

Mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum: Factsheet for service providers supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Our research team from the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research (The Australian National University) want to understand any concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have about their mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum. We also want to understand what mental health and wellbeing supports and resources would help. In April 2023, we talked to 84 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across six locations. This is a brief summary of what we heard, and we've included some links to existing support services.

This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome.

What we heard

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people told us they are experiencing extra sources of stress in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum, adding to the load that mob are already carrying. The proposed alteration to the Constitution is about recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means that conversations about the Referendum are tied to identity and can have deep and ongoing impacts.

“I go onto social media and I see people debating ... It's like who I am inside is the debate. It almost feels like entertainment for other people ... It's a direct attack on who I am as a person and how I relate to my world and family which, I think, is the part that people don't really understand.”

Participants told us they are experiencing increased racism. This includes unfair and harmful interactions in day-to-day life, overhearing racist comments, and negative messages in the media.

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Participants also told us that they are facing pressure to educate and inform non-Indigenous people about the Referendum. This can cause a heavy mental load. Repeatedly walking people through history can also be triggering or re-traumatising.

“It’s like they’re constantly putting that Blackfella hat back on us in the sense of having to educate constantly, which then is traumatising ... it takes a toll. Massive toll. Burnout.”

We heard that discussions about the Referendum are causing division and conflict between some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the non-Indigenous community, and within some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. This can have negative impacts on wellbeing for individuals, families, and communities, now and into the future.

These impacts are already occurring in community, and the impacts could be long-lasting. It is important to recognise these additional burdens and take action to reduce the negative impacts.

Potential implications for service use

In the years leading up to the Referendum (2018-2021), the health care services most used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults for non-urgent care were Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHO), Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS), and General Practice (GP) Clinics. We estimate there were around 68,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who would prefer to visit an ACCHO or AMS for health care but were not able to access one.

Those experiencing psychological distress and discrimination generally preferred to visit an ACCHO. Those experiencing psychological distress, anxiety, depression, or discrimination had higher service usage than those without.

Any potential increase in stress or exposure to racism is likely to lead to increases in service use and demand for ACCHOs and GP clinics, as well as for other health and wellbeing supports.

For concerns about Referendum-related stress or racism, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may prefer to seek support from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, who have shared lived experience. Non-Indigenous service providers can still provide valuable support during this time; it is important that all services provide culturally safe and trauma-informed care.

What can I do?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers: Make sure you look after yourself and **practise self-care**. The Healing Foundation has outlined some tips for looking after yourself and keeping your family and community strong: <https://healingfoundation.org.au/community-self-care-resources/>.

Be aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are experiencing added stress, mental load, and racism during this period. Make sure you are not adding to this burden, and take active steps to reduce this burden.

Educate yourself about the Referendum, to reduce the burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide this education. See *this link* for factual information about the Referendum. You can refer non-Indigenous clients to this website to take the load off Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Provide support to your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and colleagues. See WellMob (<https://wellmob.org.au/>) for online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frontline health and wellbeing workers, with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing.

Report racism. If you have concerns about a health practitioner, you can raise this with Ahpra or your local health complaints organisation (<https://www.ahpra.gov.au/Notifications/Concerned-about-a-health-practitioner.aspx>).

If you experience or witness racism, you can **report it** to:

- ***Call it Out***, The First Nations Racism Register;
- The ***Australian Human Rights Commission***;
- The ***eSafety Commissioner*** (for online incidents);
- The ***Australian Communications and Media Authority*** (for incidents in the media);
- The Police, if you think you or someone else may be in danger, or if you think the behaviour was a criminal offense; or
- Your State or Territory-based anti-discrimination commission.
- For more information, see: <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/take-action/responding-to-racism>.

Non-Indigenous service providers: Be an ally for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For more ideas, see the Ending Racism video and Check Up resources at <https://mk-engaged.anu.edu.au/ending-racism/>.