



Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is vital to Australia. Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in much better health than they are today. Now they experience higher rates of health and mental health problems than other Australians. Although it is well recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are resilient and have shown their capacity to survive extreme levels of adversity, it is now time to move from surviving to thriving again. A diverse range of appropriate approaches to improve health and reduce illness must be used. Strong partnerships and collaboration and working within culturally appropriate frameworks are needed to improve community, family and individual health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"Healthy spirit, healthy mind, healthy body."



Social and emotional wellbeing

Improving social and emotional wellbeing is essential to developing healthy, resilient individuals who can contribute to building strong, stable communities based on a strong cultural, spiritual and community identity that supports families and children to reach their full potential. Social and emotional wellbeing refers to the holistic inter-relationships between spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental, cultural and physical factors that make up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander view of health. Social and emotional wellbeing incorporates the concept of 'healthy spirit, healthy mind, healthy body'.

What is mental health?

Mental health is a positive state of wellbeing. It is more than simply the absence of mental illness and is a fundamental part of overall health. Health is a holistic concept that involves the social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing of the whole community. Mental health involves feeling positive about ourselves, our communities, and being able to live life to our fullest capacity.

Our mental health influences everything we do:

- how we think, feel and behave;
- how we relate to other people and take our place in our communities;
- how we cope with everyday life as well as important life events such as having a baby, loss of a loved one, physical illness, and dealing with adversity.

The term mental health is used in this context to convey a similar meaning to social and emotional wellbeing.



What influences mental health?

Mental health is affected by the events that occur in our everyday lives. It is best understood through a holistic and social model of health, rather than a medical model. Mental health is determined by factors at many levels, including socio-political, socioeconomic and environmental, as well as family and individual factors, as shown in Figure 1. Since it is affected by many different factors, mental health is everybody's business and everybody has a role in improving mental health.

Importantly, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there are unique influences on mental health related to indigenous rights. Cultural dislocation, loss of land, stress, grief, trauma, premature death, social disadvantage, and child removal are the consequences of invasion, colonisation and racism. These factors impact directly on the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and also indirectly through increased risk of suicide, self-harm, substance abuse, trans-generational trauma and family breakdown in Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander communities. Ways to improve mental health must recognise the substantial impact of these factors and the subsequent significance of reconciliation, affirmative action and life promotion.

The **social determinants** of mental health are the environmental and community factors that impact on peoples' everyday lives. These include everyday living conditions that affect opportunities for health, education and employment. Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are the most disadvantaged communities in Australia and this contributes to poor outcomes in health and mental health. Much needs to be done to address these basic requirements for healthy living and bring about equity and access to appropriate resources and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to adequate and appropriate service provision that supports good health and mental health.

Figure 1

Indigenous Rights	e.g., invasion and colonisation, racism and discrimination, Stolen Generation, the right to land and self-determination
Social Determinants	e.g., housing, employment, education, health, access to health care, financial security, community and cultural connectedness
Risk and Protective Factors	e.g., grief and loss, physical ill health, substance misuse, family and community strength





What is mental illness?

A **mental illness** is a health problem that significantly interferes with a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It is diagnosed by the symptoms and signs a person experiences, according to a set of standardised criteria. Mental illnesses are of different types and degrees of severity and some of the major types are depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, psychoses and eating disorders. Mental illness is also referred to as mental disorder.

A **mental health problem** also interferes with a person's life but to a lesser extent than a mental illness. Mental health problems are more common and include the mental ill health that can be experienced temporarily as a reaction to loss or other stresses of life. Mental health problems are less severe than mental illnesses, but may develop into a mental illness if they are not properly dealt with or last for a long time.

Mental health problems and mental illnesses can cause a great deal of distress and disability to those experiencing them. They are also strongly associated with higher suicide rates and harmful alcohol and other drug use. They impact on the wellbeing of families, friends and communities. Furthermore, these problems appear to be increasing. According to the World Health Organization, depression will be one of the biggest health problems worldwide by the year 2020.

At the level of families and individuals are the risk and protective factors for mental health. **Risk factors** are those that increase the likelihood that a mental health problem or mental illness will develop. **Protective factors** are those that decrease this likelihood by reducing the impact of risk factors or being protective of mental health in their own right. Good mental health starts early in life, even before birth with influences on the mother's health and wellbeing. Common risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include grief and loss, physical ill health and substance misuse. Protective factors include good parenting, community and family strength, and cultural identity.



How can we improve mental health and reduce mental illness?

Providing effective treatments for people with mental illness is vitally important, and there is much that needs to be improved in the provision of mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, treatment alone will not help to reduce the growing rates of mental illness. There is a need to enhance mental health early in life, build and maintain resilience and prevent problems from developing in the first place. Effective treatments must be provided as early as possible, when they are showing the first signs of mental illness to prevent the illness from becoming worse. We have to 'start strong, stay strong and recover strong'.

