



Nourishing our whole self

Understanding the many forms of rest

Sensory rest in the West Kimberley, 2025.



BELLE SELKIRK

The Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) model holds many wisdoms of how to cultivate wellness in our lives. In the wake of heavy heart events fuelled by racism, such as the failed 2023 Referendum, the terrorist attack at the Boorloo Invasion Day rally, and daily racism on social media – the teachings of SEWB are as important as ever.

As Professor Pat Dudgeon, Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, commented in the aftermath of the attempted bombing: "We don't yet fully understand the future psychological consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of being physically threatened in this way, following the devastating rejection of the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament and on top of the systemic racism we already experience."

Nourishing ourselves and prioritising rest is more important than ever. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, say wellbeing is interconnected with our body, mind, community, family, culture, ancestors and Country. And just as wellbeing has many layers, so too does rest.

From an Aboriginal and Torres



Mental rest in Garramilla (Darwin), July 2023.

Strait Islander perspective, rest is a culturally-grounded process of recovery, reconnection, and restoration of balance in each of the domains of SEWB. Let me be clear – rest does not address the injustice of racism we are seeing across the country – but it is vital to recovery, reconnection, and restoration of the heart, mind, body, and spirit. So, caring for ourselves and our SEWB often means recognising what kind of rest we need. Some days we'll need physical rest. Other days we'll need emotional or social rest. Sometimes we'll need all of them.

Let's start with the one everyone knows: physical rest. Physical rest helps the body recover and repair when it's been working hard, including stress and flight/fight reactions. It's about listening to the body and adjusting to what is needed. This might include sleep, giving yourself permission to slow down, engage in gentle movement or stretching, slowing down your breathing, sitting or lying down in a safe comfortable place, or taking time out after a gathering.

Our minds can run faster than we do – thinking, worrying, planning, making decisions, keeping track of everyone, responding to stressors and

threats. Mental rest gives the mind space to settle, to be unhurried, and to take a break from the cognitive overload. For many, mental rest comes from stepping back from threats (as much as possible) and pressures (such as work productivity or social media), and reconnecting with the vital layers of holistic wellbeing – like family, culture, Country. Turning your attention to non-threatening and nourishing things is key. Be playful with your kids/grannies, go for a swim or fish, walk slowly on Country, go back to the weaving project you started a while back.

The modern technological world is loud and fast paced, and it overwhelms the senses more than we realise. Sensory rest is about noticing and monitoring overstimulation in both the body and the mind and taking steps to restore and reset. It might include turning off your phone and notifications for a bit, choosing spaces that feel safe or calmer, moving your body to shift your energy and sensations. Country is one of our greatest forms of sensory rest and heals the senses in ways no technology can.

Sometimes the heart gets tired. Not from physical work, but from carrying heavy feelings, big responsibilities, new and old

stories that still live inside us. Emotional rest is about having room to express how we feel, without judgement, without pressure to "keep it together". It might look like: yarning with someone safe, letting our feelings come and go, allowing ourselves to feel supported and heard in safe spaces. Sometimes, emotional rest comes from being with family, Elders, or trusted people who hold space for us with safety, kindness and compassion.

Social rest is about recognising when our batteries are running low and we need to recharge to be present with our community, family and loved ones. Social rest might be quiet time alone, stepping back from big gatherings, reducing obligations for a day, or spending time with people, animals or places that energise and nourish you, or help you feel safe. Social rest reminds us that it's okay to step back. You can still love your Mob and take time for yourself.

When the spirit feels disconnected, it affects everything. Spiritual rest is about nourishing the spirit by reconnecting with who we are, where we come from, and where we belong. Spiritual rest might be spending time with Country, listening to stories from Elders, engaging in ceremony, practising culture, reflection, or prayer. This kind of rest brings you back into alignment with yourself, your values, with ancestral knowledge, with songlines and with the land that always holds you.

So today, take a pause moment. Ask yourself gently: What kind of rest do I need right now? Your body and sensations will tell you. Your mental and emotional load will tell you. Your spirit and social battery will tell you. In today's fast-paced life, with many pressures, responsibilities and heart-hurts that push up against our SEWB, remembering the many forms of

rest can help us walk strong in the face of racism, and live in a way that honours Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities.

Our ancestors taught us the importance of balance. They knew that healing comes from slowing down, listening deeply, and reconnecting to what matters. Rest is not selfish or a reward. Rest is responsibility and wisdom. Rest is a return to balance and reconnection. Rest is how we remember who we are and what sustains us.

May we all find the kinds of rest that nourishes the whole self – keeping our spirit steady, our minds clear, and our hearts strong.

Belle Selkirk is a Noongar woman living on Wadandi boodja. Belle is a clinical psychologist and a Research Fellow with the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project. She has led innovative projects in Indigenous psychology including the Listening More suite of resources, and the Psychology: From Inquiry to Understanding university textbook. She has extensive experience in providing culturally-informed therapy with a particular focus on Indigenous psychology, social and emotional wellbeing, and cultural safety in psychological practice. Belle was awarded the IAHA Excellence in Cultural Responsiveness award in 2024.

This is the third article in a series on racism and wellbeing in the Koori Mail. Check out: Tools for social and emotional wellbeing after January 26 (Prof Pat Dudgeon, January 28th, 2026), and Warriorship in the face of racism: a new toolkit for Mob (Tegan Scheffe, January 14th, 2026).