

# Tools for social and emotional wellbeing after January 26



**Pat Dudgeon**

January 26 has many different connotations for the many different people who call Australia home. For some non-Indigenous Australians, it is a day to celebrate. Yet, the history of January 26 has much darker connotations for First Nations Australians, in contrast to the image of the national holiday in the public imagination.

January 26 does not mark the day we became Australia, or the day Captain Cook landed on Australian shores – instead, it is the day Sir Arthur Phillip raised the Union Jack flag at Warrane (Sydney Cove) to claim the land as a British Colony in 1788. Today, out of 56 former Commonwealth nations, Australia is the only colony to celebrate its anniversary of colonisation as a national holiday, rather than the colony's independence or unity.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, January 26 marks the beginning of colonial invasion, land theft, oppression and genocide, all of which still leave devastating impacts into our communities today. As a result, this date is known to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as many things – a Day of Mourning, Survival Day, and Invasion Day – but it is not a date to celebrate colonisation.

Due to this history, January 26 can bring up painful and traumatic feelings for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which is why it is important to look after yourself and your community after the controversial public holiday. Below are just a few ways you can protect your social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) following this Survival Day:

## Visit Country

Connection to Country is key for positive SEWB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Connection to Country includes a deep experience of belonging to land, a traditional or spiritual association to kin and culture and a contemporary yearning to heal Country.

Returning to land is a way of healing body, mind, spirit, reconnecting with community, and cultural renewal. Immersing oneself in the sound and feel of



Uncle Major Moogy Sumner leading a smoking ceremony for the Social and Emotional Wellbeing gathering.

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention

Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing

Elders and Leaders Voices: Messages of Hope

Aunty Tjalaminu Mia's Messages to Youth: Embracing the Cultural Footpath

Aunty Tj's Message of Hope to youth 'Embracing the Cultural Footpath' is available on YouTube.

Country is just one way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to reduce stress, and to strengthen identity, connection to culture, and self-worth.

## Engage in cultural practices

Be with family, friends and community. Cultural practices are a form of cultural expression, including yarning, ceremony, fire, art, dance, song, storytelling and more.

Reconnecting with culture through these practices is another way to foster a strong sense of belonging, identity and purpose, while promoting SEWB through spiritual, emotional and physical connections with land, community and culture.

## Reach out and stay connected

Whether it's connecting with friends, family, community, Elders, or a helpline, human

connection is fundamental in fostering a sense of belonging and increasing resilience. This connection can reduce the negative impacts associated with loneliness and isolation and is a useful tool to help process difficult emotions which may arise around Survival Day.

If you need support, remember there are always resources and communities available to help you.

## Connect with a program or service

As part of our work at the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP), we recognise best-practice programs and services built to improve SEWB and reduce suicide in our communities. A majority of these programs and services are built for community, by community, using the methods which have been proven to work in bettering

SEWB and preventing suicide. For a comprehensive list of Best Practice Programs and Services, check out the CBPATSISP website at <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/>.

## Focus on relaxation

Common mental-health practices, such as journaling, mindful breathing, listening to music and taking quiet moments for yourself, are all activities which centre relaxation, and are essential in calming the nervous system.

These practices are helpful in reducing stress and anxiety, deactivating the 'fight or flight' response, and allowing the brain space to process difficult emotions. In times of high stress, try the Square Breathing Exercise on YouTube by the Black Dog Institute.

## Message of hope

Listening to the advice of our Elders' and leaders' is one other

way to look after yourself and your connection to culture this Invasion Day. Elders' and Leaders' Voices: Messages of Hope is a collection of short videos from Aunty Tjalaminu Mia, Megan Krakauer, Associate Professor Ted Wilkes and Aunty Elizabeth Hayden, available on YouTube and the CBPATSISP website. Whether it's about reconnecting to and embracing culture, understanding the importance of SEWB or finding the strength to embrace life, these videos are available to you when you need them.

Always ensure you are providing yourself with adequate space to feel, process, and prioritise your mental health. January 26 is a day of mourning and loss for our communities. Let us stand together in compassion, awareness and understanding.

Always was, always will be.

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*This is part a series of Koori Mail columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.*