There is a range of approaches that can be used to improve mental health and reduce mental illness. There are mental health interventions that:

- promote the mental health of all people (**mental health promotion**);
- reduce risk and increase protective factors for people who are at risk of developing mental health problems (**prevention**); and
- target those people who are at very high risk or have begun to show the early signs of mental illness (**early intervention**).

What is mental health promotion?

Mental health promotion is about improving mental health for everyone. It is essential for the health and wellbeing of our communities to have the capacity to establish and sustain wellbeing throughout life. Mental health promotion is about maximising everyone's mental health through:

- making sure that public policies support the mental health of individuals, families and community groups (e.g., *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*);
- developing environments (social, physical, economic, and cultural) that are good for us all and support mental health and wellbeing (e.g., *NAIDOC week, Festival of the Light, Deadly Awards, Croc Festivals*);
- empowering communities to take the actions that meet the needs of community members (e.g., *leadership programs, community programs to address issues such as domestic violence, substance misuse, community safety*);
- helping people develop the skills to understand, enhance and respond to their own mental health needs (e.g., *training in skills to deal with anger, grief and loss, problem solving, conflict resolution, mental health literacy*); and
- ensuring that health services and mental health services promote the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, as well as treat illness (e.g., *cultural awareness for mainstream health personnel, social health teams*).





How can we prevent mental illness?

Prevention is about stopping mental health problems and mental illness developing in the first place. It is also about preventing further episodes for people who have already experienced a mental illness and preventing the damage that mental illness can cause to people's lives and those around them.

Prevention is about understanding and identifying the risk and protective factors for mental health (see Figure 1). By addressing risk and protective factors, we can improve and protect our mental health throughout life. Prevention approaches can be targeted to different groups according to their level of risk and protective factors. There are three different levels of prevention:

1. **General or universal** – targeted at the general public or a whole population group. In this case no specific risk factors have been identified, and the aim is to prevent mental health problems for everyone. Universal prevention approaches are designed to reduce risk factors and/or increase protective factors that are likely to be relevant to all people.

Examples include: parenting programs provided for all parents; pre-school education provided for all pre-school children; exercise programs for all age and fitness levels; pre-natal support programs.

2. **At risk or selective** – aimed at individuals or sub-groups of people whose risk of developing a mental health problem or mental illness is higher than for the general population. Selective prevention approaches are designed to reduce risk factors and/or increase protective factors for a group identified as being at higher risk.

Examples include: midwifery programs, Aboriginal fathers' programs, initiatives aimed at people suffering grief and loss or with substance misuse issues.

3. **High risk or indicated** – for people who are at very high risk of developing a mental health problem or mental illness. Indicated prevention approaches are designed to reduce risk factors and/or increase protective factors for people at imminent risk of mental ill health.

Examples include: support programs for people recently released from prison; support for communities bereaved by suicide; support programs for people with chronic pain and chronic illness; post-natal support for mothers who have experienced birth complications.



What is early intervention?

Early intervention refers to interventions for people at very high risk of developing a mental illness, beginning to show the early signs and symptoms of a mental health problem, or experiencing a first episode of mental illness. For people at very high risk and showing early signs and symptoms, early intervention aims to prevent the development to a diagnosable illness. For people experiencing a first episode of mental illness, early intervention aims to reduce the impact of the episode of illness in terms of its duration and the damage it may cause to the person's life, and also to foster hope for future wellbeing. By addressing problems early on, we can more effectively restore and support wellbeing.

Early intervention overlaps with high risk or indicated prevention as well as with treatment for first episodes of illness. Examples of early intervention include:

- **High risk** – providing mental health information and support in alcohol and drug treatment settings; support for communities bereaved by suicide; outreach services for homeless people.
- **Early identification** – screening for post-natal depression; screening for depression in general health settings; mental health assessments in drug and alcohol treatment settings; mental health assessments in criminal justice settings.
- **Early treatment** – hospital at home services; assertive outreach programs.

General principles for promotion, prevention and early intervention

Some general principles apply to promotion, prevention and early intervention in relation to mental health, including:

- The emphasis is on a broader, social view of health, rather than a narrower medical model
- Partnerships and collaboration across governments, agencies and communities is important
- It is about maximising health and minimising illness
- Everyone has the right to good mental health
- Mental health has a range of influences and therefore requires multiple approaches
- Initiatives need to be sensitive to culture

Where can I find out more?

More information on promotion and prevention approaches to mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is available from Auseinet - the Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health - website at www.auseinet.com/atsi/index.php

