

Community-led responses are best to deal with youth suicide



Tanja Hirvonen

The devastating loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to suicide is a complex and multifactorial issue which demands urgent attention and action. Tragically, our youth, (some as young as 15 and even younger), have died by suicide, ranging from those experiencing tremendous social disadvantage to those seemingly on a positive path with opportunities. This stark contrast underscores the multifaceted nature of this crisis, where no one is immune to the pain and challenges which contribute to these tragic outcomes.

Suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth is more than just a matter of numbers. Gaja Kerry Charlton, Traditional Owner and Yuggera Elder, shared, "it is a heartbreaking tragedy that devastates families and communities. We are also losing future generations." The causes of suicide are complex and influenced by various psychological, social, cultural, and historical factors. These young lives are lost far too early, and we must closely examine not only the factors contributing to this crisis in the youths themselves but also the systems which affect their lives. Gaja Kerry Charlton believes colonisation and the systems Aboriginal peoples have had to face can lead to pain and feelings of deep exhaustion. She said, "the core issue is pain, and that pain can be too much to bear for one person to deal with alone. We need supports and services that not only provide emotionally safe areas to support people in this pain but also encourage building resilience and strength."

Comprehensive data is needed

While there is a need for comprehensive data to better understand why young people are taking their own lives, the solutions come from within communities themselves. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the rates of suicide are approximately two and a half times higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples compared to other Australians.

Culturally led responses lead to long-term healing and wellbeing; when culture is central,



Jane Kearns, Tanya Robinson, Jasmine Williams and Kim Reid at the healing walk in Wagga Wagga.

hope grows. To support this, we need data that goes beyond risk – capturing our protective factors like cultural identity, connection to Country, and holistic healing systems which reflect the strengths of our social and emotional wellbeing. Professor Pat Dudgeon said, "our centre is committed to promoting best practices that respect Indigenous knowledge and self-determination." The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at UWA promotes self-determination for First Nations communities to design, implement and evaluate programs themselves.

A complex issue

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth encounter unique challenges which increase their vulnerability to mental health issues and suicide, including the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination, and disconnection from culture and Country. When a child loses a parent to suicide, the risk of suicide for that child rises significantly. Likewise, parents who lose a child to suicide often experience a profound decline in their own wellbeing.

Thirilli is the national provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postvention support and assistance, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. Dr Summer May Finlay, Yorta Yorta woman and Chair of Thirilli, said, "in many cases, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander families are not only affected by suicide once but multiple times. The heartbreaking reality is that more and more families are facing the loss of several loved ones to suicide".

This intergenerational cycle of grief and loss can foster a sense of hopelessness which leads to further harm.

Each anniversary – the first birthday, Christmas, or another significant moment without a loved one – can feel unbearable, and the absence is a constant reminder of the loss.

Supporting families

"For those who have lost a loved one to suicide, the journey of grief is complex and ongoing. It involves not only mourning the loss but also learning to live without the loved one who has passed," Dr Finlay said.

The most helpful supports can be practical assistance, open conversation, compassion and understanding.

Services and resources developed by Mob to support Mob are the most effective and appropriate. Thirilli, for example, supports families and communities on their healing journeys and remembers those who we have lost to suicide.

A powerful example of a community coming together to heal is the "Murra Yarra (Speak Out Speak Loud)" healing walk in the community of Wagga Wagga. This walk serves as an opportunity to honour and commemorate loved ones lost to

suicide, remembering them in the way they were when they were with us. The healing walk provides a space for family and community members to connect, grieve, heal, and find support. Jasmine Williams, a co-founder of Yamandhu Marang (Are you well?), Wagga Wagga's founding First Nations youth suicide prevention community action group, hosts the walk with the support of the local Aboriginal Medical Service and other wellbeing services.

Programs like Culture Care Connect – delivered by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) – also play a pivotal role by providing integrated suicide prevention and aftercare services in local communities.

"The walk is our way to bring the community together as one, to walk alongside our sacred healing space along our river, to commemorate our loved ones, and to give space to talk about what we loved about them," Jasmine said, "walks like this can help people process their grief, find strength, and continue the journey of healing; this year's walk is the third annual of its kind with non-First Nations people reaching out to the group wanting to honour the memory of their lost loved one and celebrate their lives with us. That just shows the reach of the walk now; we all need to heal, and this is a subject we need to keep talking about."

A call to action

"We must continue to have conversations about the losses in

our communities, but more importantly, turn those conversations into meaningful action. This includes improving the data on Indigenous youth suicide, understanding shared responsibility and addressing the factors which increase the risks of suicide. It is crucial we strengthen cultural support, community connection and education around wellbeing to work toward reducing the alarming rates of suicide within our communities."

Gaja Kerry Charlton shares, "we cannot afford to remain silent. The pain of losing our young people is too great, and the need for action is urgent. Let us honour those who have been lost by committing to making a difference in the lives of those still with us."

Tanja Hirvonen is a proud Jaru and Bunuba woman – born and raised on the lands of the Kalkadon people – Mount Isa, Queensland. Tanja is the interim CEO of Thirilli and is a clinical psychologist and mid-career researcher with expertise in mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, suicide prevention, and working with persons impacted by trauma. She brings academic research, corporate expertise, and clinical experience working with remote, regional communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing, to her board roles at the Australian Indigenous Psychologist Association and the Black Dog Institute.