



OUR HEALING OUR WAY

LEADING AND SHAPING OUR FUTURE

National Youth Healing Forum Report





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report honours the stories of the young people who participated in the Forum. The Healing Foundation thanks you for your commitment and passion for healing and pays tribute to your knowledge and wisdom.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Intergenerational Trauma, stemming from over 200 years of constant and deliberate disruption, dislocation and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is not just experienced individually but collectively. It is experienced between generations and across communities.

At Australia's first National Youth Healing Forum Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came together to discuss cultural identity, safety and wellbeing and how to address the impact of Intergenerational Trauma on their lives. The Forum created a platform to start the development of our next generation of healing leadership and ensure the voice of young people is at the centre of creating and leading change.

This report represents the views of the participants and captures their discussions and recommendations. These recommendations will be used to ensure young people's healing aspirations and solutions are considered in the design and formulation of future policy and program design.

The discussions focused on:

- identifying the issues that are impacting on the social and emotional wellbeing of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- identifying the impact of Intergenerational Trauma on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- identifying existing strengths that would provide a foundation for success and new approaches to creating healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.



The recommendations are:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a National Intergenerational Trauma Strategy to underpin all existing and future plans and strategies affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

A national strategy will provide an understanding of the role Intergenerational Trauma plays in prolonging social, health, wellbeing and economic problems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and will give Governments the evidence they needs to invest in a more solution focused way.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish a National Youth Healing Reference Group to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people the opportunity to articulate their ongoing healing needs and aspirations and advise on the development of youth healing policies and strategies.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop a National Youth Healing Framework that incorporates examples of promising practice to guide State and Territory Governments to develop effective healing policies and programs targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Develop a Youth Healing Strategy as a light house project to be guided by the Youth Reference Group.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2017 the Healing Foundation hosted Australia's first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Healing Forum.

Held at Tambourine Mountain in Queensland, young men and women between 18 and 25 from diverse nations and language groups, came together from around Australia.

The National Youth Healing Forum focused on these key objectives:

- identify the issues that are impacting on the social and emotional wellbeing of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- identify the impact of Intergenerational Trauma on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- identify existing strengths that would provide a foundation for success and new approaches to creating healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

The Forum explored the themes of cultural identity and safety and wellbeing, and was facilitated with the support of three youth mentors who provided leadership, support and a strong cultural framework for participation.

This report represents the views of the participants and will be used to ensure young people's healing aspirations and solutions are considered in the design and formulation of future policy and program design.



KEY ISSUES

CULTURAL IDENTITY

"culture is about having a sense of belonging"

Participants spoke passionately about the importance of having a strong cultural identity and how this created good social and emotional wellbeing outcomes. Five key issues were identified that impacted on young people's ability to form strong and proud cultural identities:

- 1. experiencing racism and discrimination
- 2. experiencing or witnessing lateral violence
- 3. difficulty of walking in two worlds
- 4. experiencing trauma, notably Intergenerational Trauma
- 5. loss of cultural knowledge being handed down through generations.

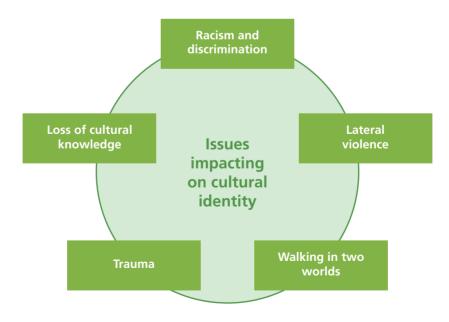


Figure 1. Key issues impacting on cultural identity

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

"If they knew the real history and what happened to us, they might have a greater level of respect and understanding"

Exposure to racism, discrimination and negative stereotypes was identified as affecting many young people at school, work and in day to day life.

Young people felt that there was a lack of respect for their culture across the broader Australian society and this often results in misinformed stereotypes. Perceptions in the community, contributed to by the media, meant that many images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were negative rather than positive aspects of culture and identity.

This led to many experiences of racism including:

- » in the workplace they say things like you only have that job because you're black, or you only got the job because you're related to the person
- » non-Indigenous people sometimes say things like you don't speak traditional language so you're not really Indigenous
- » One young person said that even if you're doing well, they still paint us with the same brush as people who aren't doing well.

LATERAL VIOLENCE

"It hurts more when it comes from your own people"

Lateral violence is overwhelmingly the most prominent issue that is hurting young people's cultural identity. Participants discussed the distress they felt in both witnessing and experiencing lateral violence.

