



CELEBRATE CULTURE AND CALL OUT RACISM TO PREVENT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUTH SUICIDE

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Imagine if – just by valuing and celebrating the inspiring achievements and practices of the world’s oldest living cultures and calling out racism whenever it occurs – we could literally save lives.

Sound far-fetched? It’s not.

A growing evidence base in recent years confirms the crucial role of culture, Aboriginal community led programming and the need for initiatives that address racism to prevent suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

That’s why today, to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and National Harmony day, a new campaign that invites every Australian to reject racism and deepen their connections with the long and impressive story of the first Australians.

And what an inspiring opportunity that offers us all.

A chance to connect with cultures older than the Pyramids and the Bible. Cultures that survived the last ice age on the planet with skill and ingenuity and sophisticated knowledge systems. Cultures that draw on expertise in agriculture, astronomy, science, environmental management – and the oldest art traditions of humankind – to connect us all to the landscape and songlines of this country.

And a chance to say that racism and suicide is never okay.

If many more Australians found ways to value and respectfully show their own pride in our country’s first cultures and to speak out against racism whenever it occurs, it would help to combat the record levels of suicide by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people comprise 30 per cent of all youth suicides – despite being 3-4 per cent of that age group. Our kids are five times more likely to commit suicide as their non-Aboriginal peers. For children under the age of 14, they are almost nine times more at risk.

And the numbers are growing. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians now has the 12th highest suicide rate in the world. And yet, suicide was almost non-existent in communities 50 years ago.

For some of our people, the disparity continues for the lived experiences coupled with high incidents of racism, naturally takes its toll. The aftershocks of trauma because of the impact of past policies together with environments that lack the affirmation and celebration of culture deeply effect the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of people.

So what can any of us do to turn that around?

Two ground breaking national reports have given us some of the answers to that question.

In 2014, interviews with senior Elders from all across the country confirmed the crucial role of culture in bringing young people back from the brink.

And then, last November, a major report to the Federal Government found something similar. To prevent Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander suicide, we need to ensure connections to culture and combat the racism that erodes people's social and emotional wellbeing, their optimism and sense of belonging.

We can affirm young people – we can give them hope – by finding our own deeper connection to the impressive story of our country's first cultures. By drawing on our ancestral stories. For the stories of this country – of the oldest living cultures anywhere on the planet – can be a source of strength and an opportunity to explore our collective identity for us all as Australians.

In forging that deeper connection, by finding your own pride in the long story of Australia for all that it is, I know you'll find yourself inspired to share your own pride in these cultures.

And by building stronger recognition of Australia's inspiring and inherit first cultures into our lives, our workplaces, our families, our faith groups and our communities, we can shift the way that young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people at risk of suicide feel about how wider Australia sees and values them.

This choice in behaviour – in moments small and large – helps to tell our young people: you are valued, your culture is valued, and that vast line of ancestors whose blood flows in your veins are valued.

We know that hope, opportunity and connections to culture are hugely important to prevent suicide among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together.

That conclusion was drawn time and again in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, [ATSIPPEP](#).

Led by an array of suicide prevention experts, it drew on the best available evidence to collect the most effective responses and protective factors against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide.

It particularly reaffirmed that the concept of health to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a much broader one than for non-Indigenous communities.

For us, health is connected to the health of our family, kin, community, and our connections to country, culture, spirituality and ancestry. Cultural identity and cultural continuity are important protective factors against suicide along with other critical elements.

So today I ask you to think about how you can find your own deeper connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

And how do you plan to celebrate that towering achievement of cultures that have endured longer than any other still living in human history?

When more of us demonstrate pride in our country's inspiring first cultures, it will help to restore hope to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at risk of suicide and demonstrate a deeper awareness of the full story of this country.

Belinda Duarte is the CEO of Culture is Life and a descendant of the Wotjobaluk people of the Wimmera district in north-western Victoria.

Join the campaign at www.cultureislife.org @cultureislife #cultureislife #whatsmissing

If you need help or support, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14 (24 hours-a-day) or contact your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. If you have questions for the Australian Human Rights Commission contact the National Information line on 1300 656 419 or 02 9284 9888.