



**Working Well Guide:** reflections on providing suicide prevention projects in remote Aboriginal Communities in Central Australia

Researched and compiled by Kristy Schubert  
Major contributors: Charles Hodgson, Liz Archer and Laurencia Grant



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A report compiled for the We Know Our Strengths Project,  
a partnership between Waltja Tjukangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation  
and the Life Promotion Program, Mental Health Association of Central Australia.

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# Introduction and background

## Introduction from the Project Officer

### **The Project Officer**

“ So, my name is Charles Hodgson, and I was the Project Worker for the 'We Know Our Strengths' Project

### **Who did work to reinforce resilience**

“ This project involved working with the strengths of community people, doing things to bring strong resilience into their lives. We're helping people do more of those things that *they* say help them to overcome the hard things in their lives. We were helping them to do the things that put them on good paths for life and things that prevented them from leading down the bad paths into depression and self-harm and possible suicide ...

### **By facilitating the processes in the communities**

“ So I see that it has been my role to guide those sorts of things: working with people on what they have identified that they want to be happening on their community to keep them strong. And that's what we've been chasing up and doing ...

### **and being the 'bonding agent' that helped hold the pieces together**

“ Sometimes we used the story of this project being like the work of a green ant. Green ants have something they secrete to become a bonding agent that makes the nest strong: the growing ants can live in it, and it doesn't fall. Nothing can break it unless humans come along and break it right down.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

# The project partners and aims

## Partners:

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi  
Aboriginal Corporation

Life Promotion Program,  
MHACA

Commonwealth Government  
National Suicide Prevention  
Strategy Funding

## Aims:

Reinforce resilience

Increase awareness

Look at good practice

## The partners

The 'We Know Our Strengths' (Strengths) Project was a partnership project between Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja) and the Life Promotion Program (Life Promotion) of the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA). It worked within 3 remote Aboriginal communities and was funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, National Suicide Prevention Strategy from 2007 – 2009.

As a background to this project, it is important to realize that the group most at risk of completing suicide in Central Australia is Indigenous men, and the suicide rate within Aboriginal communities is currently twice that of other Australians (Life Promotion).

## The aims:

- **Reinforce resilience** by assisting Aboriginal people from these communities to do more of the activities they identified as keeping their families and communities strong
- **Increase awareness** by supporting people in these communities to develop local suicide prevention and self-harm intervention resources
- **Write a 'good practice' guide for non-Indigenous workers** or those new to working with remote Aboriginal communities about addressing concerns like suicide and self harm

The project was also independently evaluated.

# What we did

We used a community development approach

We supported strengths-based activities

We worked by

- listening and linking
- going slowly and gently
- and letting community members take the lead

We started by using a community development approach and drew upon Waltja's existing organizational knowledge, policies and practices to guide community work. We employed a male Aboriginal worker (Charles Hodgson) with local knowledge but who had not worked in mental health before. Hodgson was located with Waltja but spent time with Life Promotion also, learning more about community education and suicide awareness training.

## **Creating opportunities to support resilience**

We facilitated opportunities for groups from the communities to do things they viewed as keeping them strong. To do this, we engaged with key community members and other service providers. Because our key project worker was male, most of the activities we provided were initially for the men but were usually linked with their broader family involvement.

## **Examples of activities**

- Day or overnight trips visiting country around the communities: swimming in water holes, going hunting or just relaxing with a cup of tea.
- Joining in with BushMob (an Alice Springs based Aboriginal service for young people) on a horse breaking and cultural exchange project
- Running a healthy cooking session for men;
- Facilitating cultural exchange between youth workers and young people from one community with another;
- Supporting the revival of traditional men's dancing from one community;
- Providing personal support for individuals re: social & emotional wellbeing.

## **Working through links and collaborations**

We rarely did a larger group based activity solely by ourselves and worked collaboratively with at least two other NGO projects Congress and BushMob and with Government health promotion programs. Strengths work was more like the mortar than the bricks in a building: we listened, linked people and ideas together and gave practical support wherever it was needed and we could provide it.

We took care to be led by community members to respond to their needs and sense of readiness

Government interventions and restructuring happened at the time.

They seemed to focus on trying to institute change through economic measures

The biggest resource we supported was the people themselves

### **Coming in 'sideways'**

We started by encouraging strengths and strength based activities. We didn't start off by mentioning the word 'suicide.' We came at the topic sideways, mentioning it quietly, gauging responses, backing off if necessary and waiting for people to raise it again for themselves.

### **Negotiating unexpected pressures**

Our project—sensitive within its own right—happened over the same time that the Little Children Are Sacred Report (on child abuse and neglect in remote NT communities) was released, the NT Emergency Response (the Federal Intervention into remote NT communities) was called and all the Community Councils that used to exist autonomously in each remote community were amalgamated into a broader, local Government controlled Shire structure.

Each of these had enormous impacts for community members and, as one would expect, these also flowed directly into what we could and could not do within the life of this project. These restructurings seemed to seek to institute change by applying economic measures. Since mental health, local resilience and suicide prevention were not identified as areas of focus; it became difficult to fit them into the now-busy (and somewhat overwhelmed) community agendas.

### **Keeping Community Strengths the Priority**

Key community members either weren't ready to or didn't want to develop 'resources' about suicide or suicide awareness at that particular point in time. In fact, throughout the project the biggest resource we supported was the people themselves, in all sorts of ways. We listened, helped where we could and referred on where we couldn't. This often happened quietly or on an individual basis. We supported opportunities for community leaders within our project to participate in conferences or forums, to hear what others were saying and doing, to build on their own confidence in speaking up in meetings.

For a number of reasons, communities weren't necessarily ready to look at the issue of suicide *directly*.

Community members wanted to be able to approach this issue in their own way and at their own pace.

This community readiness is a vital but complex issue. As Westerman writes:

“ The reality has been that despite the fact that Indigenous Australians have among the highest suicide rates in the world (2003), intervention programs to address this issue at a whole of community level have not been forthcoming.

*(Indigenous psychologist and specialist in Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention, Tracy Westerman)*

### Looking at community readiness

Support for community-intervention programs has tended to be connected to alarming spates of suicide fatalities over a short period of time in the one community. Yarrabah, Gove Peninsula and Tiwi Islands have had research, resources and intervention-programs invested in their communities because of patterns like this. Similarly, an alarming spate of youth suicides in Alice Springs in the late 1990s drove the establishment of the Life Promotion Program here in town.

However, while many families in remote Central Australian communities have been affected by suicide, the rates are spread through the small, interconnected populations, and so there is no one remote community with equivalent, measurable incidence of suicide to warrant this special attention and funding. This fact influenced the readiness of a community to speak out on the issue of suicide. (Grant 2009)

### Contributing to a training resource in this project

Waltja staff from the Strengths project contributed ideas and input into a training course that Life Promotion was working on as a separate but closely related project. Life Promotion wanted to create more appropriate, localized suicide awareness and prevention training that could be used in our region, including in remote Aboriginal communities. A localized resource could be helpful as mainstream programs usually:

- rely too heavily on English literacy
- are located outside the cultural values in our region
- and assume communities have immediate access to a broad range of health, educational and welfare services, including emergency services like police, ambulances and hospitals.

At the end of our project we trialed some of this resource at a workshop we held involving key project advisors and participants from two of the communities. People also discussed who should receive this training and we got more input into strengths based work within communities. ■

# The Organizations

## About Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja)

**‘Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi’ is Luritja language for ‘doing good work with families.’**

Waltja was incorporated as an Aboriginal Organization in 1997 and is governed by a group of senior women representing a large number of communities throughout Central Australia. Waltja works solely with remote Aboriginal communities and provides a diverse range of services including training & mentoring, youth services, early childhood development programs, support for the aged and those with disabilities, and health promotion projects. We also operate a publications unit that produces our regular magazine, *Family News*, along with resources and innovative project reports. Our workplace aims to deliver services and supports that communities themselves identify and within the prevailing Aboriginal “world view” or cultural values base that is part and parcel of belonging to a remote community in our region. For more information, go to our website: [www.waltja.org.au](http://www.waltja.org.au)

## About the Life Promotion Program

**The Life Promotion Program operates within the non-Government service of Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA).**

The program currently operates within a community development framework as a means of engaging relevant local agencies, Government and community members in identifying strategies and solutions to the increasing rates of suicide in Central Australia. Life Promotion has played a facilitating role in sharing an understanding of ways to better support remote communities and regional towns around the issue of suicide and has provided current local data and research to support suicide prevention proposals. For more information, you can visit our website: [www.mhaca.org.au](http://www.mhaca.org.au)

# About Remote Communities

- Remote communities in Central Australia typically have between 200 – 500 residents and offer limited essential, health, education and community services.
- People speak English as a second language and many have limited written English, numeracy and computer literacy skills.
- There is a disproportionately high number of children and young people aged under eighteen.
- There is well-documented health, housing and educational difficulties experienced by community residents (SCRGSP 2007).
- Many community members have been adversely affected by social and economic policies: many of these policies have been ‘the root causes of ill health, health inequalities and ... poverty and social disadvantage.’ (WHO 2003)
- Regional languages and cultural traditions remain strong compared with many other regions nationally.
- Community leaders often say that the path to health and recovery lies in finding ways to live well with both these strong, cultural traditions and these dominant, introduced systems. Community leaders often express the desire for their young people to be able to ‘walk well in both worlds.’ Waltja Association members—senior women in Central Australian Aboriginal communities—hope for:

“ a learning pathway for them, to get confidence, competence and employment. They hope that their young can get work within their own communities ... living in their own country and working confidently both in their own language and in English.

*(Lawrence, 2006)*

# Why we wrote this guide

“ The challenge is with all of us ... to develop and test ways of doing things better, and to share the lessons learned ...

Above all, we need to keep sight of the fact that—to be effective—our processes must enable people, despite all the complex issues that confront them, to achieve their goals in looking after themselves ... their country [and their community].

Walsh & Mitchell, p 291

## Who we wrote this for

This book is written for non-indigenous workers and for those new or unfamiliar with the cultural, geographical and other contexts of these three remote Central Australian communities.

## Making some abstracts more concrete

We wanted to make phrases like ‘community development’, ‘cultural appropriateness’ and ‘relationship building’ more real for others who may be doing these sorts of projects.

## Sharing lessons learned

We know that no two places or people are identical, but there are some common threads. We know that—even with the best of intentions—things usually don’t work in ideal ways: often we have to test things out, find new or different ways (for us) of doing things. Hopefully we learn from the process. We included this resource as one of our project objectives because we wanted to pass on whatever we learned through the Strengths project—or similar work—about addressing suicide in remote communities.

## It’s starting points and observations: not answers

This book is not a book of answers or a piece of academic research but a collection of observations we’ve made along the way. It includes practical tips about working with remote communities and lots of reminders to go gently, to listen well, to work from where people are at and to recognize that as ‘outsiders from the community’ we must be guided by those from *within* the community. This is particularly the case when projects aim to build resilience around such deeply personal issue as suicide.

# Knowing about the subject

## ***Some further reading (see bibliography for full details):***

Atkinson (2002). *Trauma Trails  
Recreating Songlines: the  
transgenerational effects of trauma in  
Indigenous Australians*

Farrelly (2008). *The Aboriginal Suicide and  
Self-Harm Help-Seeking Quandry.*

Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser (1999). *An  
Analysis of Suicide in Indigenous  
Communities of North Queensland*

Life Promotion Program (2008). *The  
Little Red Threat Book*

Mindframe National Media Initiative  
(2009). *Research: media and suicide.*

Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant (2007).  
*Discussion Paper: Central Australian  
Aboriginal Bereavement Service  
Development Issues: Surviving & Healing  
the Family Ager Suicide in Remote and  
Regional Central Australia Aboriginal  
Communities.*

Pattel (2006). *Old Suicide and Self-Harm  
Prevention Conference; Sharing Learning  
from Practice and Research.*

Tatz (2005). *Aboriginal Suicide is  
Different: A Portrait of Life and Self-  
Destruction.*

Westerman (2008). *Mental Health and  
Psychological Assessment of At Risk  
Aboriginal Clients: Participant Workbook.*

## **In this section, we briefly:**

- define suicidal behaviour
- touch on some of the reasons why suicide is a hard thing for anyone to talk about
- and introduce some of the additional things that make Aboriginal suicide 'different'.

## **This guide is an introductory resource**

This resource does not provide an extensive discussion on the many complexities of the above points: it assumes that you will bring some of this understanding with you, or that you will progressively discover some of the deep and complex matters associated with suicidal behaviour and death by suicide.

## **For further knowledge**

To get a deeper, more personal understanding of this topic, you could:

- look through some of the recommended readings
- consult with a variety of local people who know about this subject
- employ someone who brings these understandings with them

## What is suicidal behaviour?

“ “ Suicide is ... ‘the human act of self-inflicted, self-intentioned cessation.’

Louis Wekstein in Tatz 2005, p. 70

“ “ But a simple definition of this self-destructive act is misleading because suicide is described in so many ways: tragic, shocking, enraging, relief, shame, selfish, the right choice, punishment, revenge, cop-out, devastating, unforgivable. ... For most, it is based on prolonged despair or dreadful circumstance.

Weigel 2007, p. 1

“ “ And we know that people who are feeling suicidal are carrying enormous pain, shame, guilt, lack of trust—whatever it is—with them that contributes to how they’re feeling. Whether we might see that as being real or not, these feelings are real for that person ...

Archer 2009

“ “ They are tired, worn out, worn down, even the young ones. They have no physical or mental energy left to keep tackling hard times. They are tired of the same, depressed lifestyle. They see it as a quick way out of dilemmas.

Aboriginal Council Chairman cited in Tatz 1999, p.81

# What is suicidal behaviour?

“ I still find it amazing how many of us — black, white, anyone — have thought about or contemplated suicide at some point or other in our lives, and how many of us actually don't commit suicide, but who make it through. The resilience of the human spirit, I think, is enormous.

Archer 2009

## It's a hard thing to explain

Suicidal behaviour is a difficult thing for people to describe, define or explain. More academic publications, such as Colin Tatz's *Aboriginal Suicide is Different*, discuss these difficulties and talk about various forms of suicidal behaviour in depth. Here we will just very briefly summarize some of the common features:

## It's an expression of distress

Suicidal behaviour tends to stem from a sense of emotional, social, psychological, cultural or existential violation or distress. When the person has a perceived (or real) lack of options to change their circumstances or end their distress, a form of 'solution' emerges, like an offer of relief, justice, recompense, revenge or escape. To expunge or relieve the distress (or alter and control the circumstances), the person engages in some form of destruction of the body, consciousness and self.

## It has many forms

Suicidal behaviour can vary in form: it is not always sudden, nor does it always end in death. Some ways are slow and perhaps indirect, such as continual, excessive drinking. Others are quick and very direct, such as hanging or intentional overdose. Sometimes, suicidal behaviour results in death; sometimes injury; sometimes neither. The common threads are not so much in the behaviour or their outcomes, but in the thinking and feelings behind it.

## The common threads

- a permeating, overwhelming sense of pain or distress
- a desire to end this distress
- a sense that other solutions are unreachable, impossible, invisible or unworkable
- a perception the best way to solve the current dilemmas, end the distress or bring about the changes they desire is to destroy themselves

## An underlying strength in all this

Reliable research shows that perhaps only 0.5 – 16% of suicidal behaviour ends in death. That means that the rest find a way to go on, in spite of the distress in their lives, and often find ways to overcome it.

