



# HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

**HEALING FOR OUR STOLEN GENERATIONS:  
SHARING OUR STORIES**

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## Executive Summary

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This report is a review of the first two years of projects funded under the Healing Foundation's *Stolen Generations Initiative* 2013-2015.

The removal of Stolen Generations members from their families, identity, land, language and culture continues to have a profound impact on communities, families and individuals. Between 1910 and the 1970s up to one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed. The Australian Bureau of Statistics National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008 estimated that 10,500 children were removed up until 1972.

Bringing them Home, the final report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, contends that Stolen Generations members should be supported to lead and develop their own healing responses to overcome the trauma of removal and be assisted to limit the intergenerational transfer of trauma to their descendants.

Outcomes from the *Stolen Generations Initiative* funded healing programs are impressive. More than 3,676 Stolen Generations participants increased their sense of belonging and connection to their culture, and their understanding and strength in caring for their trauma and grief in healthy ways. Engaging in these projects has enabled Stolen Generations members to take steps to connect to cultural and community services to support their ongoing healing journeys.

A collective healing approach for Stolen Generations has many benefits and can effectively complement other government and community driven healing responses.

The elements that are essential to create an environment for healing Stolen Generations are:

- coming together with other survivors and sharing stories of pain, hope and renewal
- reconnecting and strengthening culture and cultural identity
- trauma informed services and responses
- healing solutions led and developed by Stolen Generations members

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation

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The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation with a focus on building culturally strong, community led healing solutions. We support organisations around the country to design and deliver healing programs that work for their communities.

Together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities we:

- work with members of the Stolen Generations to create their own healing responses
- support children and young people to improve their social and emotional wellbeing
- provide trauma related workforce education and training
- assist communities to access information on trauma and healing
- develop an evidence base for best practice Indigenous healing
- share our knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing with communities, government and non-government organisations.

## Background to the *Stolen Generations Initiative*

In July 2012, the Healing Foundation announced its first funding initiative specifically for members of the Stolen Generations. The *Stolen Generations Initiative* was designed to meet the unique healing needs and aspirations of Stolen Generations survivors, with a focus on collective healing.

Collective healing broadens the scope for who does healing and who healing is for. It means moving from a model where expert professionals work with individuals, to a model where people are supported and empowered to develop the skills and capacity to enable healing in their communities, families, and in themselves (Blignault et al. 2014, p. 14).

The broad aims of the *Stolen Generations Initiative* are to:

- provide opportunities and support for Stolen Generations members, services, and organisations to lead and develop their own solutions to the profound trauma, grief and loss and suffering experienced by Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and communities
- reduce the damaging effects of colonisation and past government policies on Stolen Generations members, their families, and communities through the provision of healing responses that are culturally based, strengths focused, and trauma informed
- create important opportunities for Stolen Generations members to connect with their culture and strengthen their cultural identity and pride.

Between 2013 and 2014, the Healing Foundation funded 31 projects under this initiative. Grants of between \$25,000 and \$90,000 totalling \$1,487,700 were made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across the country to deliver healing responses for their local Stolen Generations communities.

Funded projects delivered a range of collective healing responses for Stolen Generations members including:

- yarning circles
- peer support groups
- structured workshops and programs
- trips on country and reconnection to cultural sites
- healing gatherings and camps
- cultural revitalisation activities such as bush medicine and bush foods, art and crafts, music, song and dance, language, ceremony and transfer of knowledge from Elders
- documenting survivors' stories through poetry, song writing, storytelling, art and drama
- reunions for those from institutions, dormitories or missions
- capacity building activities to empower Stolen Generations members to develop and lead healing solutions in their communities.

Under this initiative the Healing Foundation also commissioned Muru Marri, an academic unit at UNSW's School of Public Health and Community Medicine, to develop a resource for use by Stolen Generations members, services and organisations. The resource aims to strengthen good practice and encourage the inclusion of collective healing responses in services provided to Stolen Generations members, particularly first generation survivors. *A Resource for Collective Healing for Members of the Stolen Generations* provides readers with a set of good practice principles and a step by step guide to planning, implementing and evaluating their collective healing projects (Blignault et al. 2014).

# The Stolen Generations legacy

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## *Colonisation in the Australian context*

Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for more than 60,000 years, often in harsh environments, and developed ways of life that are rich in spirituality, lore and kinship structures with enduring connections to country, music, art and storytelling. The arrival of the British in 1788 decimated the Indigenous population through massacres and other violence, introduced diseases and the subsequent loss of access to their land, resources and traditional lifestyles (Dudgeon et al 2014b; Pascoe 2012).

Aboriginal people were removed from their traditional homelands and relocated to reserves or missions on the fringes of non-Indigenous settlements. By 1911 all states and territories except Tasmania had appointed a 'Chief Protector' or a 'Protection Board' with extensive powers to control all aspects of Indigenous peoples' lives. Aboriginal people needed permission to move in and out of the reserves, marry or hold employment. Parents lost all decision making powers over their children. In the 1950s the policy of assimilation was formally adopted and many Aboriginal children, particularly children of mixed descent, were forcibly removed from their families and communities and either placed in non-Indigenous foster homes, dormitories or other institutions or adopted by non-Indigenous families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 1997, pp. 21-31).

The forced separation and removal of Aboriginal children from their families was an insidious feature of the protectionist and assimilationist policies of past governments. The ultimate aim was to eradicate Aboriginal peoples as a distinct cultural group (Dudgeon et al 2014b; HREOC 1997, pp. 21-31; McKendrick et al. 2013, pp. 11-12).

