

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health

Student Social and Emotional Wellbeing

A strong social and emotional wellbeing for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student means feeling healthy on physical, spiritual, emotional and social levels.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, connection to traditional lands, culture and country, family and kinships, community and spirituality is central to cultural wellbeing and the ability to adapt to daily challenges while leading a fulfilling life.

Significant risk factors that can impact on the social and cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities include:

- *sorry business* (grief and loss)
- impacts of the Stolen Generations and removal of children
- unresolved and intergenerational trauma
- disconnection from culture and identity
- discrimination based on cultural identity, and
- economic and social disadvantage resulting in poor health.

Protective factors enable students and their families to feel strong and resilient.

It is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have self-determination, be a part of a strong community governance and have the opportunity to obtain or regain and share cultural knowledges.

Statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are:

- two and a half years on average behind their school classmates in reading and writing
- 10% less likely than non-Indigenous peers to finish high school
- ten times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be removed from their family and placed in foster care
- 25 times more likely to end up in youth detention than other Australians
- twice as likely to die by suicide than other Australians

Statistics also show that:

- in remote communities, two out three young people graduate from year 12
- there is a 50/50 chance that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people won't have a job
- boys are 15 months behind girls in literacy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Sistergirl & Brotherboy

Due to lack of research, academic evidence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Sistergirl and Brotherboy populations is limited.

We do know that these marginalised populations are vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of psychological distress due to racism, bullying, stigma, harassment, violence, heteronormativity and discrimination which leads to poor social and emotional wellbeing and education inequities.

Risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- isolation
- displacement
- engaging in risky coping behaviours
- engaging in risky sexual behaviours
- high rates of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and blood borne viruses (BBVs)
- unplanned pregnancies
- low physical, emotional and mental health
- higher levels of self-harm and suicide
- low school attendance
- interrupted education

Suicide Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The suicide rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males are the highest in the world.

Suicide is the most common cause of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people between the ages of 15 to 34 years.

On average, over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders end their lives through suicide each year. For every death by suicide, it is estimated that as many as 30 people attempt to end their lives.

The most recent Australian data reports deaths due to suicide in 2015 at 3,027, which equates to more than eight deaths by suicide in Australia each day.

From 2001-2010 Queensland has recorded an increase in suicide rates, despite national rates remaining steady.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people take their lives at a younger age (from 15 years) than non-Indigenous Australians.

The complex related factors that heighten the risk of suicidal behaviours and self-harm can include:

- ongoing exposure to socio-economic disadvantage and multiple psychological stressors
- *Sorry business*
- violence
- transgenerational trauma
- impacts of dislocation and effects of forced removal of children and mistreatment
- racism and discrimination
- poor health, mental health and emotional wellbeing
- access to health care services

Taking steps towards culturally appropriate and inclusive environments to reduce existing inequities and enhance outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is key to improving social and emotional wellbeing.

Visit www.true.org.au or contact info@true.org.au for training opportunities or further information.

Disclaimer: True Relationships & Reproductive Health (True) has taken every care to ensure that the information contained in this publication is accurate and up-to-date at the time of being published. As information and knowledge is constantly changing, readers are strongly advised to confirm that the information complies with present research, legislation and policy guidelines. True accepts no responsibility for difficulties that may arise as a result of an individual acting on the advice and recommendations it contains.

References

- i Working Together: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Mental Health & Wellbeing Principles and Practice
- ii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report
- iii Closing the Gap Report 2017
- iiii Australian Government Department of Health 2013
- v Lifeline Statistics on Suicide in Australia
- vi (ABS, Causes of Death, 2015)