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Position Paper - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing

the issue

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is the oldest living culture in the world, dating over 60,000 years, and despite the negative impact of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians demonstrate enormous strength, survival and resilience.

An understanding of the complexity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, including the relationship between land and health, is still yet to be fully realised and as a result Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer ongoing social and health inequalities. These inequalities contribute to higher rates of ill health and a 17-year life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Given that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is increasing, with half being under the age of 25 years, and that death rates from suicide are higher than for the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (particularly in rural and remote areas), support for mental health and well being, early intervention and better access to services are priorities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are strong in their culture, communities and identity, but there remains a critical need to close the gap on indigenous disadvantage and health disparities.

evidence

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people possess many strengths and exhibit resilience and remarkable coping skills in adjustment to the world in which they live.
- Social and emotional wellbeing is a term that has come to represent the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander holistic conception of health, mental health and wellbeing. The term encompasses the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander extended conception of the self that involves a pattern of vital interconnections with others and the environment. The term recognises that achieving optimal conditions for health and wellbeing requires a holistic and whole-of-life view of health that encompasses the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of the whole community [1].
- Land is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, the land is the core of all spirituality and this relationship and the spirit of *country* is central to the issues that are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.
- The number of young people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian is increasing; 59% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is under the age of 25 years [2].
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian males live on average, 11.5 years less than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians males, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian females live on average almost 10 years less than non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian females [3].
- The legacy of colonisation has perpetuated a history of trauma and grief affecting the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians [4].
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians report higher levels of psychological distress compared with other Australians, with 77 per cent reporting experiencing at least one major stressor in the past 12 months, the most common stressor being the death of a family member or close friend (42%) [5].
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in rural and remote Australia, have higher rates of depression, substance abuse, co-morbidity and post-traumatic stress disorder [6].
- However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians do not access community and outpatient mental health services at a level that is commensurate with their need [7].
- In contrast, hospitalisation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for mental health-related causes involving specialised psychiatric care are almost twice the rate, and for mental health-related causes without specialised psychiatric care are around three times higher, compared with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians [8].

- Death rates from ‘mental and behavioural disorders’ are much higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians than for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [3].
- Death rates from suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians males are over twice the rate for other Australian males, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians females are almost twice the rate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian females. Suicide is particularly high and concentrated during the adolescent to the early adult years and suicide rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young men are nearly four times higher than other Australian young men [9, 10].
- Research shows that 24 per cent of parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian children aged 4 – 17 years rated their children at risk of serious emotional or behavioural problems, compared to 15 per cent for non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian [3].
- High unemployment rates contribute to mental health and wellbeing issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians [3].
- Substance abuse is often co-morbid with mental health issues, such as depression. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are statistically less likely to use alcohol, those who do are more likely to abuse it [11].
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians access primary healthcare services and MBS-funded services at a lower rate than non-Indigenous Australians. Surveys have estimated that off all GP encounters and registrations only 1.5% to 2.2% were Indigenous Australians [6].

position statements

- A focus on the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and their families and communities, is essential. There are critical strengths in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that should be acknowledged and supported; these include kinship, family and community, spirituality, and culture and cultural identity [12].
- Young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds are a growing demographic in Australia and their needs should be recognised and prioritised.
- Racism, marginalisation, social disadvantage, and physical and social isolation are all determinants of social exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Those that are socially excluded are at a greater risk of developing mental health problems and disorders, substance misuse and suicide.
- Cultural awareness, competence and safety are essential skills for health service providers.
- Community-based approaches to mental health care are required, which are culturally appropriate and that prioritise prevention and health promotion
- Ongoing partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and their communities, health and mental health services, and federal and state governments are required to develop a collaborative and coordinated responsive mental health system that is inclusive, equitable and effective.
- Greater collaborative and participatory research effort is needed to better understand the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young Australians and the factors that impact on this.

headspace recommends

- Widespread acknowledgement of the ongoing impact of colonisation on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.
- Prioritising the need to close the gap between the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non- and Torres Strait Islander Australians.
- Supporting empowerment, self-determination and cultural strength for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and communities, and building the capacity and sustainability of initiatives that support family and community wellbeing.
- The development of health workforce strategies that enable effective recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.
- Promotion of the active participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in youth advisory groups and other consultation forums related to youth mental health.

headspace will

provide services that are welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and are culturally safe.

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