## *The Stolen Generations*

Colonisation has had a profound and devastating effect on Australia's First Peoples, especially those children who were forcibly separated and removed from their families, communities and culture under past government policies – the Stolen Generations.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was unable to determine the exact number of children who were forcibly removed as part of the Stolen Generations due to the inadequacy of available records. However, some estimates were presented:

*Nationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970. In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten. In that time not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal ... Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children. (HREOC 1997, p. 31)*

Evidence presented to the inquiry detailed the harsh, inhumane and degrading treatment many children experienced during this period (HREOC 1997, pp. 132-153). The overwhelming majority of children were forcibly separated from their Indigenous family, community and culture and were not permitted to speak their native language. Contact with family members was extremely limited, if allowed at all. Many children were taught to believe that their families had relinquished them because they were unwanted and unloved. Others were told their parents were dead.

In an attempt to indoctrinate them and diminish their desire to return to kin, country and culture upon their release, Aboriginality was denigrated and Aboriginal people were discussed in openly hostile and derogatory ways.

The living conditions were often sparse and harsh, with funding levels provided to institutions that housed Indigenous children far below those of non-Indigenous children's homes. The children were taught only basic numeracy, literacy and life skills, limiting their employment prospects to domestic servants or labourers. Punishment for relatively minor transgressions was often severe. Children were also vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, regardless of whether they were removed to foster homes, adoptive families, dormitories or large institutions.

*Bringing them Home*, the final report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (HREOC 1997), was the first time our nation had comprehensively documented and acknowledged the terrible harms done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities during the Stolen Generations era. The report gave voice to the physical, psychological and sexual abuse, sexual and labour exploitation, racism, grief and suffering, disruption of family life and loss of Indigenous identity, culture, heritage, and community and cultural connections experienced by Stolen Generations members.

*Bringing them Home* also highlighted the intergenerational effects of separation and removal and found that ‘the overwhelming evidence is that the impact does not stop with the children removed. It is inherited by their own children in complex and sometimes heightened ways’ (HREOC 1997, p. 193). The trauma associated with forced separation and removal continues to ripple down the generations, passed on through a variety of complex mechanisms including loss of language, culture and connection to traditional lands, weakened family and community functioning, unresolved trauma and grief, poor parental physical health and social and emotional wellbeing, family and community violence and harmful substance use (Atkinson 2002; De Maio et al. 2005).

## Healing for the Stolen Generations

*Bringing them Home* emphasised the importance of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in overcoming the devastating legacy of forced separation and removals.

Only Indigenous people themselves are able to comprehend the full extent of the effects of the removal policies. Services to redress these effects must be designed, provided and controlled by Indigenous people themselves. (HREOC 1997, p. 277)

The report argued that Stolen Generations members should be supported to lead and develop their own healing responses to overcome the trauma of removal and assisted in their quest to limit the intergenerational transfer of trauma to their descendants. It warned that ‘unless provided in accordance with the requirements of self-determination, services to Indigenous people may be effectively inaccessible to them or where accessible are unlikely to secure their objectives’ (HREOC 1997, p. 277).



Stolen Generations members, organisations and services at a collective healing gathering, September 2015

Since 1998 the Federal Government has provided an ongoing healing response through the Bringing Them Home Program and a national network of Link-Up services. Evaluations of these over time concluded that services should be able to 'adopt a flexible approach to service delivery that extends beyond the mainstream clinical counselling model. This includes conducting group activities in community settings' (Wilczynski et al. 2007, p. 102).

With the release of the revised *SEWB Program: Handbook for Counsellors* by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing in 2012, further effort was made to highlight that counselling is just one type of healing activity that may be provided to clients, with alternative supports including yarning circles, healing camps, outreach services, and case management. Thus the approach to healing has broadened from an individual focus based on western models of counselling to recognition of the importance of family and community healing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing.

This renewed approach is consistent with the Healing Foundation's growing evidence about effective healing responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including Stolen Generations members.

To comprehend the importance of collective healing responses, Parker and Milroy (2014) argue that a traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview of health and wellbeing must first be understood. They state that the 'Aboriginal sense of self was seen in a collective sense, intimately connected to all aspects of life, community, spirituality, culture and country' (p. 25). Similarly, Swan and Raphael (1995) wrote that without balance across all dimensions of wellbeing, ill health will be experienced:

The Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. This holistic concept does not just refer to the whole body but is in fact steeped in harmonised inter relations which constitute cultural well being. These inter relating factors can be categorised largely into spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill health will prevail. (p. 19)

For some Stolen Generations members, circumstances mean that they are not able to reconnect with their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families or return to their traditional homelands. Even for those who have been able to achieve this, healing responses need to take into account the diversity of experiences of colonisation and removal across the country.

The Stolen Generations are not a single homogenous group. The trauma and grief each person carries is partly dependent upon their experiences of removal, where they were removed to (dormitory, institution, foster care or adoption) and their actual experiences following separation and removal. As with all healing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, collective healing responses for Stolen Generations members need to understand the way trauma is felt by different groups of people in different places, alongside the local community needs and strengths, in order to provide effective place based and person centred responses (Gilmour 2013).

In general:

whatever form it takes, collective healing is supported by bringing people with similar experiences together, often with their children and grandchildren, in a safe space where they can share, get to know their own story, build understanding and skills, and take positive steps towards a better future. (Blignault et al. 2014, p. 15)

*A Resource for Collective Healing for Members of the Stolen Generations* highlighted a number of 'good practice' features in collective healing responses for the Stolen Generations.

