



# A Theory of Change for Healing



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



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# 1. The Healing Foundation

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families. Our work helps people create a different future.

We work with communities to create a place of safety, providing an environment for Stolen Generations members and their families to speak for themselves, tell their own stories and be in charge of their own healing.

By healing trauma, we are tackling the source of social and health problems that are far more prevalent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including family violence, substance abuse, incarceration and children in out-of-home care. We change lives every day by funding and supporting local healing programs that have been designed with local people and work at the individual, family and community level. These programs support healing by combining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge with best practice western trauma theory.

The Healing Foundation is also leading the way in research in to Indigenous healing. Our studies are unique, valuable and highly regarded both locally and internationally.

The Healing Foundation is helping to create a different future by:

- generating new research and resources to establish an evidence base for healing and best practice policy
- building leadership and capacity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- strengthening the healing workforce by providing training materials and support
- conducting strategic communication with stakeholders about the impact of trauma and Intergenerational Trauma on Stolen Generations members and their descendants, and the importance of healing in addressing a wide range of health and social issues.



## 2. Why we developed a theory of change

A Theory of Change (ToC) enables understanding of what elements need to be in place to achieve real social change. Development of a ToC supports the identification of long term goals and the conditions that need to be in place to achieve them.

Our ToC draws on a process of outcome mapping, which considers how our work can achieve long term changes in behaviours and relationships. It conveys how change is expected to occur and how we communicate that change. This enables a shared understanding among staff, funding bodies, communities and partner agencies about what is required to achieve success.

To develop our ToC, The Healing Foundation engaged Social Compass, who worked in partnership with the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University. The researchers undertook an extensive process of analysis and consultation to develop the ToC. They examined more than 20 evaluation and research documents produced by and for The Healing Foundation, and conducted a review of independent international and Australian healing literature and workshops with staff from The Healing Foundation and cultural healing experts.

Our ToC now underpins all aspects of The Healing Foundation's strategic planning, project planning, monitoring and evaluation. By having a ToC for healing, The Healing Foundation can better:

- **articulate** how healing can lead to positive social change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
- **identify** the key elements required to create the optimal environment for healing at the national, regional, community and individual levels
- **target** investment of resources at those elements deemed most critical in creating the environment for healing
- **strengthen** and build the evidence base for healing.

## 3. What are we seeking to learn?

Despite significant levels of funding invested by successive governments to address the disadvantage affecting many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there is little evidence of positive impact.

Our emerging evidence tells us that strategies to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage will continue to fail unless they are underpinned by trauma-informed healing approaches that recognise the devastating impacts of colonisation and subsequent government policies. In order to understand how our ToC can support sustainable healing outcomes, we need to understand the context in which our healing initiatives are operating, and communicate this effectively with different audiences.

### 3.1 The legacy of colonisation

The process of colonisation—including the forced removal of children from their families, the suppression of language and culture, dispossession from country, disruption of kin networks, massacres and destruction of an independent economic base for living—has had profoundly negative health and wellbeing effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

*Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*<sup>1</sup> noted the devastating impact of removing children on not only those who were removed but also on their families and communities. For the majority of witnesses to the inquiry, the effects have been life long and profoundly disabling. Their unresolved grief and trauma has been inherited by future generations, as evidenced in the 2018 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants: numbers, demographic characteristics and selected outcomes*.<sup>2</sup>

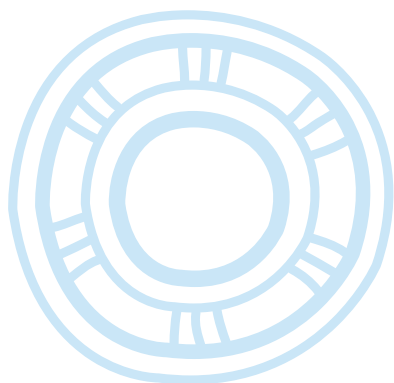
## 3.2 The trauma burden

Over the past decade emerging evidence has revealed how unaddressed Intergenerational Trauma drives many of the most serious social and emotional wellbeing issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today. These include drug and alcohol addiction, criminal behavior, violence and suicide.

Living with trauma diverts a person's energy to managing the physical and emotional impacts of that trauma. This, along with poor educational outcomes, undermines the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to engage in employment, contributing in turn to poverty and poor standards of living. The disproportionate levels of incarceration that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience is both a symptom and a cause of trauma.

