

Indigenous knowledges and the crisis of youth suicide



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Indigenous knowledges are a deep and holistic way of understanding the world, passed down through Indigenous cultures over thousands of years. It is not just about facts or logic, it is about spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, language, and strong connections to land, community, and ancestors.

Unlike Western ideas which often focus on individual success and scientific proof, Indigenous knowledges value relationships, collective wellbeing, and learning from nature. It teaches how everything is connected, mind, body, spirit, people, and the environment.

This kind of cultural knowledge helps people feel a strong sense of identity and belonging. For Indigenous youth, reconnecting with these knowledges can build resilience and hope, especially in the face of challenges like cultural loss and mental-health struggles.

The colonial project did not just aim to take our lands, it sought to dismantle culture. Colonisers understood Indigenous culture was a powerful force of resistance. To dominate, they had to sever our ties to language, land, and spirit. This disconnection has had devastating consequences, particularly for our young people.

When colonials arrived, they brought more than their religion. They introduced rigid definitions of intelligence, rationalism, and scientific thought systems which dismissed Indigenous knowledges as inferior or irrelevant. These beliefs, shaped by harmful ideas like scientific racism and social Darwinism, were used to excuse the taking of Indigenous land and the destruction of Indigenous cultures. Even today, these ideas still make it harder for Indigenous knowledges to be respected and understood.

Scientific racism?

Scientific racism is the false belief that science can prove some races are better or smarter than others. In the past, some scientists used fake or biased research to say white people were more intelligent or more "advanced" than other races.



The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) and Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing (TIMHWP) leaders sharing Indigenous knowledges for suicide prevention. (Left to right: A/Prof. Ted Wilkes, Prof. Pat Dudgeon AM and Prof. Helen Milroy AM).

These ideas were not based on real science, they were based on racism and pseudo-ideology.

Scientific racism was used to justify colonisation, slavery, and the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. It made it seem "reasonable" to take land and power away from people by claiming they were "less evolved" or "less intelligent."

Social Darwinism?

Social Darwinism is a misinterpretation of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin said animals and plants change over time to survive better in their environment. But some people wrongly applied this idea to human societies.

They claimed stronger or "more advanced" groups, usually white Europeans, were naturally meant to rule over "weaker" groups, such as Indigenous peoples. This idea was used to excuse colonisation, racism, and inequality.

Social Darwinism allowed colonisers to feel justified in their pursuit of land and power, pushing aside and destroying Indigenous cultures, language and knowledges.

Indigenous cultures

Despite these efforts to erase Indigenous culture, colonisers recognised its strength. They saw the depth of Indigenous knowledges, the connection to land, and the power of cultural practices. It can be argued this is why they worked so hard to break those connections to land, to each other, and to the spiritual relationships which sustained

Indigenous communities.

Indigenous knowledges teach us that the mind and body are inseparable. When people are disconnected from culture, language, and spirit, their mental and physical health suffers. This disconnection has led to serious consequences, including increased vulnerability to suicide and emotional distress. Without cultural anchors, many young people feel lost.

Youth suicide

Today, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, suicide is the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 15–24. Between 2019 and 2023, 1 in 5 deaths among Indigenous people aged 0–24 was by suicide. The suicide rate for Indigenous youth is more than four times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous youth.

This crisis is not just about mental illness, it is about cultural disconnection. According to research, communities with low levels of cultural and social connection experience suicide rates up to 80% higher than those with strong cultural ties. Conversely, communities with high cultural connectedness, where young people participate in ceremonies, speak their language, and engage with Elders see 44% lower suicide rates.

Knowledges

Indigenous knowledges are a protective force. They teach how this can be found in connection to land, to ancestors, and to

community. When young people are disconnected from these knowledges, they can lose their sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. This disconnection is a direct result of colonisation, forced removal, and ongoing systemic racism.

Western suicide-prevention models often fail Indigenous youth because they focus on individual behaviour change, ignoring the collective trauma and cultural misalignment with Indigenous paradigms of wellbeing. Indigenous approaches, on the other hand, centre culture, community, and self-determination. They are grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and led by Indigenous voices.

Revival as resistance

Our cultural revival, beginning in earnest relatively recently in the late 1960s, is not just about reclaiming language or ceremony. It is about saving lives. Reviving Indigenous knowledges is a form of resistance against the forces which seek to erase us. It is also a pathway towards healing.

Programs which integrate Indigenous knowledges into suicide prevention through cultural camps, language revitalisation, and community-led healing are showing promising results, as is demonstrated in the best-practice programs and services we continuously engage with at the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP). These

initiatives foster resilience, identity, and hope. They reconnect young people to their roots and remind them they are part of something ancient, sacred, and enduring.

Indigenous knowledges are not a relic, they are a lifeline. In the face of a youth-suicide crisis, they offer a way forward. By centring culture, restoring connection, and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, we can begin to heal the wounds of colonisation and protect our next generation.

Michael Lavery is a proud Yamatji man from Jaminu (Geraldton) who has travelled through Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, working to help many of our communities. His extensive work history began at the Department of Justice as an Aboriginal Wellbeing Officer, then transferring into Aboriginal legal, legal aid and federal government. His love for justice and equality came from a young age where he had seen many injustices and unfair treatment of people from numerous different ethnic backgrounds and has made it his mission to ensure fair treatment and love for all those who live in this country and those who migrate to this country. He is now working as a senior project officer for the Indigenous Futures Centre based at the University of Western Australia while he undertakes his Bachelor of Law.