# Talking about suicide **MUST** happen responsibly

- **You must avoid talking in detail about methods or means.** Being honest about the type of death ('He ended his own life') has been shown to aid the healing process of those affected by the death. But it can be unhelpful for publishers, media or organisations to broadcast in detail about specifics about the means of suicide, especially locations and tools.
- **Talking about specifics of method can trigger trauma for people,** particularly those who lost somebody this way. And speaking of methods can increase risk for vulnerable individuals, because plans to relieve their pain through self-death then become more concrete and accessible. (Mindframe 2009)
- **Providing opportunities to feel less alone and find helpful ways forward is helpful:** In many cases, giving people an opportunity to talk about suicidal thoughts or behaviours can help the person feel heard, relieve some of their isolation and provide opportunities to discover resources that help them to cope. (Livingworks)
- **It is helpful to speak about suicide as a source of grief for others,** a tragic waste or an ineffective choice among many coping options: this has been shown to reduce general population rates. (Mindframe 2009)
- **Make help-seeking options more available, practical and concrete:** wherever suicide becomes a visible, concrete option, it increases the possibility that distressed thinking may default to it (Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p. 79). Where suicidal methods *have* been made visible or concrete, leaders and media need to spend time making alternative help-seeking and resilience-based options even more visible, concrete and practical for people: especially vulnerable people. (Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p. 78; Mindframe 2009) They need to spend time looking at strengths: and that is what this project has done.

# It's hard for anyone to talk about

“ It is not just Aboriginal people. Suicide and self-harm in general are difficult for anyone to come to terms with and talk about ...

You have to be, I think, pretty courageous and really need some help to be able to talk about really deep personal things that are going on.

Archer 2009

## **Fear of saying the wrong thing**

People worry it's dangerous to talk about suicide. They are often scared of saying the wrong thing and 'tipping someone over the edge.'

## **Connected with stigma, taboos and shame**

Many people feel that suicide carries a mark of disgrace or that they are forbidden to talk about it due to social or religious customs. The word can automatically carry assumptions, stigma and feelings of shame or guilt. A lot of people who feel suicidal are scared to raise the topic, worried that others will see them as 'mad', 'bad' or 'weak.'

## **Connected with confronting issues**

Death and dying, in and of themselves, are confronting to talk about.

## **Seen as 'sinful'**

Some religions see suicide as a 'sin'.

## **Painful grief that's hard to resolve**

Death by suicide can cause what's known as 'complicated grief': when grief becomes 'complicated', it means that it gets stuck in its natural process of healing and recovery. This can happen around traumatic, violent or sudden deaths, or deaths in which some questions cannot be resolved. If family or friends have suicided, it takes a long time for those around them to heal, especially the person who found the body.

## **Emotionally draining to offer support**

It is time consuming and emotionally draining to support someone who is feeling suicidal.

# Additional concerns for Central Australian Indigenous people:

- Linked to many deep, complex, painful things
- Strong cultural laws around death can prohibit some discussions
- New problem: introduced and unfamiliar
- Fears that it will spread
- New and hard word
- Hard to find the 'right people' to talk with
- Fears about payback
- Strong community effect
- Becoming a common, learned behaviour
- Strong degrees of impulsivity
- Carer stress and obligations

## Linked to deep, painful things

*Suicide is inextricably linked with colonization, cultural loss, grief for identity, grief for family, experiences of violence and injustice and many other kinds of stress and grief...*

“ Yarrabah [an Indigenous community in North Queensland] sees suicide as being the result of the socio-economic and spiritual ill health relating to the historical issues and life experiences of the people of Yarrabah which is loss of land, loss of spirit, loss of culture, hurt, pain, intergenerational trauma and unresolved grief and trauma recent and past.

... historical, situational, intrapersonal, interpersonal, family and cultural factors combine, at particular points in time, to create a climate of heightened risk of harm in particular communities. Such confluences have resulted, among other outcomes, in patterns of self-harm and clusters of suicide.

*(Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p.37 & 68)*

## Strong cultural laws around death

*This subject is related to death, and there are strong cultural laws about death, funerals and 'sorry business'.*

*These are very important in Aboriginal culture.*

*People do not want to put themselves in a position where these laws might be disrespected.*

“ Rituals associated with death, funerals and 'sorry business' are very important within Aboriginal culture. It is an area where traditional cultural rules have been steadfastly maintained despite colonization and dispossession. Mainstream service plans ... need to be very conscious of the fear that some cultural leaders have of their culture being replaced by non-Indigenous service models and non-Indigenous 'expertise'.

*(Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2006, p. 2)*

“ And then I think about the stuff that I'm just starting [after ten years] to get my head around and my heart around in terms of our context. I know that there are huge cultural taboos in talking about deceased people. ... It's very strong.

*(Archer 2009)*

“ It's about death. A lot of people don't want to talk about it, because it is about death.'

*(Isles 2009)*

## New and unfamiliar problem

*Suicide is a new problem for Indigenous people in Central Australia, only starting in the 1980s. Existing culture and laws about justice, death and healing couldn't give people immediate guidance about how they could respond to it or to those who had lost someone to it.*

“Suicide is something that's been introduced in the 1980s, you know, and a lot of us didn't think some of our families would've went that way, too, see. We didn't think it would happen here. We didn't realize. And it shocked us.’ (Plummer 2009)

“The community was numb with deep shock and overpowering grief—nothing like this had ever happened to our community before. (community resident's personal communications with Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p. 49)

“And when there's suicide in the community, I've noticed we don't have anybody come to our side to support us, to offer their help, to show us respect, to help us with our grieving in a cultural way. I've noticed that we're just left to one side in our sorry camps ... (Shannon 2009)

## Fears it will spread

*There is a fear that this new problem will spread: people can feel frightened to even say the word, because they don't want to 'introduce it' into the minds of people in their communities, especially young ones.*

“For me it has been kind of scary. Suicide is a very hard word for most of us. And I've been avoiding the use of that word for a while. Because I'm one of the people who believed that this word, if we use it when we're talking to clients, we're putting the idea in their head.

But now, we have to. Because it's reality now, and we've lost a lot of families that have taken that path. And for us to grow strong and lead the way for our mob, for our children, for people in our community that are losing their way, to face suicide, to use that word to face and deal that issue of trying to carry it out, or to break that cycle of that thinking. They keep thinking about it, keep talking about it. Break that cycle.’ (Shannon 2009)

“Well, a lot of our mob think that when you do talk about suicide, it's going to give the individual ideas of how to do it, what to do it, when to do it: which isn't true, you know. Sometimes it helps people. It prompts people to open up and let's them know they're not alone, thinking about these things. (Campbell, R. 2008)

## New and hard word

*The word itself is new to Aboriginal people: there is not a direct equivalent in languages in the area.*

“ Understand that even just saying some words—like 'abuse', 'violence', 'suicide' ... even 'death'—can have a big impact on people.' (Archer 2009)

“ We're looking for words. You know, other Aboriginal people are looking for words that might match. But for us, it's going to be hard because I don't think we've ever had that kind of word. (Shannon 2009)

“ It's a very new thing for Aboriginal people to start talking about suicide. And also it's a very hard word, and it's a very hard thing to actually talk about ...

So I think it's a word that we need to explore more and find a word that is more suitable, more softer and gentle, so that we can actually talk to our people about suicide, because as I said, it's a very hard word.

But we need to find a word that is suitable for our people, suitable for your language group wherever we may be. And instead of using the word suicide, let's find a word that we can use that's more comfortable for us, more user friendly for us to be able to use. (Isles 2009)

## Hard to find the 'right people' to talk with

*Help-seeking options are limited by geographic isolation; limited and possibly inappropriate service provision; important cultural restrictions about who can help whom; and strong people already working at (or beyond) their capacity.*

“ For those feeling suicidal and those trying to support them, there are limited options in many communities, because they have small populations and are geographically isolated. These limits are often compounded by complex relational confidentialities and obligations within family networks, and sometimes further compounded again by inappropriate western frameworks or service workers that have not developed good relationships or who local people don't feel comfortable with. (paraphrasing Farrelly, 2008)

“ Another big factor that I see that would complicate talking about, or addressing suicide, is all of the family linkages. People have quite specific obligations in relation to one another ... Also, the person who's feeling suicidal may not want to put pressure on anyone else in their family. Maybe the strong person in the family doesn't want to hear, because it's a huge burden for them... So, perhaps it's just easier for everyone to say nothing. (Archer 2009)

## Strong community effect

*It is almost impossible for white people to fully comprehend the degree of connectedness of Aboriginal people, with families and kinships extending between many communities, and the profound effect that one death may have.*

## Becoming a common, learned behaviour

*Suicidal threats and behaviours seem to have become instilled as a common lingo and strategy: they are such powerful ways to influence or affect others. It seems that many young people learn and repeat the tactic.*

“ In remote Central Australian communities, we cannot think of one family that has not been affected by suicide or suicidal behaviour. (Life Promotion 2008, p. 7)

Suicide and attempted suicide are powerfully symbolic acts which are intended, in part, to make particular statements and express one's pain. Those who 'witness' such an act or outcome are visibly affected, shaken and impacted by the act. (Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p.22)

“ If we understand the context of the self as the interiorization of community, then suicide—literally 'self-killing'—now would mean a killing of community (Tatz 1999, p. 106)

“ It seems to have become really common ... We're worried about copy-cat behaviour, and we're worried for the young ones who are growing up with this behaviour all around them ... Sometimes it seems like a dangerous way people have developed to shock others into responding or doing what they want.' (Life Promotion 2009, p. 3 & 7)

“ Once established in a community's consciousness, suicide becomes another possibility in a behavioural repertoire, interacting with other constructive and destructive means of coping. (Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p. 78)

“ The incompletes are bad and scary. The kids who are not trying to live.' [Aboriginal worker in the Homeless Youth Unit in Taree] ... Importantly, she is not talking about a few individuals, but a plurality, a collective and group phenomenon. The significance of this must be stressed: the suicidal behaviours in these communities have become patterned, ritualized and even institutionalized...' (Tatz 2005, p. 75)

“ With the 'normalization' of suicide and self-harm threats, families with suicidal family members are overwhelmed and confused. (Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2006, p. 1)

## Fears about payback

*Many people fear payback. People fear being blamed for triggering suicide and finding themselves embroiled in a justice system: particularly if that justice system is tampered with by alcohol or misunderstanding.*

“ In traditional culture, when people were living in small family groups and the authority of law and culture was strong, senior men and women met after an event to give weight to one interpretation of events. This then flowed into controlled and measured ‘payback’ responses ...

Today’s Indigenous community in Central Australia is much larger and more fragmented. ... the sheer weight of population and their connectedness through intermarriage sees many people in the Aboriginal community participating in the funeral and ‘sorry business’ arrangements associated with multiple deaths over most months of the year.

The weight of grief and loss within the community is overwhelming. Perhaps because of this, substance misuse and chaotic behaviour is widespread ... It is often the chaotic mob who often make decisions to carry out acts of substance-effected revenge under the guise of being traditional payback punishment ... Currently there can be many people deeply concerned about what is happening with the Indigenous community that is labeled ‘payback.’ (Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2006, pp. 7–8)

“ Well, there has to be some sort of solution, because we always talk about that payback. People think that, ‘If I’m the last person to have been speaking to this person, then I may be the one that’ll get payback.’ I think about other options, if we can talk to senior people and get more understanding. Because we need to find some sort of solution, to protect those people who are wanting to help. (Plummer 2009)

“ People for instance here, in Night Patrol, they have been worried about: ‘What if the person’s family turn up to us after? If someone completes the suicide or goes ahead and does it?’ Night Patrol workers, I tell them: ‘You didn’t help them do suicide. They went ahead and did it themselves. You only did what you can, that’s expected of you, through your work.’ They said, ‘That’s you, talking to us as our coordinator. Other people won’t see that.’ And it is an area that we have to look at closely. It’s an area that we have to support our people that work with suicidal people. Support them in a way to say that they’re protected. All they did is do their job. They didn’t play a part in helping that person do it. (Shannon 2009)

## Strong degrees of impulsivity

*It seems to 'come out of nowhere.' For many reasons, Aboriginal suicide 'do not fit the conventional profiles: [among other factors] there is little evidence of clinical depression in the accepted [conventional Western] sense. There appears to be little or no correlation between suicide and diagnosed mental illness.'* (Tatz 2005, p. 74)

- “ This is a challenging issue. It makes us worried. Suicide is impulsive here. It might flare up anywhere ... The tipping points can be something like an argument with a romantic partner or something as seemingly trivial as a refusal of a request for food, money or turning up the radio (Life Promotion 2008, pp. 3 - 4)
- “ Sometimes there is not much warning: 'When people threaten it, they try it.' (Aboriginal health educator cited in Tatz 2005, p. 77)
- “ From a more psychological perspective [rather than clinical depression or other diagnosed mental illnesses] it appears that the precipitating factors in Indigenous suicides include an event or set of events. A common pattern includes some underlying and unresolved interpersonal or community conflicts. Against this background, a week of binge drinking, a death, news of a hanging of a known individual from another community, all can trigger a wave of individual responses ... (Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, p. 79)
- “ Suicidal behaviour seems to occur spontaneously and randomly, often when people have been drinking, smoking ganja or sniffing. People suddenly go 'rama rama' [crazy] or 'lose it'. They might be okay but they might not. A lot of people threaten to commit suicide. A lot don't actually go through with it. It's hard to spot the warning signs (Archer 2009)
- “ People I work with—my colleagues—and I, we're often saying that suicide here is different. I learnt about suicide in Melbourne, at university, and people say, 'It's because he's been really sad'. They understand suicide as being about depression. And I'm not saying that people here aren't depressed. There's depression out here, on communities.

But when I came and worked here, I sort of discovered that what I learned about suicide at Uni doesn't really fit. The suicides here seem to be more impulsive. I wouldn't want to count the number of times I've run after someone and had to cut them down from a tree. And it's really intense, but half an hour later, the person's laughing, saying, 'I dunno why I did that.' So we don't know. We try and approach it by sitting down with people and talking about other ways to cope when that impulse comes.' (Remote Mental Health Worker cited in Schubert 2007, p. 21)

## Carer stress and obligations

*There is enormous, conflicted pressure on carers whose kinship obligations dictate that they should submit to the demands of someone who is using suicidal behaviour to manipulate, control or abuse them.*

“ We’re also worried about the affect on partners and carers of these people. The carers are under a lot of pressure, and they’re getting stressed and tired out, and sometimes people might blame them, even when it’s not their fault. ... Sometimes these situations are limited to one person threatening and one being threatened. At other times, whole interconnected groups become involve in issuing threats and feeling the stress of possible consequences.’ (Life Promotion 2009, pp. 3 & 8)

“ On the one hand, desperate carers—who are often themselves victims of violence—are told to set boundaries to reduce the behaviour ... On the other hand, suicide prevention workers state that families must take every threat seriously and do whatever it takes to keep company with the at risk person and to do just about anything to get them through periods of articulated risk. Carers can feel very vulnerable. If they fail to appease an at risk person and it results in the person carrying out the threat to self harm even suicide, then they not only lose a loved one and see the terrible impact of this death across their family group, but then can often face the horror of being blamed and physically punished by the community through the payback process. (Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2006, p. 9)

## Key Understandings: summary

These are values and principles that underlie our practice.

They are things we believe can provide a strong foundation for working well.

