

# Links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and wellbeing: what the evidence says



The National Study of Aboriginal  
& Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

**Our cultures count.**



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1. The full version of the report is available from: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/148406?mode=full>

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# Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples believe there to be a strong link between culture, health and wellbeing. We wanted to explore what has been written about these links. Firstly, some definitions:

## Culture

We are all born into, grow, work and live within a culture or cultures. These are maintained or modified when they are passed on, reinforced and practised in both specific and general situations. The many definitions of culture all encompass culture-specific knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (including within culture variations according to rules), and all human life is culturally bound. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture includes Dreaming and other spiritual beliefs, Country, community, languages and art, including dance and music. The complex and many varied cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have developed and changed over an estimated 65,000 years.

## Health and Wellbeing

Through colonisation, cultural healers and Elders were prevented from providing healing. Increasingly, health and wellness are now seen through both biomedical (as the absence of disease) and spiritual, emotional and cultural dimensions. A well-accepted definition of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was put forward in 1989 by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party:

*[Health is not] just the physical well-being of the individual but the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and it also includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.*

## Culture and Health

Although there are differences, we found some similarities in the links between culture and health across the Nations of Australia's First Peoples. In addition, there are similarities with First Nations' peoples from countries such as Canada and Aotearoa (New Zealand). Our emphasis is on what we found in the literature about the links between culture and health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations in Australia. Further information can be found in the full version of the report.

# Overview

**We identified six broad cultural domains.**

**These are:**

1. Connection to Country
2. Cultural Beliefs and Knowledge
3. Language
4. Family, Kinship and Community
5. Cultural Expression and Continuity
6. Self-determination and Leadership



**1. Connection to Country** links an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person to their land or island and community in a deeply cultural and spiritual way. Culturally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people describe themselves as being “of Country” with identity, cultural practices, systems of authority and social rules, traditions and spirituality all tied to Country.

Loss of Country, or loss of connection to Country, may have negative impacts on health. Some reports have also highlighted the negative impacts on health and wellbeing when Country has changed.

#### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Improved procedures for Native Title and land claims;
- Increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander management of Country;
- A focus on holistic relationships between societies and their Country by incorporating more programs such as Caring for Country to reinvigorate links between health and environment;
- People returning to Country when unwell to reinvigorate links between health and environment.

Other strategies include supporting the hunting and gathering of food on Country, which benefits individuals by promoting physical activity, and the community through food sharing; and encouraging non-Indigenous people, particularly health practitioners, to gain a better understanding of the importance of Country.



Recognition of the deep connection to Country is vital, as demonstrated by the “Healthy Country, Healthy People” concept in the Kimberley, WA. *Shutterstock*

## 2. Cultural Beliefs and Knowledge, such as the Dreaming or dreaming stories, tell the story of creation and inform ways of living and being. Dreaming stories are reproduced through storytelling, art, ceremony, song and dance.

Ancestral Creators are spirits who formed the mountains, rivers and other features of the landscape. Other spirits exist alongside humans taking the form of animals, plants, landmarks, water or whirlwinds and mists. These spirits can be good or bad and can affect health and wellbeing. Community wellbeing is strongly linked to spirituality and culture. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation has said that if a person is spiritually unwell, it will affect the whole person. Ngangkari (Aboriginal cultural healers of the Western Desert region) deal with the bad spirit causes of illness such as thought disturbances, headaches, blocked ears and lost spirit. Ngangkari practise cultural healing within some communities by including “singing” people to make them well, bush trips, foods and medicine.

### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Practice holistic care and healing programs that incorporate culture and combine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing methods and biomedicine;
- Fund and develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge centres;
- Provide children with cultural experiences and knowledge through family interactions, community collaborations and school influences such as involvement in NAIDOC;
- Assist people affected by forced removal programs with family tracing and reunion services, and a Journey of Healing to restore connections to identity and social and emotional wellbeing through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems;
- Keep young people out of detention by using Aboriginal-led programs which provide spiritual guidance and support by Elders and mentors.

Research shows that the support and transfer of childbearing knowledge through the kinship system among Aboriginal women in NSW has improved health for babies, while a 2010 study of Aboriginal people with cancer showed that Aboriginal healing processes were preferred by some because they helped with reconnection to heritage, land, culture and ancestral spirits.



The ngangkari of the Western Desert region take a holistic approach to wellbeing. *ABC Riverland: Sowaibah Hanifie*



### 3. Language

A small number (20 out of some 200-300) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages remained strong in 1990. Since that time, there has been a lot of language revitalisation activity occurring in some communities.

