

What Aboriginal survivors of child sexual abuse told researchers they need

October 22 2019, by Carlina Black, Margarita Frederico and Muriel Bamblett



Coming together with Elders and other community members helped survivors feel connected. It also gave them hope. Author provided

It's a year since the [national apology](#) to victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse. While national apologies can acknowledge survivors, sorry is just the beginning. Access to healing is needed.

[Our research shows](#) a program that strengthens culture and connection for Aboriginal survivors can be more meaningful than mainstream counseling. We've shown it's a successful way to deliver cultural [healing](#).

The context is important

There are an [estimated 60,000](#) survivors of institutional child sexual abuse in Australia. Based on the private sessions held as part of the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#), 15% of survivors are Aboriginal. That suggests an estimated 9,000 Aboriginal survivors.

This is likely an under estimation. Again from the Royal Commission, we know it takes survivors [an average 24 years](#) to disclose abuse. Some never do.

Not all Aboriginal survivors will seek counseling for past traumas. Many experience mainstream counseling as inappropriate or insufficient. That's partly because mainstream therapeutic services are not built on Aboriginal knowledge and do not address the unique experiences of multiple layers of traumas, disconnection, loss and grief for Aboriginal peoples.

Not only do Aboriginal survivors experience the trauma of institutional child [sexual abuse](#), if they were part of the [Stolen Generations](#), they also experience the cultural trauma from being forcibly removed from family as children because they were Aboriginal. These children were denied connection to community, country, spirituality, language and culture.

The landmark [Bringing them Home Report](#) shows how children were often physically, emotionally and sexually abused by those supposed to take care of them in state institutions, missions, foster homes and other forms of "care."

The Stolen Generations were part of broader policies of ["protection" and assimilation](#) that began with invasion and colonization. It was characterized by destruction and denigration and included being displaced from land and forced onto [missions](#).

This context and its impacts today, including [ongoing disadvantage and systemic racism](#), needs to be understood in developing healing solutions for Aboriginal survivors.

Here's what happened

The program we evaluated in our study was designed, developed and delivered by the [Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency](#), an Aboriginal community controlled organization. Engaging survivors in the design and development of the program ensured the healing activities were relevant to all survivors.

Survivors attended one or more events including multi-day camps or gatherings, and women-only events. Families could attend select events.

Three of the four facilitators were Aboriginal; the fourth was strongly connected to Aboriginal community and had worked in the community for over 35 years.



Arts and crafts were part of the healing process. Author provided

The program was sometimes divided into men's and women's business, and included:

- ceremonies, including Welcome to Country, smoking ceremonies, song and dance
- cultural practices, including arts and crafts, painting canvases and making possum skin cloaks
- strengthening community, including tracing family history and cultural tours
- self care and well-being activities, including meditation, massage and walks
- sharing knowledge of past policies, laws, history of removal,

impact of removal and losses

- storytelling and yarning, including yarning circles, Elders' yarns, storytelling with cultural custodians.

Yes, sharing helped and gave hope

All survivors and their families (nearly 60 people) said they benefited from taking part. They said it allowed them to reclaim their cultural identity and cultural pride, and build on their cultural knowledge. Their shared histories helped survivors support each other. Survivors were also empowered to continue healing, fueling a sense of hope.

Here's what survivors told us:

- "We no longer feel we have to be ashamed or hide."
- "[I'm] feeling empowered to teach my children about past history to ensure it never happens again."
- "Knowing culture is powerful, it helps you know your strength."
- "Each time I have told my story, [it] heals me and makes me stronger."
- "My mob is telling their story and it makes me feel good."
- "Because I have no extended family I feel connected to this mob in a spiritual sense."
- "It is so much better to heal together. It is so hard to heal in isolation."

We need a different approach

Trauma in Aboriginal communities needs [different therapeutic approaches](#) to mainstream, Western therapeutic ones. A key component to the success of the program was Aboriginal people being in control of the model of healing. Aboriginal people are part of a collective culture.

And it's collective healing and connection to culture that all survivors told us were crucial to their healing.

The level of support provided by the experienced facilitators, who are both culturally and trauma informed, ensured all survivors felt safe. The facilitators' own life experiences, their immersion in culture and capacity to give of themselves was critical to promoting survivors' healing journey.

Survivors also said being on country, having elders engage with the program, the power of ceremony and involving family were all important parts of their cultural healing.

While cultural healing is based on thousands of years of wisdom, there is also increasing evidence of the success of cultural healing programs in [peer reviewed journals](#).

Examples include the [Marumali journey of healing](#) for Stolen Generations delivered in various locations around Australia, including prisons, and [Red Dust](#) healing for trauma more generally, delivered with remote communities in the Northern Territory. Both programs have ongoing evaluation showing [strong evidence](#) they work.

This is in contrast to most programs for Aboriginal communities, which have [little evidence](#) they work.

One off, time-limited, programs cannot provide all the healing survivors need. Healing is a journey. The Royal Commission recommended access to life-long healing, healing for family members of survivors and cultural healing for Aboriginal survivors. This matches what survivors tell us they need.

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