Lateral violence is defined as:

- » your own mob running you down and
- » when people turn on you or criticise you, instead of working together for the community.

Young people have a very strong awareness and understanding of lateral violence and its impact on individuals and the broader community. Participants discussed the load that lateral violence places on their families and the complications it brings to their relationships. Many reported that lateral violence is widespread and continues to damage their cultural identities.

Examples of the targeting of lateral violence in their community include:

- » you're not as dark as we are
- » I'm more cultural than you because I have dark skin
- » you're only black at work
- » you're a coconut
- » uptown nigger (because he had a good job).

The impact of lateral violence is significant, with young people describing the hurt and pain it caused them. Many expressed concern about the often unrealistic pressures they faced when they did assume leadership positions, describing how they often felt pulled down or blamed when things went wrong, rather than supported by their community members.

WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

There was extensive discussion about trying to walk in two worlds and the struggle all young people have to find a balance between their cultural identity and participating in the modern economy. Many young people felt western society overpowers who they are. People spoke about the strong influence that western society and Americanisation had on their identity and the challenges that they experience balancing work, study and cultural practice in their day to day lives:

- » we want to do cultural practice but it's hard with work and study
- » we still want cultural connection 24/7 but we're in an ever-evolving world.

Often young people felt their efforts to create balance was not supported by their employers, communities and society.

Many reported that the current day profile of actors, singers, performers and sports people created a popular image of what success looks like. Sometimes that image contrasts with the image of a successful Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. There are few positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models when compared to the broader society.

TRAUMA

The impact of trauma on young people's lives is widespread. Young people identified that trauma is a contributing factor to drug and alcohol addiction, gambling and family violence within their communities.

Many felt that there were limited services available, and existing services were not always culturally appropriate or responsive to community needs.

Young people could see that the impact of past government policies such as the Stolen Generations and stripping people of their rights has had a devastating impact on their families:

» people are still recovering and the hurt is being handed down from generation to generation.

Poor levels of mental, physical and spiritual health amongst community members including young people and how this contributed to generational disadvantage was identified as clear indicators of trauma:

» people are more at home in jail then they are at their own home because there's a roof over their head and food.

Trauma was also seen to be a contributing factor to high rates of violence, incarceration and recidivism within communities.

Young people talked about how there is a high incidence of people self-medicating to deal with their unresolved trauma and a general lack of support and services available to respond. This was creating a breakdown in cultural structures and impacting on the cultural transfer of knowledge leaving many young people stressed that Elders would die without them being able to access their knowledge for the future.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

"My grandfather was my library. when he passed away, I felt that my knowledge and ability to learn about culture had been lost".

Participants acknowledged the struggles that their ancestors have endured in protecting culture and expressed immense pride in acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were amongst the oldest surviving cultures in the world. Having sound cultural knowledge is essential to form a positive and strong cultural identity.

Access to increased opportunities to practice traditional culture is important. Culture often suffers when Elders and grandparents pass away and there needs to be more programs, services and supports available for people to continue to practice traditional cultural ways.

Young people reported that they fear that traditional culture has been damaged, due to the impact and failure of past government policies and the hurt and trauma that has been caused.

The ability of Elders to pass on knowledge and to protect culture is compromised when they are hurting and when they need healing themselves. A great deal of knowledge has been lost by the passing of community Elders, grandparents and other respected people in the community.

Some of the participants said they had limited options to learn more about their culture and this impacted negatively on their personal identity:

- » there is a lack of available services or safe places to go and find out more about culture
- » most programs that are currently available are deficit focused and labelled rehabilitation, counselling or treatment rather than having a strength-based focus
- » people would be more willing to engage in programs if they were labelled positively and focused on the positive aspects of culture, rather than negative aspects.

The programs that are currently available are quite rigid and are not always effective at promoting traditional lore, practices or cultural ways. Existing programs are not tailored to the specific needs of young people and therefore the uptake and participation rates are low.

Young people said that the forced removal of children had resulted in a lot of Stolen Generations in their communities struggling:

» we need a place where they can go and learn about where they come from.

SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Four primary issues were identified that impact on the safety and wellbeing of young people:

- 1. lack of safe places in the community
- 2. devastating impact of suicide
- 3. high incidence of family violence
- 4. drug and alcohol abuse and associated mental health issues.



