

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perinatal mental health

A guide for primary care health professionals

Indigenous communities are as diverse as Indigenous languages.¹

When working with families in the perinatal period, health professionals have the opportunity to ‘close the gap’ and improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is important to recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their families, as well as to be aware and understand the ongoing effects of inter-generational trauma and complex psychosocial issues.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept of health is holistic and interconnected with mind, body, spirit and nature in balance; *Life is health is life.*²



DIVERSITY WITHIN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURES

For tens of thousands of years before European settlement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people survived and thrived with highly-functioning social and family structures. The Aboriginal culture is acknowledged as the oldest continuous living culture in the world.³

Prior to colonisation, there were many Aboriginal nation-states each with their own belief system and social structure. They had developed more than 250 languages with many more dialects. A complex kinship system defined a person’s place in the community and guided behaviour and social interaction.

Despite this diversity, there are common elements that promote resilience and support for families and communities, including:

- a strong connection to land, country, ancestors and spirits
- the role of Elders in decision-making, teaching traditional skills and passing down knowledge, customs, stories and culture
- the emphasis on the importance of family and community
- an extended family structure – many ‘Aunties’⁴ providing guidance and care of infants
- fathers and male family members becoming more involved as children grow up
- a focus on family, kinship, culture, community, spirituality and humour which provides strength.

¹ Jimmy Pascoe, traditional owner, Maningrida, West Arnhem land, Northern Territory

² A National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989

³ About Australia – Australian Stories

⁴ ‘Aunties’ – a term for female relatives and friends who play an important role in a person’s life.