This list emerged from common themes expressed in the interviews in which Liz Archer, Charlie Hodgson and Laurencia Grant shared learnings and observations from their work.

These points were also strongly supported by other publications and materials (listed in the bibliography).

- All things come from culture—respect it.
- An Aboriginal person must guide you.
- Have an understanding of history—it can help you and others.
- Don't replace systems that already exist—support them.
- Start from strengths, not problems.
- Use community development and promote community ownership.
- Use these same principles if you do training.
- Find good ways to look after yourself.

# Some definitions

## **Culture:**

a group's patterns for living, passed down through generations

### **Forces to be reckoned with:**

“ Aboriginal culture has its roots deep in the past. It can be argued that Australia's Indigenous cultural traditions have a time-depth and continuity unrivalled anywhere else in the world. ....

Although not always obvious, values [world view] and ways of operating [culture] drawn from the traditional past are forces to be reckoned with ...

*(Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, A cultural history, 2000, p. 27)*

### **Culture: the patterns that we live by**

Every group and individual has a culture: we all are taught to live and think in particular patterns. These patterns are vast and very complex. They include the specific ways that a group have developed to:

- administer law and justice
- uphold social obligations
- create fair exchanges of effort and resources
- understand their environment
- define what constitutes profitable knowledge
- maintain the integrity and value of that knowledge
- determine who may have decision making rights over others
- understand who may exercise control over what and whom
- and so on ...

### **Passed through generations ...**

All of these cultural patterns are deep. They come down through generations, who have shaped them around their world-view. They are also dynamic and changing.

# World-view:

Beliefs and ways of interpreting the world.

World-view is transferred and upheld by a group's common stories, shared rituals, acknowledged ceremonies, guiding values and so on ...

## **A system for interpreting the world**

A group or individual's world-view is their system of interpretation for all that occurs. So it defines and determines what seems normal and what does not. Also—as is relevant to this project—world-view directs the group's definition of a 'problem' and guides their search for solutions.

## **An interactive process**

A group (or individual's) world-view is closely influenced by culture. There is continual interplay and developmental influence between the person's beliefs and their conventional patterns and expressions.

## **Guided by our (often unstated) assumptions**

Groups can share these interpretations and conventions without necessarily ever directly stating why they see or do things this way. So the group can function very effectively with the world-view hidden like an invisible maze: a set of assumptions.

These assumptions are very powerful forces in societies. Many of us are not aware of our own assumptions until we find ourselves in another 'maze' (another group's world view and culture) and get stuck or go 'bump.'

Going gently and seeking advice from local people and continually reflecting on our assumptions can help us avoid the 'bumps.'

## Future shock:

this term comes from the title of a book by sociologist, Alvin Toffler, written in 1970. The term describes the distress felt when too many big changes are happening too fast, and the new culture is confusing and difficult to participate in.

### **Cultures always undergo natural change**

Culture and world-view are responsive, dynamic, changing things. It is natural for parts of them to change gradually over time, accommodating internal or external shifts.

### **But extreme, rapid change creates trauma**

These systems have been changing rapidly in our region and the suddenness can create trauma. Because these systems of world-view and culture interact with the human capacity to create identity, belonging and purpose, the effects of this trauma are very deep.

### **This trauma is deep, disorienting and long-lasting**

Sometimes this trauma is called 'future shock': the 'shattering stress and disorientation' that happens when too many big changes are pushed on people too fast. Because culture and world-view are passed down through generations, this kind of trauma can be passed down through the generations, also.

The trauma spreads. This can create on going difficulties for people to operate in effective patterns of law, social obligations, fair exchanges, the transmission of sound knowledge and the capacity to exercise balanced power and control. And it becomes difficult or painful for people to feel secure in their identity, belonging and purpose of life. All this can lead on to high rates of family violence, increases in substance misuse and addiction, early deaths, suicidal behaviour, high crime and low employment: what Judy Atkinson calls 'trauma trails.' These difficulties are *normal* responses to the trauma of sudden changes at this level: not evidence of inferiority.

### **Adaptation is a tool for resilience**

One thing that needs to be understood in this context is that change and adaptation have been part and parcel of the survival of [Aboriginal] traditions ... [but] today new challenges and issues are faced, and new patterns of adaptation are emerging. .. Far from signifying the end of Indigenous Australian traditions, the new forms of adaptation are bringing new vitality to older cultural themes and values. (Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000, p. 27)

## Ethno-centrism:

Being so centred on your culture or world-view that you can't accommodate or tolerate those who don't conform to that set of cultural expectations

## Racism:

Racism can be intentional or unintentional.

It can be a demeaning 'atmosphere'

It can be 'systematic use of power or authority to treat others unjustly.'

It 'is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural ... inequalities in society.'

*(Sanson et al in Racism and prejudice: An Australian Psychological Society Position Paper, 1998, p. 71 quoted in Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, Introduction, 2000, p. 9)*

### We are all 'ethnocentric'

A person is being ethnocentric when they expect everyone to operate from the same cultural systems. But since everyone's lives are centred around a particular culture or world-view, everybody is 'ethnocentric' to some degree.

### It's about how we process that ...

*People start to let go of ethnocentrism* when they make an effort to remain open and accept that other people do things differently: they don't have to understand why others do things differently, they just start to accept it.

*People hold on to ethnocentrism* when they are dismissive or judgemental of other ways of doing things, try to force other people to adhere to a certain set of cultural patterns or set up systems that necessarily alienate or exclude alternative ways of being.

### Racism

Racism is related to ethnocentrism, because both have ideas about superiority: racism can be fuelled by ethnocentrism. Perhaps it is helpful to think of *ethnocentrism as a set of beliefs* that your own group is superior and *racism as a set of behaviours* that demean, exclude or oppress those who do not belong to your group.

Next, it is helpful to understand that while we may think we have never done anything to wilfully demean, exclude or oppress those who don't belong to our own group, often our 'maze' of culture and world view are implicitly demeaning, excluding or oppressing those who operate according to different cultures, values and norms. We need to become aware of social, cultural and historical contributions to racism if we want to work well.

# 1. Everything comes from culture— respect it

“ All the rules for living come from Jukurrpa. It is the main thing to keep our families strong.

Priest & Nangala 2002, p. 5

“ Everyone has culture and everyone needs culture: ‘we need it to complete us, and we cannot live without one, nor without creating one.’

Kelly 2000

“ After the disintegration of relationships that happened after a sincere attempt to hand organizational control over to local Indigenous people, the mission realized it had to first learn and then accept the Aboriginal realities as the basis for anything they wanted to try and do.

paraphrased from Albrecht 2002

*Further readings (see bibliography for details)*

*Albrecht 2002*

*Butler-Bowdon & Nowland 2003*

*Atkinson 2002*

*FACS 2002*

*Pattell 2006*

*Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes, & Box 2008*

*Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi 2001*

Culture can provide ways to address difficult problems—like suicide—at a deep, meaningful level

**Culture is a strong asset, not an outdated artifact**

Aboriginal people found a way to live healthily for 40,000 years. Their culture is valid, 'strong and has survived—despite the devastating impact of colonialism'. (FACS 2002, p. 13) These structures are not outdated artifacts, due for replacement, but contain strong assets—such as organizational structures, education systems and relational understandings—that do their own work to promote health and reduce harm.

**Culture provides meaning, identity and solutions**

“ We are starting to talk to our old people, asking them to teach us the old dances and songs. We saw mobs over on the East Coast. They were doing dances, but they made no sense. They weren't the old dances. And we thought, 'This is not right. They are really lost. They don't know who they are. They don't know their culture.' And we thought, 'If we lose our old people, we will be like them.'

So we are talking with our old people. There are only a few left here. We've got to do it before it's too late. We already lost one. He was going to teach us, but he passed away. We are talking again so we can make these things happen in the right way. We've got to have that meaning. Know who we are. Take our right place in our families and communities. That's how we prevent suicide in our own way. (Wallace 2009)

“ Our people used to work together: cooperate with one another; keep one another strong. Back in the days, before even the white men came onto this land, neighboring groups from the different clans—different language groups—used to come together and share ceremony, share responsibility for land, share dreaming, help each other be strong, share food and items and ideas.

That's what we should be doing in our cultural way for suicide. We should be sharing these things. Looking back into our culture: cultural practices about keeping family strong. Keeping people strong and community strong. (Shannon 2009)

Gaining insight into a different culture is a process that takes time, patience, self-awareness and acceptance

**Awareness is the first step**

It can be difficult—especially as a member of the dominant racial culture in Australia—to appreciate the inherent force of our mainstream cultural systems.

We can be unaware of potentially racist or ethnocentric ways of doing things.

**Gaining this awareness is a process of coming to know ourselves and others**

Unless we are able to identify and appreciate our own culture and world-view, we are unlikely to be able to work well in a cross-cultural environment.

It can take a good deal of personal work to become aware of these things, but as this book keeps emphasizing: it is a process. It can't be hurried, and it must be engaged with thoughtfully and well.

As for coming to know another culture: people will show us and teach us in their own ways and in their own time.

**Some things can help this process**

As with many aspects of working well: gentle, open, non-judgmental listening and learning is a key.

We need to accept that people work differently. Sometimes that difference will be uncomfortable for us. For the most part, we need to find ways to relax into it and let go ...

As outsiders, we can often actually be more useful by sitting back and allowing people to find their own way than stepping in and trying to control or direct them.

Over time, we learn about what is helpful and unhelpful about our own, default cultural settings.

We need to practice remaining open to accepting different ways of doing things.

**Some things to learn about over time:**

“ A lot of whitefellas trip up when working out bush, because we fail to accept that we are working with another culture: we are stepping into someone else’s country.

We are often used to controlling—to directing—and to always viewing things through our own cultural values: it’s our ‘default setting’ culturally.

We need to be gentle on others and ourselves. We also need to recognize that we will always remain a whitefella and be proud of the good aspects of that.

*(Archer 2009)*

**One example of cultural differences**

There will be many examples of implicit cultural differences in daily life. Perhaps one of the most influential on is that communal collective effort is very strong in Aboriginal communities, as is sharing of food and other resources. The following is just one example of the kind of differences that are socialized and habituated since early childhood:

“ **Non-Aboriginal Child Rearing:** Everyone has their own space and their own books and everything. They have to do their own work, even if it’s hard, they have to do their colouring or writing or their own sum. Can’t let their big brother or friend do it for them. That’s cheating.

**Aboriginal Child Rearing:** Older siblings or more confident peers will colour in, paint something for someone, even when they have been set individual tasks. This is normal and reinforces learning by observation and team effort. Aboriginal children do not like to be ‘shamed’ so they try not to stand out as individuals from their peers.

*(Waltja 2001, p. 12)*

## 2. Aboriginal people must guide you.

“ “ The underlying issue here is that most Aboriginal people have a similar shared life experience. As a group, despite diversity, they will understand each other more than outsiders will.

Dudgeon & Williams 2000, p. 390

“ “ A culturally appropriate way of working with Aboriginal people fundamentally requires the recognition of Aboriginal culture, and involvement of Aboriginal people.

Dudgeon & Williams 2000, p. 398

“ “ Always respect the Law. The Aboriginal person in the middle is your protector, because he knows the Law. This is why you must always work with Aboriginal people. Look to them for guidance. ...

Walsh & Mitchell, eds. 2002, p. 78

## Employ Aboriginal people in as many roles in the project as possible.

- If you don't have Indigenous workers in your project, then you *must* find a way to employ them as your cultural and community advisors. This often works best on a casual or part-time basis.
- If your agency visits communities (rather than having workers permanently living in them), make sure you can afford to pay local Aboriginal people as your project workers and advisors.
- Accept that it will take time for you to be able to employ people: people need to get to know you first.
- If you work in a 'mainstream' organization, link in with the local Aboriginal organizations and seek their advice on how to go about employing local Aboriginal people in your project and help you to consider how to work around some of the matters you may find difficult:

“ We employ local Aboriginal people on the basis that they've got good cultural knowledge and language skills and connections with country and people. That's incredibly valuable. However, I do think that we almost always underestimate the complexity of the work we're expecting them to do. ...

Sometimes—for whatever reason—people have missed out on the kind of education that would skill them up for report writing and things like that. And we put them in unsafe situations, because we have these expectations of them that might be different from the skill set they bring.

And so I think we need to consider, 'All right. We've employed this person to fulfill these important cultural aspects of the position. Who else can we pay to work with them and fulfill some of these other requirements?' (Grant 2009)

“ If you want to know about how to do something on the community, ask the people.  
(Campbell, L. 2009)

Make sure you have the right people for all the jobs.

Include your mentors and advisors every step of the way.

Listen to their ways of doing things and don't 'take over'.

**Provide clear guidelines then allow people to self-select**

- If you are clear in explaining what area you want to talk about and what group you are interested in engaging, people are pretty good at self-selecting. This can help avoid situations where someone might be deeply embarrassed or shamed by what they find themselves being asked to do.

**Be conscious that there are cultural obligations dictating what individuals can and cannot do**

- Don't just rely on one person or one family group. People have specific 'legal' obligations and restrictions towards one another that are difficult to explain to white people. If you are just relying on one person, you can unwittingly put pressure on them to go against these cultural laws. This can result in stress that might be difficult for them to talk about, and can lead to tensions and fractured relationships and damaged trust. Employing more than one person can help people to self-manage these obligations, relieve pressure and create a more inclusive service.

**Ask, explain, then allow time for people to reflect**

- You can start off with a broad idea, letting people know about it and think about it. Then you need to give enough time for them to reflect on what you've suggested and check the idea out with others.

**Allow them to lead you**

- Next time you visit, ask what they think. If your advisors say, 'Yes,' they would like to do something about this matter on their community, work together to take the idea another step. Ask them how they might like to go about addressing this matter in their community, following the guidelines of community development principles. See the section on Community Development for more information.

“ Anangu and Yapa can get hurt when people don't listen ... it hurts the little children, and they haven't done anything wrong. (Nangala FACS 2003)

Allow safe, 'shame-free' ways for people to decline your request

Provide ways that people can decline without having to say an outright 'no' to you

In all this, listening is vital.

### Some ways of asking about ideas

- People will rarely say 'no' outright, so if they avoid you or give an indirect response, it is best to use an equally indirect way to find out their concerns.
- For example, if they are avoiding the matter or seeming uncomfortable, you might say: 'Hmmm. Maybe it's not the right time.' Or, 'Maybe people have other things on their minds.' These sorts of responses leave a safe way out of the situation for your advisor: there can be shame or discomfort attached to saying 'no' outright, especially to a whitefella.

### And some ways of asking about involvement

- Rather than asking a particular person, it is better to put the word out that you are looking for someone in general.
- Let people know: 'This is the kind of information we will be presenting, and this is the group we will be presenting to. What is a good place for that to happen? What is a good time for that to happen? And who is a good person, or people, to help us get the message across?' That way they can say, 'Oh, such-and-such would be good.'
- If you just ask, 'Can you do that?' they might agree to present because they don't know how to say no to you, or don't know how to explain the cultural protocols that prevent them from doing it. Watch their body language: if they are getting really nervous or shame, find a safe way to let them off the hook.

### To see these things, you will need to listen well

There are more than words to listen to: you will need to 'listen' to body language, silences, senses of discomfort, the small changes of expression in the face.

“ “ **If an Aboriginal person starts explaining something to you, then you definitely need to stop and listen.**  
(Grant 2009)

Be patient for opportunities and open to accept them when they are presented to you.

