. There was a whole lot wrong with those times but Aboriginal men were still working on the land, still deeply connected with Country and animals, with roles that were recognised and valued. Now farming is done differently and those roles don't exist.

Nowadays Aboriginal men can make a lot of money in the mining and resources industries, but that means working 12-hour days, for eight or 10 days straight, and that wears people out. It's no good for men who also want to be active and involved in their families and communities.

Aboriginal men excel in all kinds of sports – and sport is one area where we can be role models within our communities. If we're lucky enough to pay at elite level, sport can be our job too. Playing footy was 10 years of my life, but footy still doesn't define who I am. What defines and differentiates me is my



The men's workshop group at the national Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Gathering 5.



Michael Mitchell co-facilitated SEWB Gathering 5 with Judith Lovegrove from the Menzies School of Health Research.

culture and my identity as an Aboriginal man.

I'm part of the Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing (TIMHWB) research project at the University of Western Australia. TIMHWB organises national Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Gatherings where people come together from all over Australia to discuss the biggest challenges and work on solutions.

At the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering 3, held on Ngunawal Country in Canberra in September 2022, a group of men who work in mental health began to discuss what we could do collectively about the troubles we are facing. We started to reflect on our own identities as men and the needs we saw in our own communities to strengthen men's roles and sense of purpose.

We continued to catch up from time to time and in October last year, on Kuarna Country in Adelaide, 15 men came together from Country all over Australia to

start shaping our ideas up into practical solutions. I facilitated along with Associate Professor Graham Gee, an Aboriginal clinical psychologist.

We came together on the banks of the Karrawirra Parri/River Torrens, starting with a breakfast cook up, and then circled up to share our work and ideas. We yarned about what a Men's SEWB Gathering on Country could look like. It could be a safe, healing space to bring together boys, men and Elders to take part in cultural activities, share our knowledge, listen and talk about what makes men, relationships, families, and community strong.

Our plan now is to bring together a working group to further develop these ideas for a Men's SEWB Network and On-Country Men's SEWB Gathering. We're going to meet regularly online and in person to keep everyone updated and think through how we can apply for the funding we will need to do this properly.

The men's group is honoured to have the support of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women leaders in SEWB. We all understand that the whole community benefits when our men are strong.

I'm optimistic we can make it happen. In the last couple of years we've seen a lot more really positive investment in Indigenous-led SEWB and suicide prevention approaches, like the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)'s Culture Care Connect program, which coordinates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention networks in regions and communities. We could look at setting up our men's groups alongside Culture Care Connect activities. I am really pleased to see various men's gatherings and initiatives starting to happen across Australia and looking forward to working together.

We need to restore faith and belief in men and build their self-worth and self-belief back up. There are important roles for men in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families if we can just make the space for them to contribute.

● Michael Mitchell is a Yamatji man of Nyamal and Malgana descent. He started his working life as an electrician and then went on to play professional Australian Rules Football for Claremont and Richmond, where he was awarded Goal and Mark of the year (1990), and was named

one of the Richmond Ten Tiger Treasures of the century by winning Goal of the Century (2020). Michael began his career in Indigenous health and social and emotional wellbeing by developing a youth training program in the Carnarvon region developing skills to work in the fishing industry. Michael managed and coordinated several Aboriginal Community Controlled Services and gained a degree focused on Indigenous mental health from Curtin University. During the 15 years he was the Service Manager of Wungen Kartup, an Aboriginal mental health program, there was never a suicide of a client under their care.

Michael is a member of the AFL's mental health committee and works as a consultant in Aboriginal mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

● This article is part of a series of Koori Mail columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors associated with the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSIISP) at the University of Western Australia, established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.