



Fact sheet 16

Suicide prevention in Indigenous communities

It is essential that services for Indigenous people acknowledge and respect the cultural differences in communication, understandings about health, and how Indigenous people interact with support services.

This fact sheet provides information on suicide amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The importance of understanding suicide in Indigenous communities

Suicide among Australia's Indigenous population is significantly higher than the general Australian population. Estimates suggest that, in some years, the suicide rate for Indigenous people in specific communities is as much as 40% higher than that for the Australian population as a whole. Over the past 30 years Indigenous suicide has increased, with young Indigenous males being the most at risk.

The high suicide rate among some groups of Indigenous Australians (particularly in young males) is likely due to a number of factors which often combine to further magnify the risk for suicidal behaviours and self-harm. These include:

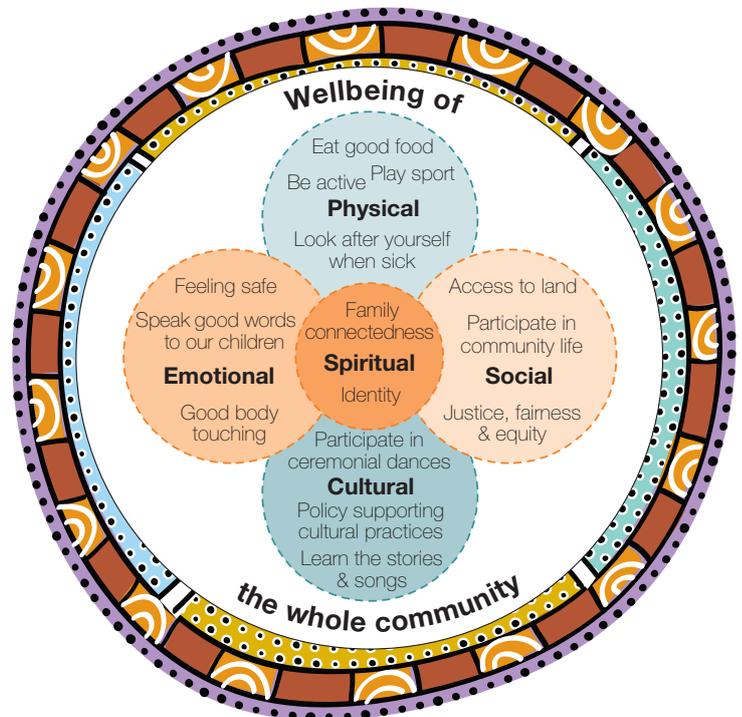
- Indigenous people are often exposed to a number of known environmental risk factors for suicide, including poverty, low socio-economic status, lack of education, poor employment prospects, reduced access to services, living in rural or remote communities, domestic violence or abuse, and alcohol and other drug abuse;
- many Indigenous people have been affected by the suicide of another family or community member that may increase the likelihood of copy-cat suicides;
- trauma and grief are ever present within many Indigenous communities as a result of the continuing loss and traumatising from past discrimination, dislocation and mistreatment, as well as current grief from the deaths of family and community members and friends;
- the number of Indigenous inmates in Australia's prison system is disproportionate to the total population;
- loss of cultural identity and social isolation is known to cause a person to lose their sense of purpose and meaning in life. This may also be a major contributor to Indigenous suicidal thinking and behaviours;

- lack of access to culturally appropriate services to assist people who may be at risk of suicide or who have been affected by suicide; and
- relatively poor health amongst Indigenous Australians compared with the wider Australian community also poses a risk factor for suicide, particularly for older people.

The importance of understanding Indigenous culture

It is important to understand the cultural differences in how Indigenous people view mental health and suicidal behaviours. Indigenous people have a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing that not only affects the individual, but the community as a whole. Wellbeing includes all aspects of health, including mental, physical, social, cultural and spiritual health (see **Figure 1**).

FIGURE 1: Indigenous understanding of health and wellbeing.



(Figure 1 adapted from artwork by Ted Watson - Yudin Dally, Murrie artist from the Bigumbul language group in south west Queensland, reproduced by Queensland Health. Additional artwork by Sista Girl Productions.)