Take the time to listen and learn.

Accept that you won't always understand everything

**It is special when someone offers you the opportunity to learn from them**

“ “ You get the opportunity to talk and to learn more on bush trips. They'll find you [for this]. You'll have a bunch of people who'll see a Waltja troopie out in the community, and then someone will call you over and the next minute it's, 'What are you here for this time?' or 'I need blankets,' or 'Can we go out bush this afternoon?'

The women are so keen to show you and to teach you. It's like they adopt you. They'll tell you stories about the land and about the bush tucker, about their family and where they grew up, how people lived and worked: all sorts of things.

And once again, it's just sitting and listening and not asking too many questions.

(Archer 2009)

**It would solve so many problems ...**

“ “ You need to just accept what's happening. And then be fairly careful and selective about what questions you ask, and who you ask them of.

Go back to that real, simple principle: Two eyes. Two ears. One mouth. And a big heart to go with it.

Just accepting. And I think it's something that we need to do more of, as non-indigenous people. That would be one of my tips. ... I think we would solve so many problems we've created if we *just did that*.

(Archer 2009)

Remember that it's much more than putting Aboriginal people into a job.

You have to really listen to Aboriginal people and get the project to reflect their world-view.

**Rather than putting Indigenous people into *our* systems, we need to learn to reflect theirs**

“ “ A service does not become Indigenized by placing Indigenous people in positions ... The process of Indigenization is far more radical and far-reaching. It amounts to nothing less than the [service] taking on and entering totally into the culture of the Indigenous people.

*(Albrecht 2002, p. 70)*

**It's vital that services are based on the underlying understandings of the people they are trying to serve.**

One story that really helps me to understand this comes from history.

It is about a time when a mission out here really did their best to hand power and control back to Aboriginal people, so that local Aboriginal people could run the existing employment programs, community garden, local school and local church. But—under the new system—things started to go wrong. This happened even though the staff spent a long time consulting in-depth with local people, with all the conversations even happening in the local dialect.

After relationships started disintegrating, the community reflected, and realized that the source of the problem was that the new systems did not match with the communities in-built understandings of authority, decision-making and relationships. It didn't fit with culture. People shared the same words in the same language and thought they understood each other, but really the understanding had to go deeper: into world-view.

*(paraphrased from Albrecht 2002, pp. 63 – 70)*

### 3. Having an understanding of history can help you and others.

“ Regardless of regional, linguistic, tribal, clan and ‘degrees of blood’ differences, Aborigines were, and are, perceived as one people. If there is indeed a oneness, it lies in a commonality of history—victims of physical killing, settler animus, missionary contempt, decimation by disease, legal wardship, and destruction of their social institutions. History, rather than race, colour or culture, has been their unifying and sustaining separateness [from white Australians].

Tatz 1999, p. 25

“ Even though we come from different families, we’re all part of one Aboriginal Family, you know? Because there are a lot of other losses we’ve felt together, like losses that have been forced on us by government and all the different ways government has treated us and told us what to do. You mob know what I’m saying, hey? These are painful things.

Central Arrernte woman at Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Capacity Building Workshop held in Alice Springs, 2007

“ Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies which are commonly employed by Indigenous peoples struggling for justice.

Smith, T.L. 1999. Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples. p. 35 quoted in Dudgeon & Williams 2000, p. 391

“ “ Hopefully, Australia will avoid repeating past tragic events, such as world wars and genocide, by understanding its part. And, to effectively understand Australian culture today, we must look at the events of the past, and look from a different perspective—the perspective of Aboriginal Australia.

Collard 2000, p. 22

“ “ When clients start ‘understanding their situation as a colonized group ... ’ It helps people to make sense of where they are at, to see where their deep feelings might be coming from: to see that their current dilemmas were imposed by powerful social forces not themselves. ‘Clients are then able to work beyond anger and resentment and go on to address secondary effects such as substance abuse [and suicide]. ...

Dudgeon & Williams 2000, p. 391

“ “ The problems of today (like substance abuse, family violence, crime, physical ill-health and suicide) have their ‘source in profound hurt ... traumatic distress, chronic anxiety ... mental distress and fears’. The distress comes down from a history of massacres, stolen generations, unhelpful Government interventions and other racist, unjust or inhumane policies. These interventions inflicted a violence that ‘Aboriginal people would call the greatest violence, the violence that brings loss of spirit, the destruction of self, of the soul.’

paraphrasing Atkinson 2002

Knowing history: getting a picture of where people are coming from

It can be helpful to have an understanding of the way that Indigenous Australians have been affected by the overall patterns of government policies. It is also helpful to understand the particularities of the history of the group you will be working with. For example:

- Where is their traditional homeland?
- How did they come to be on the land they live on today?
- How many different groups of people are living together in that community?
- What is their relationship with one another?
- Was this particular community base established as a result of a mission, a station, a removal from another place or something else?

All these understandings can help you see where people are coming from and perhaps begin to comprehend some of the cumulative affects of history and the appalling ways that many people have been treated in the past. We never know how our work will be viewed in the future, but we are in a position where we are able to analyze and reflect upon some of the patterns of the past and try not to repeat methods that have proven to have damaging results.

Understanding history: seeing beneath the surface issues to the deeper issues that are at work

In Central Australia, it can be very helpful to understand a problem like suicide as a symptom of the larger, complex traumas of colonization and 'future shock' rather than as an isolated issue unto itself. It can help you put your work in its context and understand why a variety of culturally-based activities can link so strongly to the issue you may have been mandated to address. Any group who experiences colonization, 'institutional racism', cultural genocide and historical trauma also experiences the kind of effects that Indigenous Australian live with today, such as shorter life-expectancies; higher rates of violence, suicide, unemployment and incarceration, and difficulties with English literacy, education and justice.

The pain of the past is very strong

“ **Koolmatrie:** Grieving for parents is important, but grieving the loss of your culture goes even deeper ... We've lost our belonging. We've lost our identity. It's the whole picture. How do you get people to grieve the loss? It would take a whole lifetime. ... You've got a core to who you are that you're grieving, that you've never been allowed to be. ...

**Interviewer:** Call it assimilation, but it sounds like annihilation.

**Koolmatrie:** Exactly! ... There's a real sense of emptiness.

**Interviewer:** And this sense of emptiness can be passed on to your kids?

**Koolmatrie:** Exactly. ... There's that, and there's the loneliness that gets passed on. ... And anger ... a real rage ... They've felt it inside them and they say it has origins going back into the history of their families and peoples. ... So kids go out and steal, and run around ... The intergenerational issue is just one factor in the healing ...

*(Koolmatrie & Williams 2000, p. 412)*

And, for this pain to begin to heal, it must be listened to and acknowledged.

When it is acknowledged, it can begin to be transformed.

Counselors and healers such as K. Abbott (referenced in S. Bady), J. Atkinson, J. Koolmatrie and N. Pattell use explanations of this sort of history to help Aboriginal people to understand where their anger, pain and hurt are coming from.

They also practice deep listening to people's own stories of what they have experienced and how they managed to keep going through it all.

They say that this acknowledgement, understanding and listening helps the people start to heal the wounds of the past.

They also say that it helps people take frustrations that they had been inflicting on themselves and their families and transform it into energies that are useful for restoring the things that had been lost, stolen or destroyed in their lives, families and culture.

## Why understanding history can help ...

- Looking at this past helps people to see what has happened to them and why they feel the way they feel.
- It helps people see that there are actually many valuable and strong things in Indigenous families and culture, but they have been under a lot of pressure and affected by a lot of trauma.
- People feel validated that their current difficulties can be strongly explained by external pressures rather than internal failures. And once those external pressures have been acknowledged, it somehow makes it possible for people to see beyond them, and recognise the internal strength that they *do* still have and the ways they *can* still function well, in spite of this extraordinary history and its current consequences.
- Understanding history can help non-Indigenous people to see holistic connections: for example, when we understand that historic trauma to culture has resulted in symptoms like suicidal behaviour today, we can see that current strengthening through cultural activities can help alleviate suicidal behaviour today.
- Understanding history can help us be more patient and realistic: if today's current dilemmas have been caused by long periods of distress and trauma, then today's dilemmas will probably be healed by long periods of strengthening and healing.
- Understanding history can show non-Indigenous people how important it is to work with local cultural protocols and listen to local, Indigenous people, as failure to do so has historically resulted poor outcomes and further disempowerment.
- This understanding can help white Australians stop blaming Aboriginal people for their current situation and start understanding that—to still be alive and practicing their own culture today—they must be a strong people.

## 4. Don't replace systems that already exist—support them.

“ Effective social changes cannot be achieved through programs that break down existing social structures.

Albrecht 2002, p. 43)

“ Collective trauma is compounded and made more complex as the bureaucratic response dismantles the natural support and caring that people have for each other in extended family and community networks during times of distress ... [People have been] further victimized by the actions of the officials who intervened into their tragedy and intruded into, and disrupted, the social fabric that connected people to each other, the web of relationships and responsibilities for each other which helped people heal together from disaster.

Atkinson 2002, p. 53

“ Yapa [services] need to be like Yapa camp and way of living if they are going to keep Yapa culture strong

Sharijn King in FACS 2002

“ Aboriginal people 'will be more responsive to language that supports their ability to handle their own problems rather than language that emphasizes what the practitioner can do for them

Pattel 2006, p. 17

“ When culture is supported, it promotes the healthy functioning of Warlpiri people and Warlpiri country.

Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box 2008

Why we need to work with existing support systems

## People already have their own resources

“ It’s about not stepping in too quickly to do things for people but always trying to do things with people: not assuming they don’t already have their own resources.’

Archer 2009

## They know what will work better than outsiders will

“ Given the opportunity, Warlpiri people produce solutions to problems which are highly innovative and would probably never have occurred to a non-Warlpiri person. These novel solutions stem from the desire of many Warlpiri people to live in harmony with the mainstream but in a way that preserves the core values of Warlpiri identity.

Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box 2008

### ***Further reading:***

***Albrecht 2002***

***ARMSU 2003***

***Pattell 2006***

***Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box 2008***

***Walsh & Mitchell 2002***

***Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi 2001***

Any new systems need to consider how they can draw on local understandings

Services that work with Aboriginal culture—that, for example, tap into the proper, healthy functioning of cultural and kinship obligations—tap into the people’s natural ways of staying strong. Services that disrupt Aboriginal culture can make people less strong even when they are trying their best to help people feel stronger. When services negate cultural ways, they actually cause stress, possible trauma and disruption to wellbeing (Albrecht 2002; Nangala, Nangala, & McCoy 2008).

We disempower people when we act like they don’t have their own ideas, their own resources and their own capacities: when we don’t give them a chance to express them, let alone a real opportunity to try them out.

So to work well, programs and services need to acknowledge:

- the strength of existing support systems
- the validity of these system
- and legitimacy of the underlying world-views that the natural caring systems come from.

Do your homework before you start building your project

It can be helpful to get an understanding of what people have already tried in the past.

The guidance for the system or program has to come from strong, Aboriginal people.

A community's existing support systems are huge assets.

The community can move more toward independence if they develop their local assets rather than becoming dependent on external resources.

- As with any system that runs on healthy cultural things, supporting these systems can help bolster people's underlying strengths. (supported by concepts from Hodgson 2009; Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box 2008; Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2007; Pattel 2006; Albrecht 2002; Atkinson 2002; FACS 2002; Walsh & Mitchell eds. 2002; Waltja 2001)
- There can be a lot of stress in family lives, and carers can start to get exhausted. (Pattel 2006, p. 17; Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2007, p. 3) But still, even in times when whole communities or families are in distress, it can be good for them to maybe just get some help to keep going with their natural ways of supporting one another: like Judy Atkinson notes, if bureaucratic or institutional systems step in, it can 'dismantle the natural caring systems and networks' that help people stay connected with one another through hard times.
- This is not to say that carers should be *forced* to keep looking after those who are at risk or made to feel any kind of shame if they are struggling: sometimes carers are just getting too tired, and they really need to be looked after and for someone else to take on some of the responsibilities in the short term.
- But services shouldn't jump to conclusions or force situations that remove people from their natural caring systems. The services need to talk to family members and see what they want and need. If programs come in and try to make people just stop using their own ways of helping, it can just leave them feeling bereft (which means empty, alone and sad: a bit like grief). (Atkinson 2002, p. 53)

Supporting these systems shows respect for kinship ways and shows respect for cultural ways.

- As well as needing to respect the support systems that are already in place, workers need to respect cultural sensitivities. Unless family members really know your service and trust you as a worker, they will often have worries that you won't listen or understand the way they see things and you might ask questions about things or try to make them do things that aren't right for the laws and systems of their culture. (Pattel 2006, p. 18; Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2006, p.2)

- Showing that your service can acknowledge the role of the family as understood within Aboriginal culture plays the dual role of increasing the cultural sensitivity of your services (and, so, increasing the likelihood that people will use your service) and bolstering the support that already exists in the community (perhaps reducing the need for people to access these services in the first place).

About bolstering existing supports by offering strengths-based support

- Work alongside Aboriginal people who can help you understand ways of asking things without causing embarrassment or shame.

- Connect people back into their family support networks

- Help people to remember the ways they are strong, especially the good things they do in their role for their family and the good things other family members are doing in their role for them. Help them to remember the big and little ways they have been making things a bit easier or better for one another

- Sit with the people who are supporting others and listen to what they need to make their life a bit easier. Help them think about whether they need just a bit of help to keep going, or if they need a break, or if they need somebody to 'take charge' for a while. Allow them time to choose for themselves, providing information and contact details for it they change their mind or if circumstances change in future.

About bolstering existing supports by offering strengths-based support

*(continued ..)*

- Help people to be proud of the ways they have been doing things for themselves
- Allow opportunities for people to remember how they have solved their own problems before and think about how they can solve their own problems now.
- Ask people if they would like some information about other services that can help them if things are getting too hard. Help them to think about when they want to use these services and to make a plan of how they will get to the services when they need them.
- Find ways to do nurturing things with people who are caring all the time. Help to give them a break: some respite. This might involve time away from their family and community, time out bush 'visiting country' or a holiday somewhere else.
- If carers really are in too much distress, ask them about what they might like to do to relieve some of the pressure.

*(derived from Pattel 2006, p. 17;  
Palmer, Waterford & S. Grant 2007)*

## 5. Start from strengths, not problems.

### What is a strengths perspective about?

“ It is important to use a strengths perspective to attempt to correct this overwrought and, in some instances, destructive emphasis on what is wrong, what is missing, and what is abnormal. ... The strengths perspective demands a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities. All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma.

Saleebey 1996, p. 297

### Why is it helpful?

“ When communities have suffered many losses, people can lose touch with their own special skills and knowledge. It can be difficult to remember that there are special skills that the community has ... During hard times, it is also very common for people to become extremely isolated, lonely, and to feel as if nothing they can do can make a difference in their own lives or in the lives of anybody else.

Stories about special skills, special knowledge, about hopes and dreams and the ways that people are holding onto these honour history. ... Community members have described this experience in many ways, including: 'These stories are like a healing, like a medicine'.

Dulwich Centre 2006, p. 3

## **When you start from strengths:**

### **It gives people the energy to address other things**

- A strengths-based project or training program uses the principle that when people focus on positive aspects, they are more able to address their troubles and difficulties in their own way and their own time.