It is also important to understand the impacts of collective trauma as opposed to individual trauma. Research demonstrates that significant events that impact whole communities can lead to community breakdown. Disconnection from country, culture, family and community have had a devastating impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. As a result many communities prefer to engage in collective healing responses rather than individual treatment interventions.

Given that communities often experience distress collectively, community healing initiatives are critical to creating real change. A failure to tailor healing efforts at the community level will see families continue to live in vulnerability without the strength of a healthy community to assist them.



## 3.3 A case for healing

Healing refers to 'recovery from the psychological and physical impacts of trauma [which] is predominantly the result of colonisation and past government policies'.<sup>3</sup> *Voices From the Campfires*, the report of the national consultations undertaken by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team, explains healing as 'a spiritual process that includes addictions recovery, therapeutic change and cultural renewal'.<sup>4</sup> It explains that 'healing is holistic and involves physical, social, emotional, mental, environmental and spiritual wellbeing'.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2009, The Healing Foundation has partnered with communities across Australia to build culturally strong, locally designed and delivered healing programs, and communicate their impact and the benefits of healing.

The creation of safe places where people can talk and access support is a crucial first step in the healing process, as this increases a sense of safety and enables the building of safe and healthy connections, which are essential elements of healing from trauma.<sup>6</sup>

Healing activities can include yarning circles, gatherings, healing camps, counselling, art, dance, song, weaving, cultural ceremony and culturally safe referral pathways. Family and community healing is recognised as 'integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing'.<sup>7</sup>

As well as strengthening a sense of identity and connectedness, neuroscience demonstrates that cultural practices such as dance, art, song and storytelling stimulate the part of the brain that manages emotion and memory.<sup>8</sup> Cultural practices that involve repetition and rhythm, such as weaving, playing didgeridoo, drumming and dance, are calming, trauma-informed processes that were central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. Healing restores pride in cultural identity and connection to country.

## 4. A theory of change for healing

Our evidence identified three key domains to support positive, sustainable healing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

### 4.1 The three key domains to support positive healing outcomes

- **quality healing programs and initiatives** led by communities and developed to address the local impacts of trauma
- **healing networks, champions and organisations** to promote healing at a national and community level, including trauma awareness and the importance of truth telling
- **a supportive policy environment** where policy makers and influencers understand and advocate the benefits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing and its long-term nature.

The diagram opposite details the critical elements to support quality healing within each of these domains.

#### 4.1.1 Quality healing programs and initiatives

Effective healing programs show positive impacts on individuals, families and communities.

Analysis of international and Australian healing literature identifies nine elements that were present in quality healing programs. Quality healing programs:

- are driven by local leadership
- require community readiness, capacity and collaboration
- have an evidence and theory base
- combine western therapeutic support with Indigenous cultural healing
- are informed by an understanding of the impact of colonisation, Intergenerational Trauma and grief in the local community
- build individual, family and community capacity



## Policy

Promoting truth and creating an understanding of colonisation and the trauma legacy

Creating and supporting a national healing movement

Development of trauma aware healing informed approaches in policy environments (e.g. health, education, children and families, justice)

Promotion of programmatic co-design principles that privilege Indigenous knowledge systems

Intergrated policy responses that support positive cultural identity and healing

## Healing responses

Healing programs and projects that:

- address local community issues
- driven by local leadership
- have an evidence and theory base
- combine western methodologies and Indigenous healing, creating safety and capacity for changed behaviours
- build individual, family and community capacity
- are proactive rather than reactive
- have quality evaluation frameworks
- are integrated into strong Indigenous led organisations with demonstrated healing leadership
- create collaborative and coordinated healing efforts

## Cultural Connection Restored

## Healing networks and champions

Community awareness of trauma regionally and locally

Development of healing leadership organisationally and individually - national and local

Trauma aware, healing informed organisational development

Development of the healing workforce

Community healing processes and strategies based on Indigenous knowledge and processes

- are embedded in strong Indigenous led organisations with demonstrated healing leadership or other culturally safe, trauma-informed organisations
- are supported by effective partnerships across the local service sector
- incorporate strong evaluation frameworks, communications plans and performance monitoring mechanisms.

#### 4.1.2 Healing networks, champions and organisations

Sustainable, quality healing requires healing networks, champions and organisations that:

- communicate the impacts of trauma on individuals, families and communities
- advocate the benefits of healing and its long term nature at a national and local level
- publicly celebrate the resilience of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture and promote opportunities for healing
- nurture and support healing leadership within communities, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, the broader service network and government
- create and identify opportunities for Stolen Generations members, Elders, women, men, children and young people to safely engage in healing conversations and cultural healing activities.