It is essential that services for Indigenous people acknowledge and respect the cultural differences in communication, understandings about health, and how Indigenous people interact with support services. It is also essential that any assessment of a person's mental health is undertaken within a cultural context. For example, hearing voices or seeing images of a deceased relative or ancestor or sorry cuts (a bodily incision signifying ritual mourning) may be acceptable among some Indigenous groups, but may be diagnosed as hallucinations and deliberate self-harm by non-Indigenous health professionals. The reverse is also true however, and it is very important not to presume a cultural explanation when, in fact, the person is unwell and needs care and support.

Suicide prevention interventions in Indigenous communities

All Australians can work to prevent suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through better coordination of support services, greater understanding and respect for Indigenous culture and the holistic view of health and wellbeing, and harnessing the skills and strengths of Indigenous people and communities. Strategies may include:

- involving Indigenous people and culturally competent staff in developing services that are culturally appropriate. This includes involving Indigenous people in the consultation, negotiation and decision making process to establish community ownership of suicide prevention activities and other initiatives;
- recognising and harnessing the broad range of skills and expertise of Indigenous people to improve health and wellbeing; and reduce suicidal behaviours;
- understanding that trauma and loss, both past and present, are significant factors contributing to reduced physical and mental health among Indigenous Australians and that the effects on families and communities are passed from one generation to the next;
- providing coordinated services to combat the range of social issues affecting Australia's Indigenous population; and
- providing regular screening and culturally appropriate treatment for mental illnesses such as depression, using a combination of traditional and modern treatment methods.

It can be difficult for a non-Indigenous person to know how to talk in a culturally appropriate way to an Indigenous person who is feeling suicidal. Indigenous people and community support services can provide information about what to say and do. Some suggestions are provided below.

Cultural awareness

- Involve a cultural consultant. Some Indigenous people will not discuss personal issues with a non-Indigenous person or a person of the opposite gender. Ask the person if there is someone who can act as an interpreter between you or find a respected Indigenous person to help.
- If you don't know what to say or do, let the person know if you aren't sure of the most culturally appropriate thing to say or do. This will encourage the person to tell you the best way to handle an issue and build rapport.

- Involve family and community members. In Indigenous culture it is critical that all significant members of a person's family and community are involved in any intervention or treatment.
- Consider the location. Let the person choose the location and the cultural context. Many Indigenous people find hospitals or other clinical settings frightening.
- Be aware of gender or cultural differences. There may be cultural reasons why someone can't be involved, such as men versus women's business, avoidance relationships, different tribal groupings, community infighting or payback issues. Invite the person to comment on cultural or gender differences that affect them.

Communication

Be aware of differences in language and communication style – use Indigenous terms of wellbeing. For example, use expressions like 'not being well within themselves' or 'not looking too good', rather than mental illness. Use non-confronting behaviours and language: encourage the person to tell their story in their own time, seek clarification of anything you don't understand without asking too many questions straight away which may be confronting.

Also be mindful of non-verbal expressions of illness or discomfort. Sometimes a nod in the affirmative from an Indigenous person may signify that they heard the question, not that they agree with it, or they may use non-verbal communication to avoid answering questions they would prefer not to answer. Encourage people to communicate in their own way and time.

More information

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Pages (Australian Human Rights Commission): www.hreoc.gov.au
- Auseinet – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples pages: www.auseinet.com/atsi
- Bringing Them Home – information on the Commonwealth Government's programs to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people forcibly removed from their families and communities: www.health.gov.au
- Cuz Congress – health information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders: www.cuzcongress.com.au
- Healthy For Life – information on the Department of Health and Ageing's program to improve services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: www.health.gov.au/healthyforlife
- Healthy Vibe (Healthy Mind) – targeted, culturally sensitive communication services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: www.vibe.com.au
- Indigenous Portal – resources, contacts, information, and government programs and services for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders: www.indigenous.gov.au
- Lifeline's self-help toolkits: www.lifeline.org.au/find_help/info_service/toolkits
- Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention key resources: www.mcsp.org.au/resources