### **It gives people a more positive perspective of their identity**

- Strengths-based programs include plenty of opportunities for people to think of themselves as having ideas, capabilities and solutions, and they take care not to make people continually have to identify themselves as having issues, limitations and dysfunctions.

### **It helps people feel safe**

- No matter what your topic is, you need to locate the work firmly in the safe territory of people's strengths. Because when you start by looking at *problems*—especially painful, difficult problems—you're going straight into people's feelings of vulnerability or disempowerment. This closed and often fearful position may actually increase a sense of disempowerment, anger or pain, and from here it will be very difficult for the group or individual to think about the bold or creative things they could do—or have already done—to address the problems that are troubling their families or communities.

## **Strengths can include:**

- People's own ways of maintaining culture, health and well-being
- Anything that provides people with meaning, purpose and belonging.
- Anything that promotes a healthy lifestyle: physically, mentally, emotionally, socially or spiritually
- People's own knowledge about the source of the issues they face: what triggers the issues and how these worries affect them
- People's own ways of coping when problems arise
- Healthy ways of diverting other people from their problems.
- Sometimes accepting that you cannot see the direct relationship between the strength and the issue you're supposed to address. It can be hard for some people to relax into this, because it can feel like energies are being distracted from the task supposedly at hand. But with patience and in time, people may well take the time to describe to you what it is that is happening at a deeper level. And, in time, together you may be able to tease that knowledge out even further.

**Working from strengths is like putting food into people's bodies:**

“ Continually accessing guilt and pain and shame is just that: continually accessing guilt and pain and shame. It is like always picking at a scab rather than putting on some healing cream.

[It's important to work from a strengths perspective] Because suicide and self-harm and those sorts of issues are so difficult to talk about. And people have already had so many things happen to them and for them and about them that they're often in quite a vulnerable and depowered state. So you've got nothing to work with.

It's a bit like the analogy that my acupuncturist uses. And she says, "If you haven't eaten before you come and see me, I've got nothing I can actually work with, because I'm working with your body's energy. And if your energy in your body is too low, it makes my job too hard. And you don't get the benefit from it as much as you could."

So, it just makes sense to work from this perspective if you want to see people healed and moving and working on something together. Everyone has strengths within them, or they wouldn't be here—that is, they wouldn't be alive—any more ...

*(Archer 2009)*

**It's also like putting  
air into people's  
lungs: an ongoing  
cycle that continually  
needs replenishing**

It is a bit like having air in your lungs before you go under water. If somebody dunks you under water before you had a chance to take a breath, it's going to feel really distressing. But if you fill yourself up with air before you dive down, then you can feel calm and in control, even though there's water [like pressures or problems] all around you.

But you still don't want to stay down too long, because you will run out of air. And it's like that when you're looking at a hard problem. You still don't want to keep people down there in the deep of it for too long. Let them come back up for air. If you're doing training, maybe that's through a cup of tea, maybe through an activity that gets them moving around, maybe through something more meditative like carving wood or painting canvas. If you're doing visits, maybe it's through having the next visit as just a bush trip or something fun.

Spend some more time gently filling their lungs back up with air again: gently talking about strengths again. And maybe once people have gone deeper like that, they will talk about deeper strengths, too.

It always needs to be that cycle: always taking time to fill the lungs with air before gently going in, and then coming out and filling the lungs again.

And never going down too far too fast, or too many times in one visit. It's very exhausting doing this. You don't want to burn people out. You want them to feel that it was well and truly within their capability: not feeling the weakened feeling of having their energy all used up, but feeling that strength of having energy left over.

**A strengths base  
gives people a safe  
place to look at  
hard things**

“ Everybody knows it's a painful subject, whether you're directly related or indirectly related or affected ... you still get affected, even if you ... whether you're blood relative or ... you get affected because it's happened to somebody. You still get affected, one way or another.

So slowly, slowly, you build a bridge from the painful memory or the painful fear to better ideas or better ways of preventing it. So while you're there and you're on about that job, you're stating that, 'Here's some good things that you can do.' And asking, 'What're the things that you mob like doing that keep you strong?' Working from a strengths base: 'What's these things that keep you strong, that will stop you going down that road of depression or that road of despair so much that they want to be out of here. Be out of this world.' ...

It's such a hard and difficult subject. They can't always look at that bad and ugly thing of suicide. When people want to do other things in their own way, like strengths-based things that might not seem to relate to suicide, I think they are saying: "We can see that *this* stops that.' And they are using that safe and comfortable thing to get closer to that bad and ugly thing. Tthey are looking at it from the ways they can stop it, and adding more ways of stopping it.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

The connections between the activity and the issue may not make sense to you straight away, but people will explain the connections in their own time.

Remember: it is an holistic approach.

“ “ The more you ask, the more you listen, the more they say: “We see that doing this activity is a good way for preventing people going down the wrong track. We see that if they go down the wrong track, they’ll start wanting to do suicide. They’ll start wanting to end things.” They’ll start bringing up why their way is relevant to stopping something like suicide. Their way *is* relevant. They must have some of these activities in their life. Because they feel that this is one way of helping to stop them doing these things.

That’s why it always comes back to listening. It always comes back to doing these things [strengths-based activities decided upon by the people themselves. And it doesn’t hurt to do them anyway, because you start to build up a relationship, you can prompt the question again. You can start teasing the question out. ... Your questions can point to that far off thing that is too painful to go to straight away. Then as you do those things that are keeping people strong, you build up that relationship, you build up strengths, your questions can tease that out, about how it relates.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

## 6. Use community development and promote community ownership.

### A community is:

“ “ A community can only exist when a group of people decide to work together ... Without participation there is no community, only the potential for it.

*(paraphrased from Racher & Annis 2008, p. 183)*

“ “ There are all sorts of definitions for community. Maybe it could be a group of young people in a community. Maybe it's an entire small remote community. Maybe it's the grandmothers. It is a group who want to work together on something.

*(Archer 2009)*

### Community development is:

“ “ Community development is the long-term process whereby people who are marginalised or living in poverty work together to improve the quality of their lives, the communities in which they live, and the society of which they are part.

*(Combat Poverty 2008)*

### It's helpful because:

“ “ Only when the right things are done in the right way by the right people (community members who take ownership, set direction, and embrace the outcomes of the work) can effective community health promotion occur.

*(Racher & Annis 2008)*

The *process* of community development is an outcome in itself.

Furthermore: the most lasting change or successful health outcomes are achieved by programs that have been:

- developed by the community
- are community based
- and have real community ownership.

**Community development processes produce many valuable ‘side benefits’ as well as an ultimate ‘initiative’ or ‘outcome’.**

This cannot be overemphasized: we believe that it is the process undertaken by [the community] in defining its own responses and solutions, rather than the specific initiative that emerged at the end of that process, that is important. This relates to ownership of and commitment to the problems and solutions at a community level. ...

**Community development helps create effective change and achieve real health and wellbeing outcomes.**

Fifty years of social science research and community development experience also tell us that it is at the community level that change is most effectively implemented. It is at the community level that ‘problems’ must be identified, defined, prioritized and worked through. This is particularly true of public health and preventive interventions.

Throughout Australia it is community-based, community-level health and mental health programs in Aboriginal communities that are most effective in achieving real gains in health and wellbeing. ...

*(Hunter, Reser, Baird & Reser 1999, pp. 64, 66 & 68)*

***Further reading:***

*Butler-Bowdon & Nowland 2003*  
*Racher & Annis 2008*  
*Seebohm, Gilchrist & Morris 2009*  
*Slater, Knowles & Lyon 2008*  
*Walsh & Mitchell 2002*  
*Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi 2001*

Community development acknowledges that the community has local assets:

It's just that sometimes these local assets can feel hampered, frustrated or difficult to access, particularly for people who have experienced a history of racism, exclusion and disempowerment brought on by inappropriate or ethnocentric practices. Improving access to existing, local assets will do much more for lasting health and resilience than imposing access to introduced systems.

**Community development is about a group of people working together to:**

- identify their own priorities or unmet needs
- determine their own solutions and strategies
- put their own strategies into action
- reflect back on how effective their strategies have been
- trial new strategies or identify new priorities as needed.

**The process itself has good outcomes for health**

'Community development has a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of those who are touched by it.' (Seebohm, Gilchrist & Morris 2009, p. 16)

**Remember: community ownership is essential.**

It gives people an opportunity to create change and exert more influence in the decisions that affect their lives. (Seebohm, Gilchrist & Morris 2009, p. 16)

**Because community ownership of the development process is empowering**

It allows people to speak for their own needs and germinate their own ideas, rather than always being told what their problems are and being handed a 'solution' that they have played little part in creating.

**And externally imposed 'solutions' can sometimes further disempower people**

Because they can build away from personal resources into introduced ones. In community development, people have the opportunity to develop locally sustainable solutions that draw on their own assets and work within their own context. (Racher & Annis 2008, p. 185)

## Aspects of community development:

“ Community development workers are facilitators, not leaders.

You let people identify their own priorities: people might say, oh, they could say anything. But then, it's: 'Okay, what resources do you have that you can contribute to that? If you want that, what's stopping you, or what's stopping your community from making that happen?'

And then, our role is—and it sounds deceptively easy—but our role literally is just to make it easier for people to achieve their stated goals, or their stated aspirations.

Archer 2009

- Making sure everyone has the same agenda: letting go of yours if it's different from the community's.
- Accepting that you may know about community development principles, but you may not know about the specific community: the way you apply the principles will be specific to the community itself.
- Getting known by people in a community: becoming a familiar face to them
- Gathering people who are concerned about a common issue, want to do something and have time to help (the issue could be anything, such as setting up a men's centre, having better food at the store, learning more about good mental health, finding out how to respond when someone is in a crisis of suicide ..)
- Finding out what people want to do to keep them strong
- Finding out who else wants to (and who needs to) be involved
- Doing planning and be clear about who is doing which parts of the plan
- Helping people to reflect on how it went, where it is going and what they want next
- Building in long-term sustainability, such as community members trained, willing and paid to continue the program (with ongoing outside support if appropriate)
- Being there to make it all a bit easier for people
- While workers are limited by their specific roles and so cannot assist with everything, they can sit down with people to talk about how those other things could be addressed.

**Things to  
remember with  
community  
development:**

- Go gently.
- Go slowly.
- Go patiently.
  
- Respect that you are in someone else's space and someone else's culture.
  
- Remember that time and place are very important. Wait and watch for the right time and place for all things.
  
- Respect that every community is different, so you will have to get to know it for what it is and where it is at.
  
- Don't start a project unless you have the time and resources to stay with the project for as long as it takes.
  
- Ensure that the project's aims and objectives are being developed by the community.

Working from where people are at is imperative.

**Listen to them. Respect them. Let them guide and own it.**

“ “ This gets back to listening and respect. It also relates to community ownership of the project and community control of the situation. *That one is really important: truly being able to gauge where people are at.*

*(Archer 2009)*

**So you need to listen to where people are at**

“ “ If an Aboriginal person—particularly a person from a community—says don't, like don't do something, don't talk about that thing or that person, don't go somewhere, or whatever it is: just accept it. Don't even question it at the time. Just don't.

And then find a space, a good time a little bit later. Maybe then you can ask them why. Or you can ask someone else why. You need to be patient. People may not give you any explanation at first. Next visit, perhaps they will offer a small piece and then slowly build on that over time. People need to trust you, and you need to trust the process.

*(Archer 2009)*

**Don't rush meetings or push for decisions.**

Decisions take more than one meeting and more than one visit. People need time to hear, consider. If you try to make people arrive at something before they are ready, they might pretend they have arrived there just to stop you pushing on them, then go away and think and do their own thing. You'll probably end up frustrated. Allow people to arrive at their own decisions and in their own time. 'If there is a general air of silence and withdrawal, you can be sure something is wrong.' (Crawford, Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000, p. 191)

**Stay strong when it's not the right time or place for something to happen on the community.**

Especially if non-indigenous people or those 'outside' your project are putting pressure on you to do things anyway, because of their expectations.

## What can happen if you don't work from where people are at?

- If you do persist in doing something in spite of suggestions otherwise, it can have detrimental effects on your work.
- It could be relatively mild, in that people just walk away from what you are doing.
- 'They might feel incredibly shamed, or embarrassed, whatever. They'll usually walk by morning-tea time. And you just don't see them again. (Archer 2009)
- It could be that relationships sour and people quit.
- It could be that Aboriginal people who were doing what you asked them get in trouble with their community or family.
- It could be that you are asked to stop coming to the community.
- 'I've known of situations where workers have been asked to leave communities. And it's kind of like, no, you're not doing this the proper way. We don't want you working with us. You can go now.' (Archer 2009)

## First step:

Getting known in a community: becoming a familiar face to them

Tips on planning your visits

“ The thing you have to do is—the most important thing—is go gently. Go slowly. Allow time to wait. Be there so people can see you. So the more they see you, the more they know that you’re going to be there for a while. They can start wanting to talk to you, start asking you who you are, where you’re from, what’s your job. They see you and get curious about you and what you are doing there, at their community.

They can see you’re not just a blow in, blowing in there and then blowing out. And then they start to find out about you for their own selves. In their own time. (Hodgson 2009)

- Only go at times you have negotiated with your key advisors in the community. Plan ahead and fax the information through to places like the school, clinic and Shire Service Council, so people have plenty of notice.
- You need a permit from the Central Land Council to be able to visit remote communities in our region. You may also need approval from the Shire Council.
- You also need to organise accommodation. Ring the Shire Services Office to find out what’s available.
- Check with a contact person before you start driving, even if you’ve had the time set for a while. Other things can happen, like other big meetings, sickness, accidents and deaths, making it inappropriate for services to go out there.
- Spend a few nights in the community, giving people a chance to see you, get an idea of who you are and find time for you.
- Go as often as you can but accept that the community has other priorities, too, and might not be able to see you or talk to you about your particular job at the time.
- Don’t expect things to run to a set plan, including the timing of your visits. When you are advised not to go out, then you need to follow that advice. But when someone says, ‘You can come out now,’ go as soon as you can.
- It can be easy to get caught up only talking with the other whitefellas. Find out who the Aboriginal workers and community leaders are and balance your time so that you can sit with them, too.
- From the start, be sure to use appropriate interpreters and consult with local Aboriginal advisors.

## Tips on starting up

“ Give notice to the community of when you are coming. Get to know who is in the community. Introduce yourself first. First, go to the clinic. And they can advise you of who you can talk to. Visit a few times. You’ve got to give people time. Get to know each other first, before jumping onto it [suicide awareness] straightaway.

*(Campbell, L. 2009)*

“ Time and place are very important. You have to be observant for when that is. Even introducing yourself: that depends on how busy they are at that moment, whether they have time to talk to you.

Sometimes it might work out that there are no good times to talk to anyone while you are in the community. But that’s not a waste of time. You’re still out there, making your presence felt. Still being there so people can see you. So you do that good of showing respect for time and place instead of trying to push in there with things.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

■ Talk about what you’re up to, what your job is. Explain what it is that you can offer to people. Don’t go on about it too much: just do some introductions. (Hodgson 2009)

■ Use your discretion to see who you can approach straightaway and tell them all about what you are doing and who you should wait to be approached by. (Hodgson 2009)

■ Flexibility is the key. Wait for the right moment and the right people. And when they are presented to you, be ready to use the opportunity wisely.

■ Allow people to decide if this issue is something they want to address. Don’t force your agenda or way of doing things onto people. If you’ve been invited, make sure the person who invited you is there to introduce you and the topic.

