Strong men, strong Mob: culture, connection and the Mob way



Casey Bird



Blake Fagan (Djabugay/Kuku Yalanji) and associate professor Clinton Schultz (Gamilaraay) share a moment of thanks and reflection. *Picture: supplied.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in this country have long held important roles in sustaining and caring for families, communities, culture and connections to Country. As fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, Elders, and leaders, men can and do contribute knowledge, care, and cultural continuity across families, communities, organisations, and future generations.

Thirrili wants everyone to live long, healthy, and fulfilling lives, supported by strong relationships, cultural identity, and opportunities to participate and thrive. Yet, we know too well, through our work alongside families, that too many men experience significant impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing, and we continue to lose too many men to suicide.

Suicide is complex. Men, families and communities face many pressures, and we know some men find it difficult to speak up and seek support. But addressing suicide and these complex challenges requires more than simply encouraging men to talk about how they are feeling in a clinical setting. Whilst speaking up is critically important, we must also strengthen the social, cultural and structural conditions that support wellbeing, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples leading the way.

What does the evidence tell us?

The social and emotional wellbeing model recognises the interconnected, strong relationships between family, kinship, community, culture, Country, spirituality, and identity.

Research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's health and wellbeing programs reinforces the importance of these connections. One scoping review identified 54 programs across 49 publications between 1998 and 2022, with 44 programs co-designed or adapted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, the review also identified gaps in published evidence, particularly around governance, outcomes and evaluation.

Another scoping review examining evaluated healing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men identified six recurring elements associated with positive outcomes: kinship, cultural understanding, holistic healing, strengths-based approaches, male leadership and consistent meeting spaces.

These findings reinforce what many of our communities have understood for generations: culture, relationships, belonging and opportunities to come together are important foundations for men's wellbeing.

They also highlight the need for sustained investment and stronger evaluation.

As Associate Professor Clinton Schultz (Gamilaraay) shared recently at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Ministers Roundtable in Sydney on September 3, 2026, "The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025–2035 provides important and clear direction, placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, self-determination, culture, lived experience and community-controlled responses at the centre of suicide prevention." Suicide prevention must extend beyond individual-focused interventions to address the broader conditions influencing social and emotional wellbeing. This approach is reflected in Thirrili's model of care and strategic plan.

Strong health relationships are part of prevention

Relationships are fundamental to men's wellbeing. One of the significant challenges facing communities is the cumulative impact of suicide and traumatic loss.

When we lose family and community members to suicide, it has a ripple effect. Casey states this fact, "The grief and trauma can impact the community for months and years, so it will take the necessary time to work through the impacts on community and family."

For many men, meaningful yarns happen through cultural activities, men's gatherings, men's groups, sport, being out bush or on the water, and everyday yarns.

At Thirrili, relationships are central to our work supporting families and communities following suicide and other traumatic loss.

As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, Thirrili provides culturally-grounded postvention support, including grief support, practical assistance, advocacy and help navigating complex service systems.

Men's groups, healing and changing the narrative

Within Thirrili, we have also been having conversations amongst ourselves as men about the importance of supporting each other and the potential for men's groups to strengthen connection, healing and wellbeing.

We have been discussing what these spaces might look like, how we can create more opportunities for men to come together, and the importance of having places where men feel comfortable sharing knowledge, learning from one another, and having those important yarns. Sometimes, it is not about sitting down and talking directly about mental health. It is about being together, doing things together, and knowing there are other men around you.

Too often, the discussion about our men focuses on crisis and the challenges they face. We also need to talk about men's strengths, cultural responsibilities, relationships, healing, and futures.

We need to create more opportunities to celebrate the contributions men make to families and communities and to recognise their importance.

Importantly, men must shape these spaces, reflecting local cultural authority, community priorities, and the different needs of men across generations and communities.

Changing the narrative means creating more opportunities for our men to live well, not only responding when they are in crisis.

From policy commitments to meaningful change

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025–2035 provides an important direction for reform. It recognises that effective suicide prevention must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led, culturally grounded, responsive to local priorities and supported by coordinated systems.

Associate Professor Clinton further shares, "achieving these ambitions requires sustained implementation and investment."

Culture and community connection are important strengths, but they cannot be expected to compensate for racism, housing insecurity, financial hardship, incarceration or fragmented services.

For Thirrili, this means continuing to strengthen relationships with community leaders, stakeholders, and services so families receive timely, culturally safe, coordinated support.

Our men, our future

As men working at Thirrili, we recognise the importance of supporting each other.

Men should not have to reach crisis before support is available. We need systems that invest in prevention, recognise cultural strengths, support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and respond to the circumstances shaping men's lives.

Our communities have held knowledge about the importance of relationships, culture and collective wellbeing for thousands of years. Research continues to strengthen our understanding of culturally grounded approaches, and national strategies provide a clear direction for action.

We need to keep creating opportunities for men to come together, to yarn, to connect with culture and Country, to support each other and to strengthen the relationships that sustain our families and communities.

Because suicide prevention is also about supporting men to live long, connected, meaningful and fulfilling lives.

● Casey Bird is a Juru and Wulgurukaba man born in Roma, Queensland, and Chief Operating Officer of Thirrili, Australia's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific suicide-postvention service. His work spans organisational leadership and culturally grounded systems change.

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