Figure 2. Key issues impacting on safety and wellbeing

LACK OF SAFE PLACES

"There aren't enough services to respond to demand in our communities"

There are a lack of culturally safe places within the community where young people can engage in programs to address their healing needs. The types of programs that are available are just as important as the safe place available to administer them. The young people reported:

- » sometimes home isn't a safe place and people need a safe place to go
- » you can't always rely on family based options
- » sometimes we just need a safe place to go and take time out
- » we need to let our children be children
- » too many children have pressure on them at a young age
- » sometimes the existing services are closed when we need them.

Young people felt that the high rate of family violence and alcohol and drug abuse within their communities amplified the need for a safe place to go in crisis.

Gay, lesbian and transgender community members were especially vulnerable and marginalised within their communities, and this sometimes resulted in higher levels of violence and abuse being directed at them.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Exposure to family violence is an issue that impacts heavily on social and emotional wellbeing. Family violence comes in many forms and it is more complicated than men perpetrating violence against women.

Young people felt particularly distressed by their experiences when their family accepted the violence or made excuses for it. They know that family violence is in no way reflective of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and that it needs to be strongly rejected. Some of the feedback included:

- » our Elders to lead by example
- » stand-up and not accept family violence in our communities
- » people need to be held accountable.

Specific examples were reported, demonstrating the existing struggles that people experience in reporting family violence within their communities, fearing retribution from offenders and their extended family members. Some comments included:

- » sometimes the women are too scared to report it because of what might happen
- » there is nowhere for the offenders to go so they keep coming back to the community
- » it has a broader impact than just that one person or family.

In small remote communities, reporting is even more difficult due to the potential for the police or key service providers to have a social relationship with the offender and therefore not responding appropriately. The fear of retribution by families and the community was also identified as a barrier to reporting family violence and seeking help.

SUICIDE

"we need increased focus on positive programs that keep people happy and healthy rather than only targeting them at crisis point"

Suicide has a devastating impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Young people talked about the toll that suicide is having on their families and communities. They identified the main factors that contribute to the high rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates including:

- » lack of support options and services available to assist people
- » some people feel too ashamed to disclose their issues
- » need to find new ways of reaching out to people and encouraging them to seek support
- » people are using drugs and alcohol at a very young age. This creates longer term mental health and developmental problems and can exacerbate feelings of depression, bi-polar or schizophrenia
- » lack of available support services for people who have experienced family violence, abuse or neglect
- » high emphasis on young people needing to be carers at an early age. The pressures that families are putting on young people results in those children becoming parents themselves at a very young age—generational perpetuation of the problem.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

There was significant discussion about drug and alcohol issues that young people faced in their communities. A large extent of drug and alcohol abuse was a result of people self-medicating to deal with unresolved trauma and other complex underlying issues that are affecting them. Young people reported:

- » people sometimes drink because they are bored
- » they drink because they can't deal with the underlying hurt
- » people are drinking at a young age
- » ice is the main problem in our community.

Drug and alcohol abuse has a close link with poor mental health and the two issues need to be dealt with in a more coordinated way when a person is diagnosed with both illnesses.

Alcohol and drugs create division and hatred in communities and there is a lack of education about the risk of prolonged abuse in terms of health and the impact on families and communities. Many raised concern about the developing issue of young people abusing drugs and alcohol at a young age and the impact that has on their development throughout adolescent years.

HEALING SOLUTIONS

These solutions were designed by participants during a series of group planning workshops.

The solutions are sophisticated, demonstrating that young people have a comprehensive and rich understanding of not only the issues impacting on their communities, but the means to make change.

Young people spoke about the importance of remaining constructive and building on strengths as the appropriate way of addressing issues. The healing solutions fall within six categories:

- 1. build strong families
- 2. build strong and proud identities
- 3. establish a safe place for young people
- 4. improve the delivery of education
- 5. invest in culturally responsive programs
- 6. invest in young people as future leaders.



Figure 3. Young people's healing solutions

BUILD STRONG FAMILIES

Young people spoke about the importance of having strong family units to support and encourage them. This was identified as a critical factor in fostering strong cultural identities and personal confidence including the importance of their parents, Elders and respected community members leading by example, and actively displaying quality values, leadership and healthy relationships.

Concerns were raised that too many young people are shouldering too much responsibility from a young age, and this is placing significant pressure on them during important developmental and adolescent stages. The young people highlighted the importance of allowing children to be children and affording young people the opportunity to form positive identities without adult level responsibilities being imposed upon them too early.