■ Don’t promise more than you can deliver. Make sure you are well informed about other supports for remote communities. If you can’t help, do your best to find others who can.

“ **Interviewer:** So even if you’ve been asked to come, you need to understand that people will come in their own time?

**Charlie:** Yeah. This is just an idea still. You’re just starting a new thing, so they’re not going to drop what they’re doing for an outside service straightaway. They’ll come in their own time. After they’ve got work commitments, or family commitments, other little things that they have going on that we don’t sort of need to know about. ... It means just waiting for the right time and the right place. You have to run on community time, which is the spaces of time when they have time for you, between all those other things they are doing for their lives. They’ve got to have time for that before they can talk about that hard and difficult subject [of suicide].’ (Hodgson 2009)

## The next step:

Finding out what people want 'to make their lives a bit easier'.

- **Community development is about asking:** 'What do you want? What would make your life easier? What would help?' (Archer 2009)
- **Find common ground to build on slowly.** Give people time to connect to you. Give them time to express their own ways of thinking, their own goals. Find ways to just facilitate the journey or process. That will only happen slowly.
- **Accept that people might want to go 'round-about way',** especially if your project area focuses on a hard topic like suicide, abuse or alcohol and other drugs. People might want to meet other needs first, but needs that ultimately address the one you are talking about. So if they aren't ready to talk about this particular community issue 'up front', don't think, 'Oh, well: nothing can happen here.' People might just want to approach the topic more indirectly.
- **Remain open and holistic in your way of thinking,** accepting that there are always a lot of different ways to arrive at the same destination. You've got to think really holistically and view a lot of things as being closely interrelated. (Archer 2009)

“ If you want to know how is best to approach an issue, you can ask the people, 'What is the best way to start approaching this issue?' Like, maybe they want to go out bush to sit down and talk about things or do an activity.

*(Campbell, L. 2009)*

## The next step:

Finding out who wants to be involved and who needs to be involved.

“ “ Then you have to gather them all. Make sure people are not left out. And take the older women, too, so they can explain things.

*(Campbell, L. 2009)*

“ “ A good thing that can happen, like an important thing, is getting a referral to somebody that is a community leader—the community movers—and working with somebody or a group like that. Getting invited to work with a group or a person who are leaders. But you still got to wait for the right time to meet them...’

It doesn’t matter who it is: you can’t jump into the hard things or deep things straightaway. It’s more about letting them know if your job’s got things to offer which might be relevant to that person or that community, or something that’s their natural desire, or something they want to do, or something connected to the field they are in.’

*(Hodgson 2009)*

“ “ **Archer:** Be incredibly careful of the protocols around whose dance it is. Or whose idea it is. Whose area of knowledge it is. Whose place it is. Who has to be involved in this? Not only, because we want people to be engaged in this activity, but at that really basic cultural level of certain people being obliged to be involved or to give their permission to use or do whatever it is. And if they’re not involved or say ‘No,’ then you can’t do it.

**Interviewer:** It’s like breaking the law?

**Archer:** Yes. Absolutely.

*(Archer 2009)*

## The next step:

### Making things happen

“ Be flexible for slow times when things are just building, building, building and for fast times when you have to do lots of things at once! Like, at the start, you just will be gently mentioning things and it's slow, slow, slow, build, build, build, then big rush! Then slow and building again. Be flexible for both times.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

- **First and foremost, community development is about empowerment, so people themselves must take ownership, set direction and use their own ideas and assets.** If there is something from outside then how might they use their own skills and resources to get it?
- **The community development worker facilitates this process:** The people in the group start to think, 'How are we going to do this thing? What do we need to make it happen?' The group starts to think: 'All right. Those are the things we need. Who is going to do them? Who is going to be the best person for each part?' So it's always who and why. And you are always checking back, building and building. Checking back with the people and the elders. *(Hodgson 2009)*
- **They people consider what they need:** They sit down and look: how much money do we have? What do we already have and what do we need? Some people talk it out, others draw it, others write it. Somebody makes sure all those ideas get recorded and the plan gets spread around in a way that everyone can understand it. *(Walsh & Mitchell's Planning for Country* has lots of tips on how to do this planning stage collaboratively and well)
- **People have to work together to make sure everything falls into place. Someone is in charge of following it all up,** making sure each person really understands what they are doing and why. They also need to understand what timelines and deadlines exist, and have reasonably realistic plans about how they are going to meet them. This facilitator might be someone in the community, or it could be the community development worker. The community development worker needs to work hard to remain the facilitator and not take over more and more as the leader.

## Another step: Reflection and evaluation

As facilitator, the community development worker has a responsibility to ensure that some good reflection processes happen along the way.

Have a broad plan, but make it a flexible one, too. Plans will always change, and communities need the space to take their own direction, which may be different from the one you made an 'educated guess' about. Keep an open attitude. Remain reflective. And don't see changes as setbacks, but as part of the learning process.

If it seems that things are steering away from the issue you are supposed to be addressing, perhaps find the right time and place to ask about it. 'You might be able to gently say: "Look, you know, my role is this and I'm interested to know where you think we're at with achieving that" rather than putting it aside all together.' (Grant 2009)

- Am I adapting and revisiting the goals to suit the new knowledge that I have?
- Am I letting everyone know what's happening and giving everyone the opportunity to be heard and involved?
- Am I making sure that everyone has the same idea in mind? That the goals being developed are well understood by everyone?
- Am I holding the meetings at times and places where people can come? Some people just won't be able to come, or it might put unnecessary pressure on them if it's being held at the same time as other things they have to be at. (Grant 2009) Some people worry about their families, so it's good not to be away too long. (Walsh & Mitchell eds. 2002, p. 77)
- While not trying to keep people for too long, am I also giving people enough time to consider things and come back?
- Am I considering what sort of conflict might exist between families in this community, and how might that impact on how they engage with me and communicate with me, and communicate amongst each other?
- Am I observing protocols respectfully in ways that might help avoid jealousies?
- Have we built in ways to find out what impact the work has been having for people? Independent evaluators can be useful in asking the hard questions about why things have or haven't happened. They also need time to develop their own relationships with people in the communities, so that they can gather a variety of feedback and anecdotal evidence that might be used as qualitative data to analyse the work of the project.

## Importance of positive reflection

“ Don't see obstacles as something that really puts a dampener on things or start thinking, like, "Nothing more can happen now!" When those big things come in that seem to change everything, it's just a slow time. A time for a different approach.

Be like water. When water hits a big obstacle, it might churn up a bit, but it finds a way around it. It takes the good path around it. It keeps on flowing. Keeps on growing.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

“ There's a richness of what comes up when you do look at: "Well, why *didn't* we do that?"

Well, we didn't do that because there'd been a death in the community. Or we didn't do that because four kids were killed in a car accident. Or we didn't do that because there was no one in the community because they were all off on business. They're all incredibly legitimate reasons.

And I'm hoping that even knowing those sorts of things might—in some small, tiny way—create a bit of an attitude shift for people who aren't aware of or aren't familiar with the context of the work here.

*(Archer 2009)*

## Listening ...

“ Listening is not just about speaking the same language: it has to go deeper. You have to listen for a different world-view.

(Albrecht 2002)

**Be respectful of silence** and the quiet talk.

“ Take time to grapple with different understandings about things—like one example would be even a simple thing of what aunty means to Indigenous person as compared to what aunty means to me. The differences go so much deeper, into kinship and law and all kinds of things that you won't see immediately. I think you're trying to put your feet into the other person's shoes. And see things from their perspective. Which is challenging, I think, for all of us. (Archer 2009)

“ The kind of listening you have to do is in an ability to really not only just hear what somebody's saying but, you know: try and be able to understand the pauses and understand the silence and notice body language. It's a respectful thing.' (Grant 2009)

“ Don't talk too much, because I don't think repeating what you say in slightly different ways makes any difference! I think we sometimes get anxious when people don't jump in with a response to our questions. We expect people to be thinking of their answer while we're making our sentence. We're not used to giving our sentence time to settle, be considered and then honestly replied to. So we start thinking there was something wrong with our wording. But the message has gotten across. If people aren't responding, it's just that they need time to take it in and perhaps consider it for a while or talk it over with family. I am surprised what people bring up again later on, when I thought there was no way they heard me or understood!

(Grant 2009)

“ When you've got opportunities learn more about the people and the families, being opportunistic. When people are willing to talk to you to spend the time to listen, even if you thought you might have something else to do. I just think if people choose to talk to you, you should stop and listen. '

(Grant 2009)

## Listen for people's own agendas, not your own.

“ “ When you are out there, you got to ask the people what they want to talk about. Listen to whatever they want to talk about. Good things and bad things. Not forcing something.

*(Campbell, L. 2009)*

“ “ Try not to go in with too set an agenda or with too many expectations about what people might want. You may be able to make some educated guesses and have a bit of an idea, but I reckon three quarters of it is actively listening to the community. ...

I can remember Tony Kelly, a few years ago when he was doing a workshop here, saying that the reason that most community development projects fall over—in fact, he reckons about 95% of them do—is because people don't listen. Or they already go in there with a set agenda.

*(Archer 2009)*

“ “ That's why it always comes back to listening. It always comes back to doing these things. And it doesn't hurt to keep coming back to them, because you start to build up a relationship. When you have done some of these things with people, you can gently prompt the question again, about the far off, painful thing ...

Start teasing the question out: 'We do this because we see it's one way of preventing suicide. What are the ways this is helping you? What other things would you like to be doing?'

Your questions can point to that far off thing. Then as you do those things that are keeping people strong, you build up that relationship, your questions can tease that out, about how it relates. Only go gently, and still don't force it, giving them time and all that.'

*(Hodgson 2009)*

## Don't ask too many questions.

You can ask a few things, to get to know where people are from and things they like to do, but don't ask too many personal questions about family or cultural things. And try not to challenge people on why they do things their way: it might not make sense to you, but you have to remember that it is a way of being in the world.

“ It doesn't matter who they are really. You can't go and ask them personal questions. I mean, they don't even know you yet, and people have some really deep issues that they haven't got the time to talk to you about things or they don't want to talk about things that they've been hiding them or suppressing them for such a long time.'

Hodgson 2009

“ I can work with anybody, but I don't like when people ask me personal questions—questions about myself or Aboriginal Law. I like people to respect my privacy. ... Don't ask questions [when an Aboriginal person is showing you something], because they're teaching already. They will explain when they're ready, or when you're ready. If you ask too many questions all the time they might think you're mad, and likely to wander off into the bush by yourself.'

from men on Ngaanyatjarra lands Walsh & Mitchell, eds.,  
2002: p. 77

## Respecting space: where you can and can't visit.

“ **Interviewer:** When you are moving around the community, are there places you shouldn't go? Just keep to public places?

**Hodgson:** Yeah, and that should be sort of obvious. You know you have to go to the council office; you have to go to the shop, even sitting at the shop. Because you're so new in the community you might go in the shop, you might come out and have your drink or whatever you still have to be away from people sitting there. You get invited into their space when they say, 'Oh, what are you doing?' Then you can come over and sit down with them ... but not too close!

**Interviewer:** So it's something like keeping to your own space when you are there?

**Hodgson:** It's more like respecting *their* space ...

*(Hodgson 2009)*

- **Visit services:** Visit the ones back in town, all the ones that are doing work in that community and have relationships out there. And go to the services in the community, like the clinic, school and council office
- **Don't only visit services: also be there in the community so people can see you for a while.** Sit at the council office, the store, public places where people can see you but you're not intruding into their own, personal space.
- **Remember you're in another person's place;** you're in another community. So there's no way you can go pushing around things. (Hodgson 2009)
- **Keep to your allocated place of residence** when you have to stay overnight. You can gently walk around the community in the daytime. (Hodgson 2009)
- **Don't go to all the things that are happening in the community straightway.** You can only just go to things slowly, unless you are invited by a community member. But as you build your relationship, you can sort of start to go along and be seen at those events, too (Hodgson 2009)
- **If you do want to go for a drive in the day, find out if there are places you should avoid** (like sacred sites, men's or women's sites or dreamings). Get permission from the relevant Traditional Owners. It is their land: going there without permission is not only trespassing but is deeply offensive.

## On responding if there is sorry business

The way you respond to sorry business will depend on the kind of relationship you have formed (and are forming)

The essential element, though, is respect.

- Responding to sorry business depends on the kind of relationship you're building in that community
- If you have an ongoing relationship and are building up connections in the community over a long time, you can ask, 'Is it all right if I come out and pay my respects?' and if they say, 'It's all right,' then you'd still have to go and make your presence known by just having a little thing, going up, shaking their hand or if you have to sit with them for a little while you sit for a little while. (*Hodgson 2009*)
- Don't go with any expectations of what you can do, apart from just that gesture of respect, unless you're asked from them to try and do something. And then no promises and no guarantees, because you just mightn't have the resources available for what they are asking, or have the thing that they need (*Hodgson 2009*)
- If you are just going out to deliver training or something that is not an ongoing relationship, just send your respects for now. Let them know you'll touch base at a good time, but leave it for a while.

“ If you have gotten to know people and are really building up that long-term relationship, just to be able to go up and shake their hand to show that you do sympathize shows that you know they're going through a moment. ... You still showed your presence, even if it was just a brief word, a brief action. And then you come away from them. It's just like that. It's just showing some kind of respectful presence each time you're around.

You might be able to talk to the skeleton staff and get some work done on your project, but it doesn't matter if you don't do any of that. You achieve a bigger thing, I believe, by showing your presence and that you don't hide away from them in their bad times. (*Hodgson 2009*)

## Dealing with requests

ngapartji ngapartji:  
genuinely mutual  
obligations.

“ Always tell the truth to Aboriginal people, because they have a one-track mind—yes or no. Don't say maybe. This is very important. ... But explain why yes or no—give reasons. And don't make promises if you can't keep them! And don't make quick decisions.

Remember that Aboriginal people ask you from their hearts. Like old people asking you to go out bush, this is really important to them. Consider this before saying yes or no.

*(from men on Ngaanyatjarra lands, transcribed by Keith Noble, quoted in Walsh & Mitchel, eds. 2002, p. 76)*

“ Think outside of the square: like about that 'ngapartji ngapartji' stuff. Don't think, 'Oh no, this is a mental health project, therefore I can only do things that I know are directly related to mental health.' You've got to think really holistically.

*(Archer 2009)*

“ You are building on that relationship where you can assist, in a way. But be honest on how much you can assist, what your project or job is offering and, yeah, what things are achievable.

*(Hodgson 2009)*

“ Be clear about the boundaries of what you can and can't do. If you feel uncertain, just say clearly that it's something you have to ask your own boss about. Understand and respect the roles people play in your organization and what you can and can't do within them. Call on the authority of other people in their roles if that is what you need to give a person a clear answer without compromising your relationship

*(Archer 2009)*

## Be kind, perceptive and helpful

“ Don't go out to a community expecting that people are immediately going to give you an idea or a story or this or that or the other. Expect that they're going to want something from you. Whether it's a trip to the shop or some more firewood or a guitar string. Whatever it is. So, you show an interest in them. You provide them with something. And then it's *ngapartji ngapartji*. And they're far more likely to go, 'Oh I see what you're on about! You're all right.' And it goes from there.

