

SPIRITUAL CARE

considerations series



The Spiritual Care Considerations series equips all carers with basic information to help you think about the spiritual needs of the person in your care. They are a prompt to give you ideas for conversation with the person you are supporting and/or their loved ones. Meaningful Ageing Australia members can access more information under the Member's Zone Resources Clearing House www.meaningfulageing.org.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Spirituality

A painful history is also a story of resilience

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their spiritual needs are best understood with knowledge of their history and unfair treatment. Up until the 1970s, an Australian policy enforced the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, due to a belief the children would be better off living in white society. Families were rarely reunited and this policy has since been identified as genocide. **The Stolen Generations** is not just a historical event, but a traumatic lived experience that continues to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people all over Australia today. If you ask about an older person's family and/or where they are from, and they don't answer, this may indicate that they may have been a member of the Stolen Generations and, sadly, don't know. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are incredibly strong and resilient and many identify their kinship networks and spirituality as the source of this strength.

Spirituality and healing

Spirituality is an important aspect in health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is not limited to a single definition and varies between different communities. Common characteristics are:

- Passing on culture to younger generations through song, dance, artwork and story-telling by Elders; and
- Connection to land, a highly spiritual concept, which not only upholds a respect for the land, but a belief that one *is* the land and that each person, animal, plant and the natural landscape has equal value.

'Being Aboriginal has nothing to do with the colour of your skin or the shape of your nose. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart' (Linda Burney, cited in NSW Department of School Education, Aboriginal Education Policy, Sydney, 1996, p3).

Colonisation introduced Christianity to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Many children were taken to live with white Australian families or on missions; as a result, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grew up learning Christian values. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today find the Christian faith as a source of comfort and strength. A fusion between Christian faith and traditional spirituality may be important to the older person you care for. You could ask; *Do you have faith or beliefs that are important to you and your mob/ clan?*

- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel a strong need to go back to country (where their ancestors lived) to live out the rest of their days. It can result in deep spiritual distress if they are not well enough to do so.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people view hospitals and places of care as places you go to die. They were also places Aboriginal children were removed from their families. Because of their history, there may be a deep distrust and fear in entering care. Many older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people worry that they will be unfairly treated again later in their lives. You could say; *Sorry for what has happened to your people. At (*your workplace) we welcome you and hope we can work together to make you feel comfortable here.*

- Many Aboriginal people have a strong sense of belonging; belonging to something bigger than themselves. Belonging to family, community and country is part of culture and identity.
- Family and kinship ties are important. Kinship is a complex network of extended family, with specific roles, responsibilities and shared resources. The older person may have responsibilities to extended family, and Elders have added responsibilities of passing on traditional knowledge and resolving conflict.
- Many Aboriginal people will talk about seeing a family member who has died or speaking or hearing from the ancestors. This is common spiritual language among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is not a mental health concern.

Ways to show respect to an older Indigenous person

Not all older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are Elders. Being an Elder is a position given by their community and is a great honour with responsibilities. Take care in referring to the older person as an Elder, ask first. Alternatively, you can ask to call the older person 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' as a sign of respect.

- Sharing where you grew up and where you have lived can help to build trust. For example: *Hello my name is ___, my mother came from ___, my father came from ___, and I grew up in _____. I'm here to help you with ___.*
- Avoiding eye contact is considered to be polite in some communities, so do not worry if this happens.
- Listen without interrupting the stories. Make time to get to know people better, you could say: *Aunty, let's have a yarn! I'll make us a cuppa.*
- Use the older person's language in everyday tasks if the preferred language is not English. Put up pictures and words so workers learn the older person's language, if they have given you permission.
- Never use language like 'half' or 'quarter' to describe someone's Aboriginality.
- Take care in mentioning childhood experiences. This may stir powerful emotions of the Stolen Generations for the older person. If you do not feel prepared to deal with their distress, it's best not to ask.
- Don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing! The older person will most likely appreciate your genuine interest in their lives and culture and in most cases also freely correct/guide you.

Tips for team leaders and managers

- Initial assessments are important in understanding the needs of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Food taboos, which can change during sorry time, need to be clear in meal plans. Language preferences and use of interpreters must be addressed.
- Ensure you have a shared understanding of the words you are using when communicating. For example, saying 'yes' to something may not mean consent, but acknowledge they have heard what you are saying.
- If possible, work with the assistance of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker
- Gender roles are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, it is not appropriate for women to shower men. Ensure your organisation can meet the needs of the older person.
- Display a plaque prominently, acknowledging the land on which the facility is built and display appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork in common rooms or hallways.
- Before publishing the name or a picture of a deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, gain permission from the family. It is considered deeply disrespectful to have these seen in public so this must be considered if you are holding commemoration ceremonies.
- Be aware that celebrating days like Australia Day (commonly referred to as Invasion Day or Survival Day in the Aboriginal community) may be painful. Important days that could be celebrated by your organisation include the anniversary for the Apology to the Stolen Generations, Mabo Day or NAIDOC Week to show support for your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents/clients and their families.

Deepen your understanding

- **Bringing Them Home:** Stolen Generation stories - www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sl82VMuuKl0&t=1210s
- **Charlie's Country (2013)** is a film about an older Aboriginal man's struggle to reconnect with his country.
- **Putuparri and the Rainmakers (2015)** is about a Kimberley man whose determined love of family, culture and traditional lands takes him back to his desert home.
- **Rabbit Proof Fence (2002)** the story of three Aboriginal girls who were forcibly taken from their families.
- **Mabo (2012)** is a film about Eddie Mabo and his fight for native title legislation.

For more resources and links to useful reading for your own information on *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Spirituality* visit the Meaningful Ageing website Member's Zone. *With thanks to Matt Bell, Indigenous Hospitality House; Mark Elliott, Catalyst Foundation; Roslyn Malay and Cath Josif WA Centre for Health and Ageing, UWA, and Jana Stewart for their assistance in preparing this Consideration.*