Whilst young people understood the importance of meeting their own kinship responsibilities to siblings and the broader family unit, they were adamant that this should not be over imposed, as this burden did not allow children and young people time with their peers and to enjoy their life fully.

Young people were committed to addressing the challenges that could damage the integrity and strength of the family unit, such as family violence. These solutions were identified:

- » challenge behaviours or attitudes that blame women or accept violence towards women
- » more support programs in place to enable people to escape family violence
- » investigate a sentencing program, especially for family violence (like the Circle Sentencing model in NSW and the Murri Court in Queensland). This would provide a mechanism for the community to demonstrate that family violence is not acceptable and to design culturally appropriate sentencing options for offenders
- » a place where men can go, so that the families can remain safe at home
- » options for young people who are in situations where they are exposed to family violence so they can escape to a safe place and seek support
- » programs that teach parents to be better parents, particularly those who have had children at a young age.

Drug and alcohol abuse was identified as exacerbating family violence. Suggestions to minimise the impact in community are:

- » more education for people on the risk factors associated with addiction and abuse
- » adequate supports in place when we introduce dry communities. We can't just remove the alcohol with no supports in place. People need intensive support when they are drying out from alcohol
- » early intervention to address issues before they become too big and unmanageable
- » more culturally appropriate drug and alcohol services located in the community. It's no good having the services too far away because then people won't access them, or they will drink again when they come back to the community
- » deal with mental health and drug and alcohol issues together because they are complex and usually related to one another in terms of cause and effect.

BUILD STRONG AND PROUD CULTURAL IDENTITIES

"Sometimes it's too late for people when they didn't know about culture or receive support when they were growing up"

The formation of strong, resilient and proud cultural identities promotes healthy social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for young people. Young people's priorities included:

- » develop strong identities in people from a very young age
- » encouragement from their parents, Elders and the community to learn about and practice culture
- » access to programs that teach people about where they come from, who their mob is and connecting back to country.

Young people are keen to learn more about their culture, traditional practices and traditional languages however there are very limited options available to support and enable them:

» not many of our people can speak traditional languages anymore and that is important for us.

ESTABLISH SAFE PLACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Forum agreed that many young people did not have access to a safe place in their community where they can take time out to address their own personal healing needs.

Safe places were seen as critical to support young people to access help and to support their healing needs. Young people felt at times, services did not meet their needs, did not employ safe people and did not offer healing supports that engage them positively and proactively.

If each community had a safe place where young people were welcomed and engaged, this would ensure that many people could seek help early rather than leaving their hurt unattended and things getting worse. Participants expressed interest to be involved in the co-design of safe places so that services are attractive and responsive to their specific needs.

INVEST IN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE HEALING PROGRAMS

"when it comes to programs there is too much talk and not enough action"

Young people spoke about the importance of effective programs being available that focus on teaching culture, supporting people to build strong and resilient identities and nurturing young people to become future leaders.

Participants identified pitfalls, shortcomings and service gaps that currently exist. While it was acknowledged that there are some very effective programs available, it was reported that they are sparse and not available to most people, particularly those that live in remote areas of Australia.

Some successful programs that participants have been engaged in have been short term and have had funding withdrawn. This was deemed a key failure in terms of healing because healing solutions should require long term investment to be effective and for results to be sustainable:

- » funding needs to be long term to achieve sustainable results
- » some good programs have stopped because the funding has run out.

Young people spoke about the importance of innovation and adopting a fresh approach:

- » we need a fresh approach
- » the old ways have led us to where we are now.

Several people spoke about their experience of the best programs in their community being developed from the ground up, at the grass roots level:

- » we need to provide people with support to get their ideas off the ground
- » there are a lot of good ideas in the community but we don't have access to funding.

IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION

"colonisation and past government policies have had a devastating impact but people don't know the truth about what happened to us... If people knew the real history, it might change their attitude towards us"

Participants believed that mainstream education does not teach the truth about Australia's history and the impact that past government policies have had on of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. If schools teach all Australians our true history, we would have less racism, stronger communities and individuals would have greater capacity to develop strong and healthy identities that were based round cultural pride, mutual respect and a shared understanding.

Participants felt that existing workplace cultural awareness training may not be challenging colonised notions of what constitutes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, feeding racism and negative stereotypes

They also conveyed that education doesn't just need to tell the truth about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it should also celebrate positive elements of culture as a way of developing a greater level of understanding and respect.