Content	Delivery
Reflect an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview of health, wellbeing and healing	Emphasise and enable safety for participants, workers and organisations
Have an education component	Are trauma informed
Have an experiential component	Allow time for genuine engagement
Build on traditional cultural strengths	Ensure support is available, with the opportunity to work individually or in a group as needed
Provide tools and build skills in recovery	Are confidential, non-judgemental and flexible
Promote empowerment and self-determination	Respect individual differences
Are inclusive of family and community	Promote self-determination
Connect people to services and follow up supports	

Figure 1: Good practice in collective healing for members of the Stolen Generations (Blignault et al. 2014, p. 21)

## Data analysis

Data collected from funded projects provides information about each project's performance in line with service agreements. Data is also collected on agreed national outcomes and associated indicators. This data, together with project case studies, provides a picture of the effectiveness of the collective healing projects and how they contribute to the larger healing agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### Performance indicators

Table 1 summarises the performance reporting data collated across the 31 funded projects between January 2013 and December 2014.

Indigenous people employed	368
Total number of participants	3,676
Total number of services delivered	415
Participant satisfaction	86%

Table 1: Performance reporting data<sup>1</sup>

Depending on the organisational context of the funded project, services were delivered by either existing core staff as an adjunct to their current roles or by short term contract and/or casual staff, consultants or cultural advisors employed specifically for this purpose. Where existing staff assumed responsibility for the project, as was the case in many larger Stolen Generations services and organisations, the additional funding allowed them to extend the scope of healing services offered to their client group and engage with their Stolen Generations community in new and innovative ways.

<sup>1</sup> These figures are calculated based on the six monthly performance reports submitted by the funded projects. Individual staff, participants and services may be counted more than once across different reporting periods, therefore these figures may overestimate the true numbers of each.

Stolen Generations members participated in a range of healing activities including yarning circles, music and art therapy workshops, trips on country, healing camps and gatherings and Marumali Journey of Healing workshops delivered by Aunty Lorraine Peeters.

Stolen Generations members who participated in the projects reported very high levels of satisfaction with the services and activities provided.

### National outcomes

The Healing Foundation is committed to contributing to the growing evidence base for healing through the collection of outcomes-based data. Three national outcomes were developed for the *Stolen Generations Initiative* and form the basis of the project reporting.

Table 2 summarises the national outcomes reporting data collated across the 31 funded projects between January 2013 and December 2014.

Stolen Generations members have an increased sense of belonging and connection to culture	77%
Stolen Generations members have increased understanding and strength in caring for their loss and grief	72%
Stolen Generations members have increased knowledge and confidence in utilising available support services	68%

**Table 2: National outcomes reporting data**

The results demonstrate that the projects have been effective in assisting Stolen Generations members to experience a sense of connection and belonging to their fellow survivors, family and community, and culture. Projects have worked hard to bring together large numbers of Stolen Generations members, including those who may not have previously accessed the Bringing Them Home Program or Link-Up services, and provide them with opportunities to connect with their cultural knowledge.

The results further indicate that Stolen Generations members are enhancing skills to aid in their recovery from trauma, and feel more comfortable accessing and engaging with available support services to assist in their ongoing healing journeys.

Incorporating healing work within the context of yarning circles, camps, cultural activities or bush trips is an example of trauma informed service delivery. By allowing space for trust to develop in environments that are safe and calming for Stolen Generations members, participants were more willing to raise issues of concern or seek help to address problems in their lives.

### Key emerging themes

Case studies provide a wealth of information about the nature of healing work being undertaken by the funded projects. NVivo qualitative data analysis software is used to capture and analyse these case studies, to highlight key themes.

Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the key themes identified by NVivo across the 31 funded projects between January 2013 and December 2014.

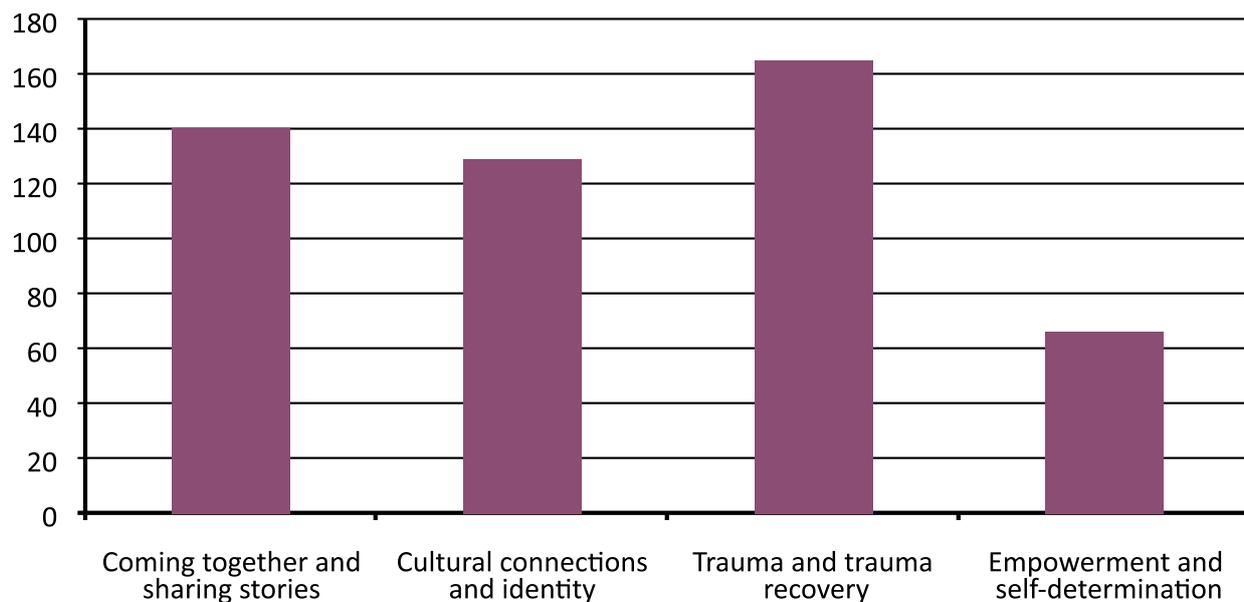


Figure 2: Key emerging themes in qualitative reporting data



Left to right: Jody Jackson, Florence Onus, Aunty Lorraine Peeters and Jessie Cobbo at a collective healing gathering, September 2015

## The importance of coming together with other survivors and sharing stories of pain, hope and renewal

The importance and value of Stolen Generations members coming together as a collective cannot be underestimated. Almost all projects spoke of the community of care that Stolen Generations members provide for each other, and that was enabled through this funding initiative. It is a unique support system that cannot be replicated by any other professional means.