Evidence suggests a positive relationship between language and improved wellbeing. Learning and speaking language is associated with improved physical health, social and emotional wellbeing, healing from intergenerational trauma, community interconnectedness and cultural continuity and higher bush food consumption.

#### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Attendance and participation of community members and use of language in ceremonies, particularly those involving songs;
- Adequate funding to assist access to language resources, including children's books, combined with a strong family and community focus on storytelling and reading books in language;
- Radio and TV broadcasting in language;
- Bilingual models of education.



Language revitalisation is crucial to both healing and empowering communities.

#### 4. Family, Kinship and Community

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity comes from being connected to your country or island of origin. Identity is about knowing and being part of a community and seeing yourself as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.**

Despite the processes of colonisation, a strong sense of community exists in many places. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are constructed around communities with strong kinship and family ties. Work with Torres Strait Islander people has shown that there are very strong connections with family and kinship even if the person had never been to the Torres Strait. Being part of a community may bring responsibilities and obligations that confirm and reinforce membership. These may be obligations to (extended) family, and involvement in community functions. Kinship has positive effects on maintaining cultural knowledge, and on the overall health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly children.

##### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Restoring, promoting and maintaining health with community-based programs;
- Using family and kinship networks to pass on knowledge about health information;
- Ensuring children are raised in a safe and happy environment where their wellbeing, education and safety are shared with older family members and community;
- Addressing inequity in the social determinants of health such as access to education, employment and housing;
- Maintenance of social and cultural structures which strengthen connection to kinship, family, culture and land;

School sports programs help in a number of ways, including improved attendance, attitudes towards learning, social and mental skills, physical and mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion and cohesion, connection to culture, and reduction of crime.



Strong family ties are integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. *Otis Williams Deadly Photography*



## 5. Cultural Expression and Continuity

**Culture means connection to Country and community, respect for Elders, kinship and family connections, gender and age roles, identity, language, art, ceremony, spirituality and storytelling.**

Due to the holistic nature of wellbeing, culture, empowerment and community are essential for education, work and health. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture is recognised as the overarching social determinant of health. Colonisation, including the ongoing effects of racism, forcible removal of children and intergenerational trauma has had negative effects on health and social and emotional wellbeing for people, families and communities.

We note that resistance and resilience are as much part of a contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity, as are the effects of colonisation.

### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Reclaiming history with the support of therapy;
- Transmitting culture and connection through ceremonies, art and singing;
- Welcome to Country ceremonies;
- Creation stories, smoking ceremonies, artefact making and painting;
- Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as artists, performing stories through hip-hop and rap;
- Playing of musical instruments in both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous settings;
- Maintaining and learning about culture to help children with identity and education;
- Connecting with land and learning from Elders including collecting, eating and sharing bush tucker.

### Creating cultural spaces

Aboriginal art centres have social and cultural benefits as well as positive effects on the economic, physical, psychological and emotional developments at both individual and community levels; while playing football has been found to provide a contemporary space for some Aboriginal men to maintain and develop hunting techniques.



Ceremonies, art, singing and dancing have positive effects on wellbeing. *Shutterstock*

## 6. Self-determination and Leadership

**Self-determination and leadership in decision-making and control over life, an area or program is essential for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**

The loss of control through dispossession and colonisation has resulted in major changes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures and contributes to the breakdown of healthy patterns of individual, family and community life.

### Strategies linked to better wellbeing

- Participation in leadership programs;
- Culture-based governance models;
- Development and support of youth leaders and role models;
- Culturally safe policies and practices such as those that bring cultural considerations into policy development, planning and training.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control.



Community control and self-determination is critical for positive change and successful outcomes in health, education, governance and community programs. *Shutterstock*

# Conclusion

## We have provided an overview of six broad cultural domains.

Focusing on what might help, we have highlighted the complicated links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and wellbeing which operate at the individual and/or community level. While there are differences across Australia, there are some things that may be helpful for many communities.



Artwork: Krystal Hurst 2017 (Worimi)

This artwork shows the importance of culture as central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and wellbeing. The colours red, yellow, black, green, blue and white are drawn from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, and their communities. The blue represents water and its healing powers to nourish the mind, body, spirit and our lands, symbolic of the interrelationship our people have with Country.

Red, white and yellow ochre are used to illustrate the importance of ceremony, dance, stories and spirituality within our diverse cultures, and the strong connection with the land.

The centre represents the sun radiating warmth, positivity and connectedness. The pathways and meeting places speak of the long journey that the Mayi Kuwayu Study and our mob will embark on together to yarn, make decisions and create a meaningful and positive future.