(Archer 2009)

“ Thinking and noticing the practical things that people need and bringing those along as an exchange: that can be really helpful. I've noticed that some workers do that really well. They notice the shabby shoes that somebody's wearing and the next time they come out they bring a load of shoes too ... it's also appreciating that they're not in a town with loads of shops and they don't have access to a lot of resources, and they may not have a vehicle to get anywhere. ... And it also shows that you notice things, and you care.

(Grant 2009)

## Without feeling too stretched or 'used'

“ And it's a funny one, but you've still got to have fairly clear boundaries as well. ... Because you've still got to be real. And you're operating within a particular budget, and you don't want to set up a precedent where you become the community taxi service or whatever. But it's how you make wise judgments about who and when and where and, above all, why to help. ...

So you have to learn to negotiate those boundaries and be clear when it has to be: 'No, I'm not doing that. I can't do that.' If you become uncertain, don't fall into: 'Um, ah and maybe and um, ah ...' Just say clearly: 'That is something I will have to ask my boss about.' If you are ever unsure or feeling pressured, it can help to save face, relieve pressure and can help to prevent misunderstandings.

(Archer 2009)

## 7. On suicide-awareness & intervention training.

Delivering training about a concern or issue is a valid and relevant way to bring information into a community about how to deal with it constructively. But we need to remember that suicide *is* a sensitive and painful issue that can only be approached at the right time and place.

“ Resources and training programs need to be ‘organic’ and flexible at every level: the development, the delivery, the timing ... Highly structured or inflexible programs can disengage people far more than they engage with them, especially if they also rely on high levels of English literacy or are tailored for mainstream communities or urban settings.(Archer 2009)

“ And a subject like this: around Central Australia, people don’t want it to happen, don’t wish it to happen, but they have dread about it happening ... (Hodgson 2009)

“ We need one another. We need non-indigenous people and we need Aboriginal people from the different language groups to work together to share this information to keep one another strong. We need to talk amongst one another and discuss what are some of the cultural practices that may help us keep our people strong. We’re all working in our own areas, away from one another. We need to come together. We need someone to pull us together. (Shannon 2009)

“ I believe if we can do this, if we can actually sit around and talk in groups about it, it’s a way forward for us as Aboriginal people in communities. We have people, strong people, who are strong at talking about this suicide that’s happening in our communities.

And the big risk is if people don’t explore this word suicide and don’t have education around it as well, we’re not going to talk to our people about suicide, even if we see people coming and saying that they’re going to kill themselves. They may go off and think that nobody cares, or they may go off and think I’m silly, they said I’m silly so I might just go ahead and do this.

So one of my hopes is that we can get together and talk, talk about this word suicide which is a very hard thing to talk about, and to be able to talk about it in a way that it will help our people and the whole community as well. (Isles 2009)

## About suicide- awareness training in The 'Strengths Project'

In separate but related work, Life Promotion has been developing a suite of resources that are still in progress at the time of writing this resource.

The training program has been trailed and refined on the basis of ongoing feedback, including from community leaders and members involved with the Strengths Project.

Suggestions included linking with the clinics and the night patrol workers and for the trainers to do some of the relationship building that we looked at earlier in the booklet.

### **Community-identified priorities for suicide prevention**

Community members and leaders also identified things they were already doing in their own ways to prevent suicide, and emphasized that they wanted to focus on these things rather than suicide intervention training. Some of the things they identified included culture, language and strengths-based activities; other diversionary activities; and a solid, community-driven program of activities for their young people.

### **Possible future directions for Life Promotion's resource**

A potential delivery strategy is for Life Promotion to promote their resources and offer training for remote communities both in the content and delivery of this program. Workers could then take the resource back to community and use it back there. This could include people seeing what others have to say about the topic and then having opportunities to express what they have been doing with their own understandings and assets.

### **Continual focus on process, reflection and evaluation**

As with any aspect of a project, reflection and evaluation are essential. All aspects can benefit from independent evaluators who check the outcomes of a project against the projected ones.

So Life Promotion are also engaging an independent evaluator to assess the program, check the outcomes against the expense of the upkeep and see how the concepts that inspired the process actually work when they hit the ground.

**Use all the principles in this book when you do training.**

**In summary, they include:**

- Acknowledge the validity of the existing culture and respect cultural obligations, patterns, restrictions and protocols
- Have respected Aboriginal leaders from the community to guide you and inform you every step of the way
- Acknowledge that ultimately destructive behaviour (like suicidality or substance misuse, for example) is a way of coping with the pain of history, but also contributes to the pain and therefore needs to be met with appropriate healing and alternative coping strategies: but these must come from within the community
- Allow plenty of time and space for people to 'have their say'. Avoid directing the process too much, talking too much yourself or trying to impose external agendas
- Work from a strengths base
- Before introducing systems, bolster systems of support that fit with the flow of existing culture
- Be guided by Aboriginal people and their understandings using participatory planning or a community development approach

## Some additional things to note:

**Sometimes, people will call these behaviours—particularly suicidal behaviours—‘acting silly’ or ‘doing silly things’.**

Don’t automatically think that this indicates a shallow understanding. Sometimes it has become the safe, acceptable way to be able to talk about a difficult subject. While the expression can at first seem to trivialize very serious behaviours (and might sometimes actually trivialize them), it’s also an attempt for people to describe the fact that those who behave this way are acting against the proper order of things.

Usually, when people act in these ways, it’s because the ‘proper order of things’ has been traumatized or disrupted for them. So this simple phrase of ‘acting silly’ can actually be referring to something quite complex, and—rather than dismiss it outright for people—if appropriate, to sit with them to explore what ‘acting silly’ means, where it comes from, how they’d like to act and what might help.

### **Use participatory planning or community development to develop intervention plans**

The best way to set up a system of support is through a participatory planning or community development approach. See ‘the community’ as all members who are ready and able to start talking about suicide.

### **Build relationships**

You will need to do a lot of relationship building through community development and strengths-based activities. It is best if the trainers already have some level of relationship with the community with which they are delivering training. If this is not the case, it is imperative to build the training in around a project or workers that *do* have that relationship.

### **Check if outside support systems will be appropriate**

Those experiencing suicidality in a community may well need further information and systems of support, as may their carers. These programs and information need to align with cultural systems if they are really going to promote safety and health. Programs that don’t align with cultural systems can ultimately be damaging to safety and health.

You might start this process of engaging with community leaders and service providers by gently showing stories, images and understandings that have been produced by other communities, then leave it, and allow people to come back to it in their own time.

**Make sure any workers in the community have proper endorsement and support from the community to address this sensitive issue**

Make sure you work alongside Aboriginal workers and that they have clear endorsement to address this subject in the community.

**Offer appropriate training and support to these leaders**

These Aboriginal leaders and service providers also need skills and confidence in suicide awareness to follow up on situations once the trainers have left. They may need someone to offer them training and sit with them over time to figure out what kind of safety plan might work in their community, what assets they already have to make those safety plans work and where they might need to network with other services to fill in gaps (such as transport to safe places or emergency relief funds).

**You might open discussions by sharing relevant messages, artwork and understandings from other communities**

You might start the process of engaging with community leaders and service providers by showing them stories, images and understandings that have been produced by other communities. It can help to leave it for a while then, perhaps checking in occasionally, but allowing people to come back to it in their own time.

**If you are really concerned**

Remember that if you are seriously concerned someone might be suicidal, you have a responsibility to refer and connect to more help. Contact the clinic or Remote Mental Health.

**If no one is ready, then step back and wait**

If no one in the community is ready to engage with this painful and sensitive issue, then they won't be ready to sit down to engage in the process of setting up safety plans. Allow people the time and space to go on their own journey with these things. You can touch base occasionally without forcing the issue. ■

# Timing of training

In general, follow the same principles as suggested in the 'tips for starting up'.

But here are some additional things to keep in mind:

- **Training needs to be based on invitation not imposition.** It comes back to that principle of allowing people to identify their own priorities. Community members have to agree that it's something they think is necessary. If you just stand up there and plow on with your agenda, things can go horribly wrong! (Grant 2009)
- **Check who is inviting you.** What is their place and role in the community? Why they are asking you to come? Are they service providers or community members? Who do they want to include in the group? Find out whether they are making assumptions that the community are ready, or whether it's people from the community saying that they actually feel ready. If it seems they are making assumptions, you could still go out, but strongly suggest that you will start this time with the service providers, with Anangu being welcome but not mandated to come.
- **Do not go out to deliver the training if there has been a recent or sudden death by suicide or accident.** If people are in periods of too much pain or distress, just talking about the topic can trigger painful memories, a bit like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Even if somebody asks you to come out, if it is within about six months or so of a death, it can be better to wait. Find alternative ways to support the person who has made the request.
- **The only exception to this would be if community leaders who may be concerned by copycat behaviour invite you.** 'Training' needs to focus on what is already being done and what people want to know or learn more about. This is far more likely to occur if you are providing a community development, strengths-based program and have strong, lasting connections with key people in the community.

## Every community is different.

Just because one community was ready for and receptive to the training, doesn't mean every community will be.

“ And now, you see, there's a time for those things to come in: for other resources, other ways of looking at it. There's a time for those things to come in to the community. But you must add it in when it's the right time. When it's the right place. When people are thinking, 'I feel like I want to know a bit more about it.' Don't say, 'Here's this. Do you want to have a look at that?' Bang! That's just too hard. Too startling. Too, too—what is the word?—*abrupt*.

That's why it always comes back to listening. Because that depends on the mood of the community, if they feeling like they want to know about that sort of stuff or if you have to start feeding that idea slowly, you know?

Each community is going to be different. And they might want it. Or they might deny it. Or they might be going that way slowly by wanting to do things that they see as important. We're all going for that same goal, but we're moving in different ways to get there.

This mob wanted to direct it through their activities and things they wanted to do in their own style on their community [rather than helping to develop workshop resources or do training]. Whereas, some other people might say, 'All right. I want to hear about those things. You show me what you've got. You come and show us those resources.' Because they might move that way faster before they want to put their own activities into it. They might need prompting. But that comes down to how they feel.

You've got to ask. You've got to talk with them and listen to how they want to add that resource to the way they are travelling. Ask the certain leaders in the community: do they need it then or not?

*(Hodgson 2009)*

**If you have been invited to do suicide awareness training, remember:**

- Plan ahead, negotiate an appropriate time with the community and check again before you start driving to the community. Respect if something happens that means you need to postpone the training: send your respects and after a respectful period, gently touch base again to see how they are traveling.
- Use icons, images, interpretations that are familiar to that group: e.g. a graph or chart may be a familiar way of conveying information to a Western group whereas a painting using local symbols may be a familiar way of conveying information to an Indigenous group.
- Ensure the training makes sense within that culture's world-view, offering explanations that fit with the current contexts and understandings. Don't ask a group to accept a foreign conclusion that does not fit with their existing ways of explaining, knowing about or interacting with things. Allow them to explore their own ideas and ways of knowing things.
- Use the group's idiom: the kind of language and wording that they naturally and characteristically use. Where at all possible and with the proper processes and permissions, the content should actually be developed through *the people's own words*.
- Draw on the opinions that have an accepted authority for that particular group and reflects the strengths that are being exercised by that group.
- If it connects people to resources, it connects them to already existing support systems that are readily acceptable and available to people in the community. The strongest preference is always for systems that are community owned and utilise local assets and resources.
- Respect cultural protocols, including gender laws, which are likely to influence the dynamics of groups.

## Some other factors in training

### Dynamics:

- Some things are easier in groups. Some things are better left to individual 'time and place'
- Usually, people will not talk about their own things straight away, and usually won't respond individually to more personal questions directed to the group. If you want people to share, build them up gently.
- When doing the group work, there needs to be different ways that people can participate. There can be canvases for painting, paper for drawing ideas instead of writing them, things to use to model or map ideas out on the ground. There are lots of different ways to do things and different people will feel comfortable with different ways. (*Planning for Country* has excellent tips and advice on creative ways to get information across. It's a good starting point to adapt from).
- People will go deep when they are ready: and not always when you expect it. 'Some people aren't comfortable opening up ... I've noticed a different sort of way of communicating that my Aboriginal colleagues have. A lot of it's based around humour, smartness. Then, *bang*: straight into the heavy stuff. And then, *bang*: out again ...' (Archer 2009)
- Some mainstream models create healing and understanding by sharing stories together. This doesn't work as well where there can be worries about disclosing sensitive stories within a very small community.
- We noticed that stories from other communities, shared through readings or recordings, generated feelings: so long as there was no pressure to self-disclose or respond in the group. If people wanted to talk about their own experiences or share thoughts, they'd seek us out in break times, talking quietly about what they wanted to share. So it's important to allow for these opportunities and treat them sensitively.

Create safe, non-verbal ways for people to express difficult ideas and emotions

“ I find that these activities [the creation of people’s own images, metaphors and stories] really help people to ground the ideas: to externalize ideas, too. And from my values base, my practice base, I see it as a part of empowerment and an holistic approach to things. ... People create their own expressions of the ideas: their own images. The images convey a lot of power, and icons convey a lot of power. And they can almost act as a tracking device for people, at a very subtle level, I believe, an energetic sort of level. ... I’ve seen it work. It’s around identity and making it safer to talk about things like emotions, particularly if they are difficult emotions ...

Allow people to use a collective (rather than individual) approach

“ And I wouldn’t do it so that everyone has to do the contribution on their own. ... It comes back to the collective approach to things. What happens if they can’t think of who’s kept them strong? What happens if they can’t think of all of these things? We’re really asking them to put some complex information there ... and it’s hard to pull that out, particularly with young people. ... So you let people call out. So that no-one’s put on the spot. They’re doing everything as a group. And you get the same degree of information, and the same amount of processing without the same amount of personal risk attached to it ...

Avoid putting people on the spot, and find ways to talk ‘sideways’

“ You don’t want to make anyone feel isolated, put on the spot. Like, they’ve got to perform or anything like that. So, if you can find ways around it. If you can talk, maybe as third person or using an example or in a role-play, asking, ‘What could this person over here say?’ Or, ‘What is [this imaginary person] over here thinking?’ rather than, ‘What are *you* thinking?’ It’s like a sideways way of going about things. ... And people will talk around. But they’ll often use a metaphor or a story or something, and then they’ll unpack that.

(Archer 2009)

## Communication styles

- Use interpreters, local advisors and cultural consultants.
- Keep theory and lecture style delivery to a minimum.
- Use plain English.
- Don't rely too much on English literacy, but if people do want to pursue that, giving them all the assistance you can with it.
- Think of creative ways to get information across and using images to communicate your meaning. It's good to have butcher's paper or even to draw in the sand. You can use anything—model houses, sticks and leaves—to make diagrams. (If you are outside, make sure you have something to hold papers down, so that they don't blow away).
- Respect silences. Let silences go on. Don't feel anxious about them. Don't be too quick to jump in with information yourself.
- Use stories and metaphors or encourage people to come up with their own. There is more information about using stories later in this chapter.

# Using Interpreters

- An interpreter needs to fit within the relationship and authority structure of a community. So allow the community to select an interpreter rather than going in and picking out someone that seems good to you. This person must be respected by the community and have the support of the community to take on this role. (The section on 'Aboriginal people must guide you' is relevant to this position).
- This is paid work.
- Meet with them beforehand to go through the plans and the information. Develop a relationship: don't 'go in cold'. You can run into trouble if you haven't spent enough time getting to know each other, becoming comfortable, arranging cues and finding out if they really are ready to talk about this issue.
- Have cues. Ask them for a signal they can give you if you are doing something culturally inappropriate or there is cultural shame at play, so you know to stop, leave that thing and not go into it again.
- Also talk with them about being faithful to your words. If there are cultural laws, then they need to give you that signal. If it is just something they think differently about, they need to stay on track and be faithful to your words.
- Be clear with the group, too. Let them know that this person will be translating your words. So if they say something that other people are unsure about, they need to remember that the words are coming from the trainer, not the interpreter.
- Give them time to think about all this before the training starts.