Although individual stories might be different, the common experience of loss of connection to kin, country, culture and spirit provided a base of shared understanding. Participants spoke of feeling a sense of safety, acceptance and belonging when in the company of their fellow Stolen Generations members. This was especially true for those children who had been forcibly removed to institutions. These Stolen Generations members often referred to themselves as 'family' and felt a strong need to come together as brothers and sisters to support each other in their healing journeys.

Former residents of the [institution] experienced collective traumatisation as children and its aftermath as members of the Stolen Generations. Few outside the group understand their experiences or how this has shaped them. [The] girls state their best support comes from each other and maintaining their connections to each other [as a] source of collective strength is viewed as crucial to their social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

Stolen Generations members deal with loss and grief in various ways, most do not involve the generic counselling model used by most of the mainstream population. Their way of dealing with loss and grief is to come together as a family unit of Stolen Generations members and yarn, reminisce and heal. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

Sharing stories and yarnning was an important element of many collective healing projects. Stolen Generations members were able to share their experiences in a non-judgmental, supportive and compassionate space. Expressing their own stories of pain, hope and renewal and bearing witness to those of others helped to validate the experiences and effects of removal and separation.

Projects reported that a great sense of healing was experienced by yarnning circle participants. Their sense of isolation decreased and they gained strength and insight from discovering avenues for healing. In many cases the experience of sharing stories within the safety of the group was the catalyst for sharing their stories with family and support workers. In this way the healing continued beyond the space of the yarnning circle and rippled out into participants' families and communities. Yarning circles often also acted as springboards for participants to document their stories through the mediums of poetry, song writing, art or the recording of oral histories.

Stolen Generations members show their resilience and strengths by telling their stories. Yarning circles are a way of promoting culturally appropriate support and safety for the group to be able to yarn about their own story. The safe space allows the participant to self-reflect openly and share with others their life experiences ... The space allows the group to support each other at difficult times when sensitive issues arise. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

More of the ... men are able to verbalise their experiences and share these with one another and in the presence of others who they are starting to trust ... which in turn has reduced the tendency for these men to isolate themselves, remain silent but in pain, or turn to substance misuse to ease their feelings of grief and loss. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

In the safety of the group, they shared sorrow and laughter. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

## The importance of culture and positive cultural identity to healing for Stolen Generations members

The centrality of culture as a tool for healing is consistently and strongly noted as a critical success factor in healing programs.

Reconnecting with cultural values, knowledge systems and practices and restoring a sense of pride in one's cultural identity is important for Stolen Generations members. An insidious feature of the Stolen Generations era was the denigration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Many children were made to feel ashamed of and denied their cultural traditions, language and spiritual beliefs. Thus the process of welcoming and reclaiming those parts of self that individuals and communities have previously been made to disown is essential to healing.

Providing opportunities to reconnect to these parts of themselves and reclaim their cultural connections is important to recovery from trauma and the development of a strong sense of self, identity, belonging and purpose for Stolen Generations members.

Connection to family and country is a very significant factor for Stolen Generation clients who are experiencing trauma and grief ... They are in need of acknowledgement of who they are and where they come from whilst they are on their healing journey. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

The inclusion of traditional arts, crafts, music, dance and song as ways to connect with culture emerged strongly in the project reports. Painting, weaving, silk dyeing, printing, woodwork and wood burning and making a possum skin rug and hunting tools are all examples of traditional art and craft activities offered to Stolen Generations members.

Many projects invited respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to perform traditional dances and songs during their healing gatherings, camps and reunions. Watching these performances was said to bring great joy and pride to participants. Some projects invited participants to take part in choirs and singing groups including learning to sing traditional songs in language.

Equally important was the opportunity to be on country and connect with land and significant sites as a source of healing. Project reports frequently cited the warm welcome provided by Traditional Owners and the knowledge sharing that occurred during these events. Some projects, typically those in regional and remote Australia, were also able to provide access to traditional healing ceremonies and traditional healers.

Many clients verbalised feeling 'blown away' by the connection they had with the cultural practices offered to them whilst taking part in the weekends. The ability to be recognised as having Aboriginal culture, history and connection to surroundings, others, kin and land was profound for most of them. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

Participants marvelled at the resilience of Aboriginal culture in regard to bush medicine, bush tucker and hunting, to live naturally and well on the land again, instilling pride and [a] sense of belonging and connection to culture. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

## Project case study: Reunion to Self

*Reunion to Self*, a new approach to healing for Stolen Generations members living in Adelaide and surrounding communities, was developed and piloted by Link-Up SA. *Reunion to Self* was created in response to the recognition that for some clients a family reunion or return to country was unlikely to happen due to inadequate records. In other cases where reunions had occurred, the outcomes had not been all that was hoped for. It was a unique program designed specifically to meet the healing needs of this group of Stolen Generations members, and provided a space for grieving, learning and healing together.

The aim of the program was to reduce isolation and distress, develop sustainable relationships with peers and create connections to local places of cultural significance and the communities and stories associated with those places. Drawing on the Kurna dreaming story of Tjilburke whose trail across the lands was followed, participants were led through a series of six day trips on Peramangk and Kurna country, culminating in an overnight stay at Victor Harbour on Ngarrindjeri country. They visited important cultural sites and participated in yarning circles around themes of colonisation and survival, grief and loss, the healing journey, spiritual healing and cultural connections. Participants were connected with and supported throughout their journey by local respected Elders and Link-Up SA workers.

