

'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'. (*Living Is For Everyone* (<http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Indigenous.html>))



This fact sheet provides information about the current state of suicide amongst Australia's Indigenous population and some of the unique elements of this very concerning issue.

Suicide facts in Indigenous Australia

Rates of suicide in Indigenous communities have been increasing since the 1970's. The majority of Aboriginal people who suicide are under the age of 29. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) produced a document entitled 'The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples', which cited the following statistics:

Indigenous males

- Age 0-24: 30 per 100,000
- Age 25-34: 105 per 100,000
- Age 35-44: 62 per 100,000

Indigenous females

- Age 0-24: 10 per 100,000
- Age 25-34: 20 per 100,000
- Age 35-44: 17 per 100,000

How is bereavement in Indigenous Australian culture different?

Indigenous Australians have a very unique and special way of viewing their world, life, and spirituality. This impacts upon the way they grieve the loss of a loved one. Bereavement (also known as Sorry Business) is experienced by Indigenous people on a social, emotional and spiritual level. When someone dies the whole community grieves at the same time and the whole extended family are all strongly affected.

Indigenous Australian culture requires that Indigenous people have cultural obligations after the death of family and community members that override all other commitments and constraints. There are many cultural observances, some of them include: restrictions on people entering and leaving the community; where the funeral and ceremonies are held (homeland); the undertaking of 'sorry cuts' (i.e. self inflicted cuts or wounds to show they feel pain); the performance of 'smoking ceremonies' in houses or places where the person died and the use of the deceased person's name.

Issues relating to suicide in Indigenous communities

One of the key issues that impacts upon suicide in Indigenous communities is the occurrence of 'copycat' suicides. This is also known as a 'contagion effect' or 'cluster'. Queensland's Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian states that "contagion", or copycat suicide, is a key factor in 60 per cent of suicides among children and adolescents, who took their own lives after the suicide or attempted suicide of a friend, relative or community member" (Senate Enquiry Submission 2009).

Research by Hanssens (2007) from Charles Darwin University found that young, unmarried, unemployed males aged between 15-45 are at the highest risk of copy-cat suicide. She also cited that the use of alcohol and drugs had been found to be a factor in approximately 70% of the suicides in the Northern Territory. The co-morbidity of risk factors therefore seems to be a significant issue influencing suicide in many Indigenous communities.

What is being done?

Programs and organisations that are currently focusing on suicide prevention in Indigenous Australians include:

- **Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS):** the world's premier institution for information and research about the cultures and lifestyles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, past and present.
- **Mibbinbah:** exists to create safe spaces for spirit healing, empowerment, celebration and education and training for Indigenous Men. The three-year research program aims to provide an understanding of what makes Indigenous Men's Spaces safe and healthy places for men and how this might benefit families and communities.
- **Indigenous Psychological Services:** a private company designed to address the inequities that exist for Indigenous people in relation to appropriate levels of access to specialist and culturally specific mental health and psychological services.
- **National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO):** the national peak Aboriginal health body representing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services throughout Australia.
- **The National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Workers Association Inc:** works to bring together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers as a professional body, to exchange information, ideas, and to network for the benefit of our communities.

A list of Indigenous Suicide Prevention Programs funded under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/3kfxmzc>



Useful resources and websites

- Grieving the Aboriginal Way booklet - <http://www.gtp.com.au/ips/inewsfiles/Grieving%20Aboriginal%20Way.pdf>
- Living is for Everyone Indigenous Fact Sheets- <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Fact-Sheets.html#c48>
- http://www.lifeline.org.au/ArticleDocuments/234/44392%20LIFELINE%20Toolkit%20Aboriginal%20suicide%20prevention_FA-web.pdf.aspx
- <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Indigenous.html>
- http://www.actnow.com.au/Issues/Aboriginal_Suicide_is_Different.aspx

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