

# Honouring the past while building a stronger future



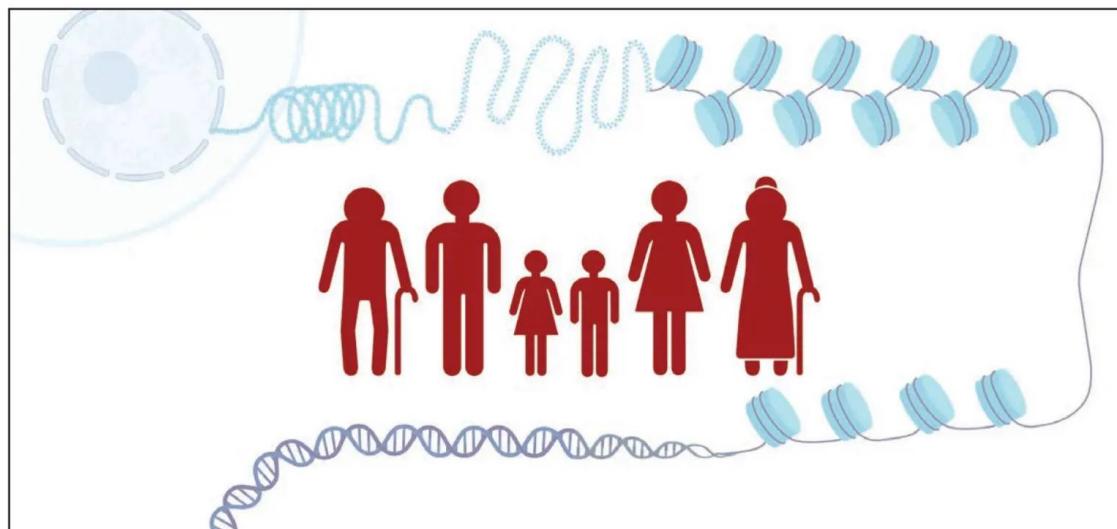
**Helen Milroy**

**W**e often hear Elders say that we carry the pain of our ancestors. As part of our work on Indigenous mental health, we have seen how the trauma from yesterday can still affect the lives of our young ones today. In our recent review published in the *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* (<https://www.mdpi.com/1422-0067/26/7/3075>), we set out to understand why this happens and more importantly, how we can help Aboriginal people heal while honouring our stories of suffering and resilience. Our work is about nurturing hope and using both culture and science to break the cycles of trauma, creating a path towards a healthier, stronger future for generations to come.

## The science of trauma

In our research team, one of the big questions we explored is how the experiences of one generation might affect the next. In science, this is called “epigenetics” – the idea that our environment and life experiences can change how our genes work. Several studies have explored the possibility that traumatic experiences could leave an epigenetic footprint on the next generation. For example, research has found that children of people who survived great traumas, like the Holocaust, show changes in stress-related genes. It’s as if the original trauma “taught” the body to stay alert for danger, and that lesson was carried on to the next generation.

In our review, we consider the ways this could be happening. We found that, while the idea of trauma being “written into our genes” often grabs media attention, the actual scientific evidence for this in humans is lacking. What is clear, and what the research shows again and again, is that ongoing social conditions, family connections, and community support play the biggest role in whether trauma is passed down, or whether healing can take its



An image created by the Empowering Service Systems team to represent the relationship between epigenetics and trauma across generations.

place. This means trauma is not destiny and knowing that is powerful.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we cannot talk about intergenerational trauma without talking about the true causes – the long history of colonisation, the suppression of culture, forced removal of children, systemic racism, loss of land, language, family, and life. These deep wounds created the social and emotional pain we still see today: poverty, discrimination, and disconnection that keep the trauma “alive”. Given this reality, it is essential to ground our understanding of intergenerational trauma in these historical and ongoing injustices. Therefore, the mainstream concept of “trauma in our genes” is not only unsupported by scientific evidence but could also inadvertently promote deterministic or fatalistic narratives that stigmatise already marginalised communities. The results of this work reiterate the importance of considering social, political, and cultural contexts when thinking about ways of healing from trauma – and highlight the need for policies and services to acknowledge and address these powerful influences.

## Culture as medicine

Our review found that healing must happen on the same pathways that trauma travelled – through our relationships, our environments, and our culture. Western science is catching up with what our Elders have always known: culture is medicine. Strong family systems, rich cultural traditions, community solidarity, a sense of belonging and communal ways of healing buffer against the

transmission of trauma by changing the narrative from one of loss and suppression to one of pride and resilience.

Research shows that Indigenous communities around the world who have actively revived cultural practices and strengthened cultural identity, have lower youth suicide rates than those that have not. In other words, when young people walk proudly with a strong sense of who they are and where they come from, the narrative changes. They move from a place of loss to one of belonging, from disconnection to strength – and this has a profound effect on their well-being.

Creating an environment of healing involves many pieces. It starts with family – nurturing our kids in safe, loving homes. It extends to community – having spaces where people feel they belong and are supported. Community-led healing programs, such as cultural camps, yarnning circles, or Indigenous-run trauma programs, weave cultural knowledge with emotional support.

Our team also looked at some existing and emerging therapies making an impact in mental health. Approaches like physical activity and mindfulness practices have proven effective in treating conditions such as PTSD, depression, and alcohol use disorder among others. Research also suggests that these treatments are linked to changes in the way our genes work, making it easier for people to recover from trauma and stress. Practices like mindfulness and meditation, which are closely aligned with Indigenous ways of being present and connected, are showing promise in helping

people manage stress, while increased physical activity supports recovery and reflects traditional ways of living on Country that have long supported First Nations health and resilience. In addition, emerging research suggests that, when practised safely and respectfully, therapies involving traditional spiritual medicines may help people heal from deep emotional pain.

These approaches highlight that true recovery is physical, psychological, and spiritual. Ultimately, this reminds us that by combining new therapies with cultural traditions, there is great potential for healing in our communities.

Above all, any approach to healing our communities must be culturally safe and holistic. This means Indigenous people guiding the journey. Research and interventions should involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders – Elders, healers, Indigenous mental-health workers. Our review calls for culturally grounded methods, where we as researchers work with community, not on community. We know that one-size-fits-all solutions don’t work in isolation. Healing has to happen on community terms, reflecting the holistic view of wellbeing that includes spirit, body, mind, and Country of Aboriginal people.

## Resilience

In talking about intergenerational trauma, we also celebrate intergenerational resilience – the strength passed down to resist and recover. Our ancestors endured so much and yet ensured the survival of our cultures and families. That resilience lives in us. We have seen families where the cycle was broken – where a parent’s

determination that “my kids will have a better life” can change everything. We have seen communities come together to revive language and ceremony. Every positive change – be it a supportive uncle, a strong mother, a cultural program, or a government policy – is like a thread of healing woven into the fabric of Aboriginal peoples’ stories, strengthening them for the future.

Our team’s findings ultimately affirm what Aboriginal people have been saying: healing must be holistic, and it must be hope-filled. Each generation, armed with greater knowledge and better support, can move further from the shadows of the past toward a healthier, more hopeful future. We share this message in the spirit of unity and strength. Although the echoes of trauma can still be felt today, it’s through compassion, culture, and community that we can raise even stronger echoes – those of strength, love, and healing – to guide us forward. Together, we can ensure that our children and grandchildren inherit not the pain of our history, but the pride and resilience of our people.

**The Empowering Service Systems team led by Professor Helen Milroy at the Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing project**

**Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing is a ground-breaking research program at the University of Western Australia transforming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health care through Aboriginal leadership and authentic partnerships with Aboriginal organisations.**