The program was delivered over four cycles, allowing Link-Up SA to utilise an action research process to observe and reflect on the development of the program before planning and delivering the next cycle. The service received positive feedback and praise for its innovative approach to providing healing for Stolen Generations members who cannot return home.

## Creating a trauma informed environment for Stolen Generations members to recover from trauma

Members of the Stolen Generations have experienced immense trauma, grief and loss, and suffering as a result of their experiences of forced separation and removal from kin, country, culture and spirit. Projects frequently spoke of the enormous pain participants were carrying and how this pain was also felt by their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Both workers and participants came to recognise issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence, social isolation and poor physical and mental health as indicative of the high levels of unresolved trauma participants were experiencing. This understanding has not only enabled projects to provide trauma informed responses, it has also helped Stolen Generations survivors and their families to better understand their own and others' healing needs.

*A sense of unity has become apparent amongst the Elders, especially those that utilise the services of our aged care centre. They are supportive of one another and tolerant of emotion outbursts. Instead of being reactive and unsympathetic toward one another's anger, frustration or unhappiness, they have become more tolerant and compassionate. (Project report, Stolen Generations Initiative)*

Building on this recognition and understanding of trauma, projects reported that through involvement in collective healing activities participants were developing skills to manage their trauma and grief in more positive ways. Many projects incorporated expressive art and writing, music, yoga and meditation in their project activities. Rather than these practices being confined to the project experience, Stolen Generations members provided feedback to workers that they were utilising these new skills and strategies in their everyday lives to manage and reduce their distress.

[We] have previously held art classes as a way of healing and we are now seeing Stolen Generations members continue this practice in their own homes ... [In this way] the healing continues both through the organisation and also within their own personal space. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

Participation in the collective healing projects also created pathways to ongoing support and assistance for Stolen Generations members to recover from their trauma. Increased engagement with medical services, counselling services, drug and alcohol programs, traditional healers and Link-Up services was noted amongst project participants. Those agencies that provided regular peer support group meetings reported increased attendance at these following delivery of the collective healing projects. Interestingly there seemed to be a shift amongst project participants from crisis-driven help seeking to accessing and engaging with services to support their healing journeys in an ongoing and sustained way.

The Elders are more empowered to speak with our [workers] in asking for help to be referred to appropriate services [such as] Aboriginal counsellors specialising in grief and loss. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

Participants have expressed more interest in their physical wellbeing by taking an active interest [and] requesting health check-ups, visiting doctors and dentists and managing their own health needs. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

### **Stolen Generations members developing and leading their own healing solutions**

*Bringing them Home* highlighted the importance of self-determination for healing for Stolen Generations members and the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (HREOC 1997). Colonisation and past government policies denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities control and autonomy over their own affairs. Restoring these basic human rights at all levels – societal, communal, familial and individual – restores a sense of personal agency, self-determination and responsibility. It provides the space for people to make choices that are in the best interests of themselves, their families and the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The restoration of basic human rights is an important step for Stolen Generations members in recovering from trauma and healing.

In the context of the *Stolen Generations Initiative*, Stolen Generations services and organisations delivered healing activities for their clients from a particular community or region, working with participants to identify the types of activities that would be most meaningful for them. In other cases former residents of institutions were supported to develop or strengthen their own organisations in order to meet their healing needs. There were also examples of projects hosting forums or gatherings that provided Stolen Generations members with an avenue to express their needs and aspirations and contribute to decision making about issues that impact on them.

The ability to voice these support needs enabled survivors to feel a part of a community that they belong to – the Stolen Generations – and to be able to voice their needs as survivors that sometimes are not heard by other community members. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

More of the members ... have sought to actively speak out about [the organisation], and their experiences as members of the Stolen Generations and articulate to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members what they hope to create [and] achieve in the work they are doing with [the organisation]. This in turn has made them more confident about how they engage in community activities and with other members of their families and communities, and increased their willingness to engage with community supports they had once turned their backs on. (Project report, *Stolen Generations Initiative*)

## Project case study: Supporting self-determination of the Coota Girls

Between 1912 and 1968 Aboriginal girls from across New South Wales were forcibly removed from their families and placed in the Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls. The girls were denied contact with their families, forced to assimilate into mainstream society and trained to become domestic servants for non-Indigenous families and businesses. Former residents of the institution, known as the 'Coota Girls', are now middle aged or elderly, and continue to live with the legacy of trauma and human rights abuses they experienced as children.

The Coota Girls state that 'the best and utmost support has always come from one another, as Cootamundra survivors'. Despite being spread across the country, the Coota Girls identified that their healing needs are best met within a collective healing framework, where members are supported to care for each other.

In 2010, 32 Coota Girls came together to draft the 'All One Statement by Cootamundra Women About Our Support Needs'. The statement outlined the practical and social and emotional wellbeing needs of the women at this stage in their lives and proposed a model of support to address these needs.

The aim of their project was to progress the women's preferred model of care by facilitating collective decision making in the establishment of a support structure for the Coota Girls. A core group of women came together to review the 'All One Statement' developed in 2010, and endorsed the document as an accurate reflection of their current and future support needs. The women participated in leadership and governance training, culminating in the establishment of the Coota Girls Aboriginal Corporation. The stated objective of the organisation is drawn from the 'All One Statement' – to ensure the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of the Coota Girls, their families and subsequent generations. A core aim of the organisation is to maintain the Coota Girls' connection with each other, not only by coming together on a regular basis for reunions and healing gatherings but also through virtual support networks and newsletters.