Suicide was also raised as a priority issue that requires investment in education:

- » we need a more preventative and educational focus rather than support post trauma
- » the name and label of the services is a deterrent
- » services need to be labelled positively to encourage people to engage without being labelled
- » we need culturally appropriate ways of educating people to recognise the symptoms of depression early so they can seek help.

The Forum also highlighted that better and more targeted education is required to minimise the likelihood of vulnerable people in the community members being targeted; including Gay, Lesbian and Transgender community that were perceived to be the target of higher levels of abuse, violence and marginalisation.

The influence of smart phones, Internet and social media can consume people and distract them from engaging in more traditional communication methods such as storytelling and other cultural practices. There is however, an opportunity to explore how modern technologies can be utilised in a positive way, as a tool to teach culture and enable learning. This would need to be carefully considered and co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure effectiveness.

INVEST IN YOUNG PEOPLE AS FUTURE LEADERS

"Our young people will be our future leaders, we need to encourage and support them"

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced significant disadvantage for many generations and this has led to a significant amount of Intergenerational Trauma. The young people spoke passionately about the need to make positive changes for the next generation and the importance of investing in young people as future leaders now, to drive necessary reforms and changes for future generations.

Young people want the positive aspects of culture to be elevated and celebrated. They felt that all of the focus was on the negative aspects of being Aboriginal such as disadvantage, over-representation in the justice system and health outcomes. Whilst it is important to focus on these issues and to identify solutions, more emphasis was needed to also identify their strengths and leverage off them to improve outcomes.

The young people identified the following means of support that would be required for them to become effective young leaders:

- » we need to firstly focus on ensuring that young people can develop a strong and proud affiliation with their culture and identity before they can develop into good leaders
- » we need our current leaders to set a good example and to demonstrate what a good leader looks like
- » we already have young people in our communities with great potential, skills and knowledge and we need to support them
- » we need to eliminate lateral violence and stop tearing each other down before we can succeed
- » we need to build upon the strengths in our community, we too often have a deficit focus to dealing with issues
- » we need to celebrate success and acknowledge people's achievements so that they feel valued and to keep people motivated
- » we need to keep the big picture in mind and remain focused on our goal which is to improve the lives of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters, their families and our communities.

IDENTIFYING THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR A FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT YOUTH HEALING.

The issues that have been highlighted throughout the report were informed by the direct experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. They were very conscious of ensuring that their solutions were realistic, deliverable and built upon existing strengths that exist within their communities.

Young people made it clear that youth healing will not occur in isolation of healing for families and communities.

The National Youth Healing Forum participants also identified principles that should guide policy makers and program administrators when developing initiatives targeted at young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUTH HEALING



Figure 4. Guiding principles for success

INCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE IN CO-DESIGN

Young people need to be involved in the co-design of policy and programs to ensure that solutions are targeted to their actual needs and are appealing for the target group. This process will assist in skills development and fosters future leaders.

ESTABLISH LOCAL LEVEL OWNERSHIP

The best programs for young people are those that are locally developed and implemented. Local people know local issues and a high level of community ownership results in programs being successful in terms of uptake, responsiveness and sustainability.

DEVELOP BETTER WAYS OF MEASURING SUCCESS

Successful programs for young people in communities are being discontinued because of the short-term nature of funding and the inability of program administrators to adequately capture and measure success. Appropriate and innovative methods of measuring success need to be developed, recognising a greater balance between qualitative and quantitative outcomes. Communities must be involved in identifying what success looks like and how to best demonstrate outcomes.

BUILD STRONG COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

Many successful initiatives have been discontinued because of poor governance, oversight, administration and management. Success begins with a solid foundation of strong community level governance, accountable program management practices, transparent recruitment processes, suitably skilled staff, ongoing professional development and effective performance monitoring frameworks.

THE WAY FORWARD

Forum participants honoured the knowledge that has been passed down to them by their Elders over many generations and expressed great pride in belonging to the oldest continuing culture in the world.

Their wisdom and insight provides critical lessons for policy makers across Australia. If implemented, many of the solutions will support better outcomes for young people and will promote a generation of future leaders, to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing and healing outcomes.

THE PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE NATIONAL YOUTH HEALING FORUM INCLUDE:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a National Intergenerational Trauma Strategy to underpin all existing and future plans and strategies affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

A national strategy will provide an understanding of the role Intergenerational Trauma plays in prolonging social, health, wellbeing and economic problems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and will give Governments the evidence they need to invest in a more solution-focused way.

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