## Using stories

Stories can be very powerful ways to hear about complex issues, feel heard and being to heal.

But there are important things to consider before using them:

- **Not everyone is ready to share their story.** These are painful topics, and sometimes people are not ready to process that pain in the conscious way that storytelling requires. There must always be a right to pass.
- **Not everyone is ready to hear these stories.** When first talking to a group about the topic, the presenter should say something like, 'This is a sad and difficult topic. If at any time you feel upset or sad and you want to leave, then do so.' If possible and appropriate, follow up with this person soon after to see how they are travelling and if you can provide or arrange any support. There must always be acknowledged opportunities for people to remove themselves to supported (but emotionally unpressured) spaces if trauma is triggered for them.
- **Those who are ready need safe spaces to tell their story.** Environment is very important. The physical environment must be a comfortable and safe one for the person to share in. The emotional environment must be one of gentle, non-judgemental attention, where the person has the time they need to pause, to breathe and to get through the emotional content. It is vital that the person does not experience being 'shut down' or 'cut off' but, instead, feels himself or herself sitting in the midst of an open sense of attentive patience.
- **Because not everyone is ready, Life Promotion sometimes used recordings of stories to share with others.** This means that people are not under pressure to just start talking about this subject: they can hear someone else's story, and maybe that's a catalyst for them to think in new ways or consider opening up in their own way. Another benefit of recordings is that people who are ready to tell their story don't get burnt out by having to front up to different communities and tell their story over and over.

## Using recorded stories:

Before using recorded stories in a community, it is important to remember a few things:

- Does the person still give permission for that to be shared with this group?
- Is it something the group is ready to hear? Sometimes, stories from people who have been taking action on a sensitive subject for a while might be inappropriate for people who are still deciding whether they are ready to discuss the topic directly at all. Or stories from people who want to approach a topic directly by training and open discussions might be too foreign for people who want to approach it more indirectly, through cultural or strengths-based activities. With sensitive topics like this, the stories need to be coming from around the same place that the group is at. If you are presenting a variety of stories to show the range of possibilities, certainly don't drill the group with a foreign line of approach.
- Is it coming from a person that the group identifies with or respects? Although there are some things that 'Aboriginal people' have in common, there are also many historical, political, linguistic and tribal differences that mean that one group may not necessarily identify with what a member of another group has to say about a matter.
- Are there safe ways for people to get supported space if the content is too much for them at the time?
- Will you have good ways for people to process what they have heard, be it through an activity or talking?
- Are you able to keep the original storyteller in touch with what it means for others to be hearing their story?
- Do you have the correct people facilitating the group?

Sharing stories in a facilitated way can help release people's pain, honour people's hopes and help them to heal

“ Over ... six months, a number of Aboriginal communities, which are having hard times, have been sharing stories between them. These are stories about special skills, special knowledge, about hopes and dreams and the ways that people are holding onto these. They are also stories that honour history. ...

This process has involved women's stories, men's stories and stories from young men, and young women. ... precious stories about how people are dealing with some of the most difficult things in their lives. They are stories of hopes, skills and special knowledge that too often gets neglected or over-looked.

Once a story was shared from one community to another, then those who listened to it sent messages back to the authors of the story to let them know what it had meant to hear it. Community members have described this experience in many ways, including: 'These stories are like a healing, like a medicine'.

*(Dulwich Centre)*

It is about affirmation and hearing people's response: feeling validated and heard

“ I think it's important [for Indigenous people to tell their stories] because Indigenous people haven't had their stories heard. ... it's about affirmation and hearing people's response. ... it's about opening up, about healing. ... A big wound opening up ... When the person begins to talk it starts to empty out the pain and badness and we can start to fill it with good things. The person can start to heal, and we can put ointment on it, love and understanding and validation.

*(Koolmatrie & Williams 2000, p. 414)*

# Looking after yourself.

This section is for anyone who lives or spends a lot of time in remote communities.

It presents a couple of concepts that might help you to understand some of the difficult feelings that are commonly faced by people, particularly those who move from a mainstream urban setting to a remote, Indigenous one.

It also includes some hints and tips of how you might take care of yourself in a cross-cultural environment.

## Culture shock

“ I heard a story from a guy who was working in community development years ago, and going to a remote community for the very first time. And he said, he looked around him, with his whitefella eyes, and saw the dogs and the rubbish and the poverty, and he said, I sat in the dirt and I cried and I cried and I cried and I cried. And eventually, one of the senior men came up to me and said: ‘Maybe when you’ve finished crying there’s some work you could do.’ ... And he said, ‘Well. That pulled me up short.’

*(Archer 2009)*

## What is culture shock?

‘Culture shock’ is the process of coming to terms with a new environment and different ways of doing things.

The concept came from research into the experience of immigrants. It can also hold true for people who have lived an urban, non-indigenous lifestyle and who come to work in remote communities in our region. If people have come from western ways or city life, they can experience this when they come to work in remote communities.

It can help to know a bit about this, so if you find yourself feeling particular things, you know it’s part of a process: you are not going crazy and you won’t feel the same way forever. Everyone processes these things in their own way and at their own pace. Not everyone goes through each stage, and not everyone is suited to cross-cultural work.

## Honeymoon

The first stage is sometimes called the 'honeymoon' stage (or some people call it the stage with 'rose coloured glasses'). It can feel a bit euphoric, because everything is new and exciting and different. Some people miss this stage and move straight on to the next.

## Transition

The next is the 'transition' stage. This is the phase that occurs *between* two different sets of cultural ways, and people experience it as they realize that they have had to detach from their familiar realms but have not yet gained familiarity with the new realms. During this time, it's common to experience feelings of frustrations, discomfort, impatience, anger or sadness: even grief. You might feel like you are having difficulties communicating: understanding others or being understood. You might feel lost, or that you simply just don't know what you are doing. It takes time to move between cultures, and the transitioning process can be very challenging to your sense of competency, identity and worth. Don't be too hard on yourself in this time ...

## Adjustment

The third stage is the 'adjustment' phase. This happens as you gradually start to feel more at ease with the way things work in this new cultural realm. You've come to know more about what you can expect, and things that once seemed so different and disorienting begin to feel 'normal'. It feels easier to take in things in your stride, joke, laugh and connect.

## Integration

In the fourth stage is 'integration'. This can happen when both cultural worlds have degrees of familiarity, and the person starts to make personal choices about what they see as helpful and unhelpful from both realms. Certain new ways-of-being may start to feel more naturally integrated into the person's whole perspective, behaviours and world-view, and this integration can lead to a sense of identification and belonging with the new culture as well as the old one.

## Re-entry

The fifth stage is the stage that is called the 're-entry shock.' This happens when the person goes back to what was once familiar and realizes that it is now unfamiliar. There can be a sense of disorientation and lack-of-belonging when the person realizes that their original culture may have moved on since they were immersed in it. Also, the integrated aspects of the foreign culture can put the person out-of-step with the ways of being that were once their own. It can take a while to re-transition, re-adjust and re-integrate.

*(adapted from Guanipa 1998)*

## Compassion fatigue

In traditional Native American teaching, it is said that each time you heal someone you give away a piece of yourself until, at some point, you will require healing.

*(Stenicki, M.A. 2008. *Emphatic fatigue: Healing the mind, body, and spirit of professional counsellors*. New York: Springer quoted in Bush 2009, p. 26)*

Compassion Fatigue happens to people when they see a lot of hard things and hear a lot of hard stories. The part of them that is doing hard work to do something meaningful gets worn out and tired. It is common for this to happen to people who are in jobs where they care for others or are trying to make a difference to big problems that are causing pain for others. It's also known as 'burnout', 'vicarious trauma', 'secondary traumatization', 'empathy fatigue' and 'the wounding of hope.' (Bush 2009, p. 26)

## A couple examples of compassion fatigue:

“ You know, it can be really disheartening kind of work and it can be quite unrewarding when you think you're here to have some impact and to make a bit of a difference, and then you get here and realize the magnitude of the problem, and that in your time here it's probably, your impact might actually be quite small ...

*(Grant 2009)*

“ There are high rates of death, violence and trauma. You are constantly faced with its effects. Sometimes you might see violence for yourself, violence that seems really unjust. And the person's, was it mother or wife, ended up with her skull beaten in. Because she was deemed as the person responsible for that situation. Yeah, she ended up with a fractured skull. And, like, a really good woman by many people's accounts. But just, yeah ...

*(Archer 2009)*

“ **Grant:** I don't want to get cynical ... I think sometimes what can happen is that you don't even realize you've just driven past someone lying in the street and you didn't call the police, because you got desensitized and sort of didn't even notice. I almost did that once. I mean, I looked back and saw someone else had stopped to help, but it did make me think that it was getting a bit hard for me that day. I think that sometimes is what can happen here, because it becomes a bit too common. And I see some people get a real weariness. A real dismissiveness about it, and they leave here very tired and burnt out and take that with them to wherever they move to next

**Interviewer:** So it's being concerned about being able to respond and to keep on responding to terrible things, even when they start to become common to you: not letting the fact that it's common reduce the fact that you care?

**Grant:** Yeah ...

*(Grant 2009)*

## Warning signs of these things:

- Withdrawing from any signs of pain or distress in people.
- Finding yourself reacting strongly or dismissively to signs of other people's pain or to just general conversations on the topic: feeling strong anxiety, guilt, anger or powerlessness and helplessness in response to those issues, and feeling those things strongly enough that it seems to get in the way of having conversations or doing practical things.
- Signs like depression: low concentration, low self-esteem, and apathy. Getting irritable about little things. Feeling more moody. Noticing you want to eat all the time or not at all. Noticing you want to sleep all the time or just can't sleep very much at all.
- Feeling like you can't trust other people.
- Wanting to isolate yourself. Feeling detached.
- Sometimes feeling aches and pains in your body, like headaches or tummy complaints. Just generally starting to get sick with sore throats.
- Feeling exhausted without really knowing why or like you just can't turn up to work.
- Questioning a lot, like: 'Why am I doing this?', 'What is all this for?', 'Does it really mean anything?', 'I don't feel like I can believe the things I used to ...' or 'I can't see any point.'

## Things that can help

“ Practice the ‘art of the possible’.

(Bush 2009, p. 27)

“ A good sense of humour is really important, I reckon. And being able to laugh—literally being able to laugh at yourself a lot; not take yourself too seriously; not go home and stew about stuff to much. Learn from it and move on.

(Archer 2009)

“ Be kind to yourself. Remember that this work is not always easy, and that some people find it more difficult than others.

(Grant 2009)

“ Get some breaks in. Get into town, get out bush. Whatever it takes, just get your breaks.

(Archer 2009)

- **Don't try too hard.**
- **Look after yourself.** Get enough sleep. Eat food that is nurturing and good for you. Enjoy time in morning sun or late afternoon light. Maintain your fitness. If you're walking around the community, a lot of people take a stick to ward off the dogs. Or you might feel more comfortable stretching in your own home. Or maybe there's some sport at the community that you can be a part of.
- **Stay connected to people from your own culture.** This will give you a feeling of belonging and you will reduce your feelings of loneliness and alienation
- **Maintain contact with the new culture.** Try to learn some of the language. Volunteer in appropriate community activities that allow you to practice the language that you are learning. This will help you feel less stress about language and useful at the same time. Go out on bush trips when you're invited. Take the time to get to know the people properly.
- **Give yourself permission to feel sad about the things that you have left behind:** your family, your friends, access to your hobbies and so on.
- **Don't 'vent' inside the community.** Remember that the things you say about people can really come back to haunt you! Try not to get into community gossip and politics.
- **Understand yourself,** including your own strengths and weaknesses. Allow yourself time to learn. If people get cranky at you for doing things in the wrong way, sit down with them in a good way and explain that you are still unfamiliar with a lot of things, and you're trying to learn the proper ways.

“ **First circle first. Second circle second. First circle is you and your family. Second is your work. You got to look after that first circle first, or you will have nothing to give out to that second.**

(Hodgson 2009)

“ **If you feel stressed, do look for help.**

(Archer 2009)

“ **If you find you are not suited to cross-cultural work, then you can leave, and by leaving, you will do less damage: both to the community and to yourself. There is no shame in acknowledging that this kind of work is not the right fit for you**

(Archer 2009)

■ **Have things that are just for you:** One woman who works out in remote loves cooking, so when she is in town, she stocks up on really good supplies of food then invites people over for good meals at her place. Another guy said that his prized possessions on community were his coffee machine and his bread makers, so no matter what food was available in the store, he could always have fresh bread and good coffee. Someone else said they keep pot plants and have a special chair set up where they can read a good book and feel like they're in their own oasis. (Grant 2009)

■ **Remote travel can take its toll on your back.** Treat yourself to chiropractic appointments, acupuncture, massage or whatever it is that you need to keep aligned.

■ **Get someone you can debrief with.** Someone who understands something about the kind of work you are trying to do and is respected by Aboriginal communities. Debrief with people who encourage you to use your own resources to problem-solve and reflect.

■ **Take a rest.** And call on people when you need them. 'Unattended sorrow' is hard on the soul. (Bush 2009, p. 28) Find someone who can sit with you in it when you need. Refresh your spirit.

**This work can be isolated and difficult. But it can also take you beyond your known boundaries and teach you much about life. Just remember that it's ok to get tired sometimes when it's not an easy road, and taking the time to look after yourself can help you hold it together for the distance.**

## Conclusion

“ You know, sometimes I do wonder about, “Why are we out here?” you know? And sometimes hearing stories of people’s pain, it just makes me cry ...

**But the more I think about it, I realize it is good work. Really crazy work! But it can be good work: it can be really special ...**  
(Grant 2009)

“ Go slowly with things. Go gently with things. Be happy with small wins. Big wins are better wins, but small wins are what get you there in the end.

Be flexible for slow times when things are just building, building, building and for fast times when you have to do lots of things at once! Like, at the start, you just will be gently mentioning things and it's slow, slow, slow, build, build, build, then big rush! Then slow and building again. Be flexible for both times.

And don't see obstacles as something that really puts a dampener on things or start thinking, like, "Nothing more can happen now!" When those big things come in that seem to change everything, it's just a slow time. A time for a different approach ... hurtful and hard times will wash away ... just keeps growing and flowing ...

*(Hodgson 2009)*

“ With all of these things, you just have to let yourself go on the journey. Like everything else we’ve talked about: these processes take time. You can’t force yourself to be at a stage that you’re not.

But to ‘progress’ you need to ‘process’: to get to a healthy place of cross-cultural interactions, you need to appropriately process and internalize all the messy, confusing, painful and disappointing experiences you might have along the way.

Sometimes processing the difficulties means talking, and sometimes it means just getting away for a while.

If the work is not for you, that’s okay. And even those who are a good ‘fit’ for cross-cultural work need plenty of support to make their way through it.

Either way, there is much to learn, and if you take some precautions to learn safely, responsibly and ‘work well’, then you may just find yourself participating in rich, rewarding work here in Central Australia: stay strong and know your strength. ■

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