## Contributing to the growing evidence base for healing

A literature review of Indigenous healing programs in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States identified eight elements common to all quality healing programs, regardless of where they were located, who they were delivering services to and what outcomes they were working towards (McKendrick et al. 2014). Emerging evidence from reviews of projects funded by the Healing Foundation has also shown the importance of these eight elements.

The eight elements provide a framework to consider learnings from the *Stolen Generations Initiative*, and how these contribute to the growing evidence base for healing in general, and for collective healing for Stolen Generations members in particular.



Figure 3: Elements of quality healing programs (adapted from McKendrick et al. 2014)

### *Local needs, local leadership, local responses*

The Healing Foundation is committed to ensuring it supports local solutions, designed and delivered to meet the healing needs and aspirations of their local communities. In establishing the *Stolen Generations Initiative*, the Healing Foundation did not prescribe a preferred model of service delivery to communities. This approach allowed communities to design projects which addressed the unique healing needs and aspirations of survivors from their community, region or institution. Such flexibility enables self-determination, improves accessibility and service uptake by participants and ensures that local Indigenous knowledge systems are respected.

## *Combining trauma informed practice with Indigenous healing knowledge systems*

It is now widely recognised that colonisation and the policies of past governments created a legacy of unresolved trauma, grief and loss, and suffering for those directly impacted, their descendants and the wider Indigenous Australian population. Many of the problems prevalent in today's Indigenous communities such as substance misuse, family violence and mental illness are themselves rooted in a cycle of unresolved trauma.

Indigenous communities have long held the knowledge of healing. Structures and practices were embedded to assist with grieving, support recovery and enable pain and distress to be held by ceremony and traditional healing practices. Whilst many of these structures were destroyed by colonisation, the knowledge has not been lost. Much of what we understand as trauma informed practice in the modern context was known and practiced by our communities in the very way they operated, and ensured strong spirits. Trauma informed practice for Indigenous communities involves building on this knowledge to design effective trauma recovery and healing programs.

Our contemporary knowledge tells us that trauma recovery requires attention to safety, remembering and rebuilding as the core components of healing practice (Rothschild 2011).

One of the most important parts of healing is to re-establish a sense of safety and stability for people. In the context of the collective healing projects, being in the company of fellow Stolen Generations survivors provided a sense of safety, acceptance and belonging for participants. Within this healing environment incorporating activities such as yoga, mindfulness and meditation, rhythmic cultural practices such as dance, song, music, weaving, woodwork and massage, and being on country as a form of grounding provided the necessary space for participants to take care of their pain and lessen its negative impacts on their lives.

Alongside this, healing work must enable remembering and making sense of one's traumatic experiences. Through these projects participants were able to share their stories and mourn their losses. The practices of storytelling, journaling, writing poetry or songs, creating music or art or sitting quietly in meditation and mindfulness were effective both as restorative activities and as a means of developing a deeper understanding of one's journey.

Trauma often alienates a person from themselves and from the resources they have in themselves and their lives. By participating in these projects Stolen Generations members reconnected with their inner strengths and resilience, called on the strength and wisdom of their fellow survivors and their culture and were connected with services which could support them as they progressed along their healing journey. Participants were able to envisage a more hopeful future for themselves, their families and their communities.



Kinchela Boy Michael Welsh and Darryl Kickett at a collective healing gathering, September 2015

## Project case study: Heartfelt

Yorgum Aboriginal Corporation is a counselling, wellbeing and community development organisation located in East Perth, and also provides services to regional and remote Western Australia. Through a series of culturally significant and arts-based therapeutic activities, their project aimed to support healing for those affected by the Stolen Generations era (Elders, first, second and third generations). The project enabled participants to share their healing journey through the therapeutic mediums of art, song and dance, combined with the use of traditional practices and language, with a view to empower Stolen Generations members and their families to build stronger communities.

In the Kalgoorlie region an experienced social worker and song facilitator with the Wongatha people, together with a team of mostly Aboriginal musicians and mentors, delivered 10 music therapy workshops for community members. Older people who were directly impacted by the Stolen Generations policies acted as mentors, sharing their experiences with younger participants. These older people reported feeling listened to, respected and understood by the young people through this process. The young people reflected that learning about the experiences of their grandparents and aunties and uncles helped them to better understand themselves, their families and their community in deeper ways.

A key principle of the workshops was the idea of transformation – the belief that pain and hurt can be expressed in positive, healthy ways. Whilst the discussions were at times difficult and challenging, the young people and community members were guided through a process of expressing their pain and transforming it into lyrics that were healing, inspirational and hopeful.

The stories and poems of the mentors were used as springboards for the song writing sessions. Young people and community members worked together, encouraging and supporting each other throughout the process and problem solving issues as they arose in solution focused and strengths based ways. The project culminated in the production of a CD of recorded songs entitled *Heartfelt: Hopeful Notes for the Lost and the Stolen*.

## The centrality of culture to healing

The centrality of culture to the healing process continues to be identified as critical. Strong connection to culture can provide Indigenous people with a sense of belonging, identity, purpose and meaning and pride and confidence.

