



OPINION

How can a child of ten feel such despair that she would end her life?

What must she have seen, heard and felt in such a short life to destroy all hope? What has she lived?

How do her parents, siblings, community live with the pain? How can they possibly endure the all-consuming grief of losing their child?

Now imagine if this were your child, your family, your close-knit community. Wouldn't there be outrage, a wailing from the heart of overwhelming grief?

This is what is happening to First Nations children and young people in our country.

And to parents and communities as our young people are dragged into a vortex of 'suicide by despair'.

Over the past horror week, five more young Aboriginal girls have taken their own lives - prompting a warning from one researcher that First Nations children and young people could soon comprise half of all youth suicides. Suicide prevention researcher Gerry Georgatos, head of the national Indigenous critical response team, said poverty was a major factor in suicidal ideation among young First Nations people - with almost 100 percent of suicides of First Nations people among those living below the poverty line. But he said sexual predation had also been identified as a factor in one-third of all First Nations children who suicided. My heart breaks for these children and their families, whose pain will be all-consuming.

The organisation that I lead, Culture is Life, wants our country to treat this as the national emergency that it is. We want every Australian to think about the devastating toll of Aboriginal youth suicide and to help us to stop it. Urgently.

Instead of expecting youth suicide, we must take a stand of defiance against it. Unfortunately, across Australia, suicide and self-harm are on the increase. This is being driven by a deep sense of hopelessness and despair, by a lack of belonging and connection, and in some cases by the abuse they have experienced.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people today are living with the consequences of acts committed by other human beings in charge of policies and laws through more than two centuries of trauma and dispossession. This history haunts us. It lives within us. It's there in our own families' experiences of stolen land, children and wages, of killings and cruelty and abuses of power. They see this history in their grandparent's eyes, if they are still alive. They discover it in their family stories of exclusion and unfairness.

And when they, too, feel the slap and sting of racism and ignorance when it comes at them as abuse in the schoolyard, or they sense the awkwardness of others in understanding their Aboriginality or someone's eyes won't meet theirs, this history becomes the present. It eats

away at them – at their confidence, their self-belief, and their self-love – every time they are the target of racism and discrimination or at the end of ignorance and apathy and when they are directly affected by abuse.

The task of repair and healing requires a powerful counter-force to that abuse, ignorance and apathy.

We can tackle this together as Australians. We can begin to repair these wounds through daily acts of love and hope in communities, schools, universities, and workplaces. Daily acts that send a message to our young people that there is belonging, strength and pride in First Nations peoples and cultures.

We are asking all Australians to show our young people that there is cause for love and hope. Show them that you share a deep sense of pride in who they are, in our inspiring cultures, and in our strength. Tell them they matter, by showing your pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Share it with #loveandhope #cultureislife.

Because when our children have love and hope in their lives, it combats helplessness and makes them safer from self-harm. It gives them the support and courage required to take the steps they need and want to.

And when the broader community shows our kids that they care, it deepens our connections as Australians. One of the things I love most about my people, is our willingness to invite others to connect with us and to experience our culture. And the only reciprocal ask is to take up the invitation to connect. Once you take up the invitation, you will be an ally in rectifying some of the most haunting international statistics for our country.

We know from the research, and from psychologists who work with young First Nations people, that such small gestures of affirmation can make a powerful difference to their safety. Tanya Hirvonen, an Aboriginal psychologist who appears in Culture is Life's LOVE and HOPE campaign <https://www.cultureislife.org/campaign/love-hope/> says many people don't know the power of "warm interactions and warm gestures" at just the right moment to avert disaster. She hears time and again from young people that "there was someone there for them at a particularly tricky time in their life ... a coach or a teacher or an aunt or a grandmother ... someone has said something pivotal to them at a particular time. Those warm interactions matter."

Culture and connection are powerful protective factors against First Nations youth suicide. That's why the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders across the country in cultural pride, revitalisation and renewal programs is so crucial. People like Yuin Elder Uncle Max Harrison, who is teaching young men the ways of the old people, their lore, their duties, their responsibilities. And, as he does so, he is building their pride, strength and resilience.

So that they walk taller, knowing who they are, that they are cared for and supported and connected to this land. It's a model for us all to feel more connected as Australians.

We cannot fail to act when we are able to save children and young people from the agony and hopelessness and torment that leads to suicide. We can affirm them in who they are, and in so doing, we can save lives.

Authored by Belinda Duarte and published in the Australian Newspaper on Thursday 17 January 2019.

Belinda Duarte, a Wotjobaluk woman, is CEO of Culture is Life. <https://www.cultureislife.org/>

For help or support contact: Lifeline 13 11 14, beyondblue 1300 22 4636, Q Life 1800 184 527 <https://qlife.org.au/> or your local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisation <https://www.naccho.org.au/member-services/naccho-member-services/>