#### 4.1.3 A supportive policy environment

Healing outcomes can only be sustained when they are supported by policies that:

- promote truth telling and a greater understanding of the impacts of colonisation and our nation's trauma legacy, including through the education system, across all service networks and to the broader community via effective communication strategies
- promote programmatic co-design principles and communication processes that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, leadership and structures
- partner with communities to co-design and promote effective healing-informed, trauma-aware policy approaches in areas like health, education, children and families and justice
- strengthen the capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing workforce and the broader professional healing-informed service system
- support positive cultural identity and healing.





## 4.2 How do we apply our Theory of Change?

The ToC has been applied to The Healing Foundation's strategic and operational planning processes so that it is embedded in our practice.

We will use the ToC to continually improve our knowledge and understanding of quality healing in the following ways:

### Quality healing programs and initiatives

We have embedded the three domains for sustainable healing change into our project planning and management tools to ensure healing initiatives reflect these critical success factors, or that action can be taken when they are not present.

We include the ToC domains in our evaluation methodologies to consider which elements are contributing to successful outcomes and whether the absence of critical elements may be undermining potential outcomes. We have established data monitoring mechanisms, so we continually review and improve our understanding of the conditions necessary to support sustainable, measurable healing outcomes.

We will continue to undertake and publish evaluations of healing initiatives so the lessons learned can be communicated and shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

### Healing networks, champions and organisations

We will continue to develop healing champions to promote emerging knowledge about trauma and healing across our communities and the broader nation. We will continue to fund and support community healing forums as a means of nurturing healing leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and

promoting awareness about the benefits of healing across the service networks that work with our communities.

Trauma and healing are difficult concepts to explain but our communications expertise and knowledge ensures we are best placed to translate the effects of trauma on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We articulate and promote the benefits of healing across communities, government and the broader Australian population. New and emerging media allows us to target key messages to our stakeholders, influencers and the broader community, ensuring a consistent and strategic narrative to increase understanding about The Healing Foundation's work.

We will implement a nationally accredited healing short course to further equip workers to safely support quality healing. Our participation in, and membership with, key bodies, councils and reference groups—as well as our partnerships with government and non-government organisations—is contributing to the growth of a healing movement.

### A supportive policy environment

We will share our growing evidence about the impact of healing on a range of health, family, justice and other outcomes with policy makers across Australia via our website, media, our Healing Portal and our participation in a range of information sharing forums.

We will continue to develop resources and information that can be used by policy makers to increase understanding and support for healing-informed policies and a culturally safe service system that supports community led healing. We will also ensure these are distributed and communicated effectively.

We advocate the need for, and evidence of, how healing can create change for our communities, through submissions to inquiries,

publication of our research, and through participation in conferences, networks and other forums that facilitate knowledge sharing between our communities, the services that support them, our government and the broader community.

### **4.3 How our healing partners can use our Theory of Change**

Our ToC is intended to benefit anyone who has an interest in or responsibility to support healing. It emphasises the importance of nurturing healing leadership and promoting trauma awareness as crucial first steps towards individual, family and community healing.

For communities who wish to lead the development of healing initiatives, it conveys critical elements they should consider, the partners they may need to influence and the challenges they may face when pursuing sustainable healing outcomes. It provides a clear framework for building a monitoring and evaluation framework for community led healing work.

It provides support to government, policy makers and service providers about the mechanisms they can support and the policy domains they should focus on that will create the right environment for healing to thrive.



## 5. Conclusion

We recognise our understanding of each domain of our ToC will continue to evolve. Together with our community healing partners we will continue to reflect on our practice and contribute to the knowledge about supporting positive healing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Importantly, our ToC provides a compelling argument that healing-informed, trauma-aware strategies must be implemented alongside enablers like employment, education and economic empowerment in order for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to transform their lives.

# Endnotes

- 1 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1997). 'Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families'. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Sydney.
- 2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants: numbers, demographic characters and selected outcomes'.
- 3 Healing Foundation (2017). 'Glossary of Healing Terms'.
- 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team (2009). 'Voices from the Campfires: Establishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation' p4.
- 5 Ibid. p11.
- 6 The Healing Foundation (2015). 'Growing Our Children up Strong and Deadly: Healing for children and young people'.
- 7 Muru Marri (2014). 'A Resource for Collective Healing for Members of the Stolen Generations', p15. The Healing Foundation.
- 8 Perry 2009 in Blagg H and Tulich T (2018). 'Diversionary pathways for Aboriginal youth with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder'. Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice No 557, August 2018. Australian Institute of Criminology.





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