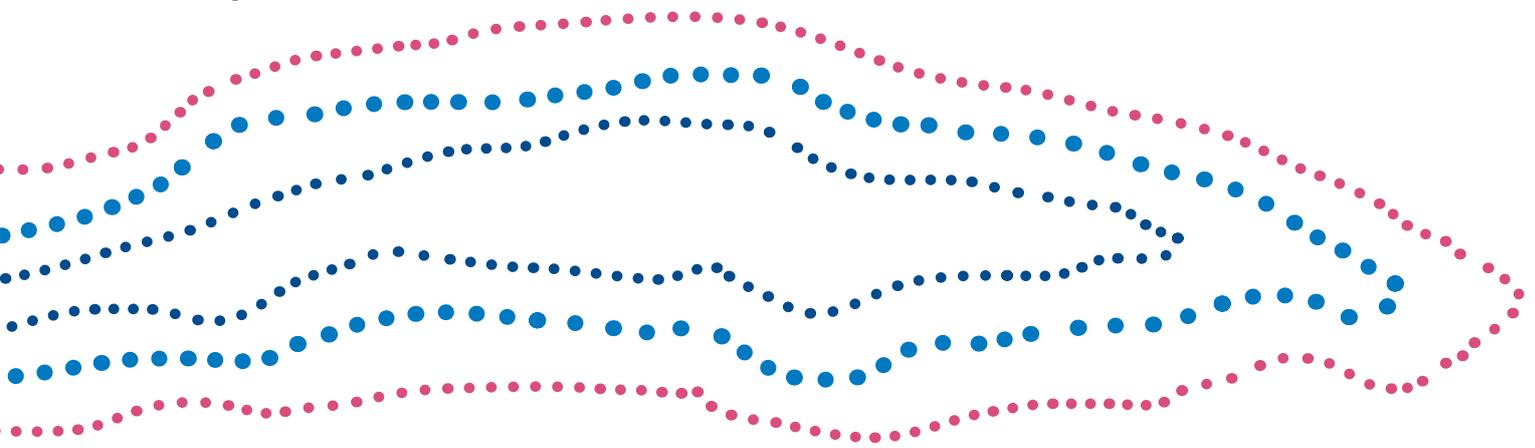
Emeritus Professor Michael Chandler, a Canadian researcher with expertise in social and emotional wellbeing in Canadian First Nations communities, has documented the importance of culture and cultural continuity to strong, healthy Indigenous communities (Chandler & Lalonde 2008). In the Australian context, the National Empowerment Project led by Professor Pat Dudgeon has similarly demonstrated the importance of culture, and the need to foster and enhance connection to culture, as a source of health and wellbeing (Dudgeon et al. 2014a).

The Healing Foundation's own evidence from the *Our Healing, Our Solutions Funding Round* demonstrates that renewal of cultural practices builds individual, family, community and cultural strength and supports positive social and emotional wellbeing (Gilmour 2013). A review of 21 funded projects found the following emerging themes (p. 22):

- identifying with our cultural lineage makes us proud and dignified
- preserving and sharing cultural heritage gives us a sense of future
- connecting with land, country and our history makes us strong
- following our cultural ways makes us feel good and builds our spirits
- strengthening our community gives us belonging and protection
- acknowledging leadership allows us to mentor our future leaders
- respecting self and others is an important cultural value that guides us
- using our cultural skills in our work makes us feel valuable and rewards us
- grieving space and healing time lets us take care of hurt
- reconnecting with our spiritual selves is powerful and makes us feel whole.

In the *Stolen Generations Initiative*, culture as the process for healing was demonstrated through:

- a recognition of the pain, hurt and suffering associated with the loss of connection to culture, and the permission and support provided to regain this important aspect of self and identity
- the use of cultural activities and practices to reduce distress and regulate emotions
- culture being a means to reconnect with self, family and community
- the value of being on country and visiting significant cultural sites to reconnecting to culture and one's cultural heritage.



## Project case study: Healing camp on country

Working in partnership with Traditional Owners, local councils, an Indigenous anthropologist and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultants and service providers, Gurriny Yealamucka Health Centre in Yarrabah, Queensland were able to utilise the strength gained from being on country and visiting sacred sites to support the healing of their Stolen Generations members.

A five day healing camp was held on country for 40 Stolen Generations members from the communities of Yarrabah, Hopevale and Wujal Wujal. Over the course of the healing camp participants joined in workshops and yarning circles about the Cape York experience of the Stolen Generations era and the impact colonisation and trauma have had on themselves, their descendants and the wider community. They also worked with an Indigenous anthropologist to identify their clan group and tribe, strengthening a sense of who they are and where they belong. Opportunities to share their stories through the mediums of storytelling, art and clay were available, as were trips to sacred cultural sites supported by Traditional Owners. A celebratory reunion dinner was held on the final night of the camp, bringing together participants and immediate and extended family members from the region to strengthen connections as kin.

### *Collective healing for Stolen Generations survivors*

The trauma, grief and loss and suffering experienced by first generation Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants has been immense. Their healing needs are distinct from those of the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. If genuine healing for survivors is to be achieved, both government and community-led responses must take into account the nature of the trauma experienced and the resulting needs of Stolen Generations members, and tailor their healing responses to address the legacy of forced separation and removal from kin, country, culture and spirit..

*Bringing them Home* noted that ‘before services addressing the range of needs arising from the forcible removal policies can be planned and implemented, basic information is needed on what and where those needs are’ (HREOC 1997, p. 340). Recommendation 32 specifically called for ‘a program of research and consultations to identify the range and extent of emotional and well-being effects of the forcible removal policies’ (HREOC 1997, p. 341). Unfortunately this recommendation has not been fully implemented (National Sorry Day Committee 2015) and almost 20 years after *Bringing them Home* was released, much remains unknown about the particular type of trauma associated with forcible separation and removal and how it relates to the existing body of knowledge about psychological trauma.

To address this gap in knowledge, the Healing Foundation has actively engaged with the Stolen Generations community to better understand their healing needs and aspirations. As the *Stolen Generations Initiative* has evolved, the strong desire for collective healing in response to the trauma experienced by Stolen Generations members has become increasingly evident.

Collective healing broadens the scope of who *does* healing and who healing is *for*. It means moving from a model where expert professionals work with individuals to a model where individuals develop their own skills and capacity to empower healing in themselves and their families and communities (Bignault et al. 2014, p.14).

Collective healing engages all participants ‘as workers for healing so that working together we grow the wider circles of relationships necessary to develop healing communities’ (Sheehan 2012, p. 108).

The development of *A Resource for Collective Healing for Members of the Stolen Generations* was the first step in articulating a good practice model for healing for Stolen Generations members, in particular first generation survivors. The Healing Foundation is committed to refining the collective healing model and growing the evidence base for collective healing for Stolen Generations members. The Healing Foundation will continue to work alongside Stolen Generations leaders, services and organisations, and governments to ensure a range of culturally based, strengths focused and trauma informed healing responses are available to Stolen Generations members.

Only Indigenous people themselves are able to comprehend the full extent of the effects of the removal policies. Services to redress these effects must be designed, provided and controlled by Indigenous people themselves. (HREOC 1997, p. 277)

### ***Incorporating evaluation methodologies***

Evaluation has an important role to play in supporting Indigenous communities to strengthen their healing programs and practices and encouraging broader support for the healing movement. Evaluation can provide important information about the conditions necessary for healing to occur, and how healing works for different people. It also provides evidence of the positive outcomes achieved for participants, both intended and unintended, and can suggest opportunities for continued improvement (Blignault et al. 2014).

As noted in the collective healing resource (Blignault et al. 2014, p.40), in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs evaluation must be undertaken in a way that:

- reflects an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview
- is accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge systems.

The Healing Foundation utilises an outcome based reporting framework, with projects reporting against national outcomes on a six monthly basis. This reporting framework supports a formative evaluation approach by encouraging projects to reflect upon the desired outcomes of their project and how they are tracking in working towards achieving those outcomes. It enables projects to identify what elements have worked well and build upon these, and identify what may not be working so well and adjust their project as required. The main sources of data utilised by projects funded under the *Stolen Generations Initiative* to evaluate their projects were formal and informal feedback from project participants and observations made during and after project activities.

It is unclear to what degree services and organisations are undertaking formal evaluations of their work, separate to their reporting requirements for the Healing Foundation. Formal evaluations, both formative and summative, will contribute to the growing evidence base for healing for Stolen Generations members. The Healing Foundation is supportive of and encourages Stolen Generations services and organisations to evaluate their service delivery, including their collective healing projects, utilising culturally strong evaluation methodologies.

## How healing for the Stolen Generations contributes to the Indigenous Advancement Strategy

The health and wellbeing of Stolen Generations members is critical to the advancement of Indigenous communities and organisations.

They are parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, community leaders and Elders. They play a significant role in growing the next generation of Indigenous children up strong in body, mind, culture and spirit. They provide leadership and guidance to ensure communities are safe, healthy, prosperous and thriving. They encourage their family and community members to embrace education, training and employment opportunities and they contribute to the economic development of their community through workforce participation. They support the continuation of Indigenous culture in contemporary Australia.

However, like any survivor of complex childhood trauma, Stolen Generations survivors need opportunities for recovery and healing in order to fulfil these roles in their families, communities and workplaces.

Research has shown that the costs of unrecognised and unresolved complex trauma are enormous (Kezelman & Stavropoulos 2012). Van der Kolk (2005) has highlighted the inverse relationship between quality of life, life expectancy and productivity, and the utilisation of medical, correctional, social, and mental health services for survivors of complex trauma, describing it as ‘the single most important public health challenge’ of our age (p. 401).

Investing in healing for Stolen Generations members will improve their health, social and emotional wellbeing, workforce participation, family functioning and community involvement and leadership. When Stolen Generations members are healthy, strong and vibrant this creates positive benefits for their families, communities and workplaces and limits the transfer of trauma to subsequent generations of Indigenous people.



Sixty Stolen Generations members from across the Kimberley region came together with their families at Wuggubun, June 2015

## Challenges

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Projects funded under the *Stolen Generations Initiative* have achieved strong outcomes for participants, their families, and the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Despite their strengths and successes, projects have also faced some significant challenges including:

- high staff turnover
- competing demands on staff and/or understaffing, particularly in situations where the healing project was an adjunct to existing workers' primary responsibilities
- high cultural load carried by staff
- ill health and ageing, particularly for first generation survivors, and the implications of this for the location, timing and nature of project activities
- vulnerability to unresolved trauma being triggered and re-enacted in the context of project activities
- assessing the readiness of participants to revisit the pain of separation and forced removal
- bereavement and sorry business commitments causing delays to project activities
- significant lead in time required to engage and negotiate project activities with all stakeholders, often within complex environments and relationship structures
- underestimating the human and financial resources required in the design phase
- effects of the wet season in remote locations
- participants spread across regions and states or territories, making it difficult to deliver services to such a large geographic area
- difficulties of delivering short term, one off projects within tight timeframes
- operating within an uncertain funding environment and changing government priorities.

The Healing Foundation worked closely with the funded projects to limit the impact of these challenges on service delivery. In many situations project staff initiated contact with the Healing Foundation to discuss emerging issues and identify potential solutions. A degree of flexibility is built into the Healing Foundation's funding processes to enable projects to respond to local community needs, including the option to submit a new workplan to adjust staffing levels, project activities, timelines, and/or budget allocations.

## Conclusion

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The *Stolen Generations Initiative* evaluation data demonstrates the success of healing in creating strong spirit, strong culture and strong people for our Stolen Generations members and communities. It highlights that these responses are only enabled if led and designed by Stolen Generations members themselves. This review has shown that a collective healing approach for Stolen Generations members has many benefits and can effectively complement other government and community driven healing responses.

As the Healing Foundation continues to establish how to better target, develop and support healing initiatives for Stolen Generations members, the organisation is committed to working in partnership with Stolen Generations leaders, services and organisations, and government bodies to ensure Stolen Generations members have access to the range of responses they have determined will best support them in their recovery from trauma and strengthen their healing journeys.

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