

Supporting Aboriginal people on a pathway to healing: For Health Services Practitioners

The following stories were told in interviews with social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) practitioners for the *Rising Spirits Community Resilience project*. They provide ideas which have worked for them in supporting Aboriginal individuals and families in bereavement.

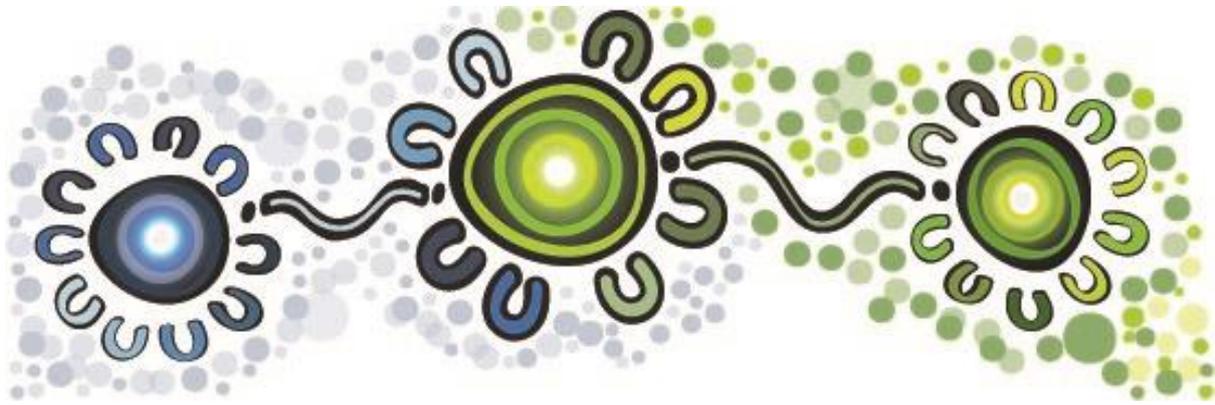
Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS)

Because ACCHS are small, and are closely connected to the local community, the workers are usually aware of who 'isn't travelling well' and is in need of monitoring. A staff member explained what happens in one service:

One of the things that our service has done when there has been a death is to get all the staff together because first of all we have to check how staff are feeling, because it might mean we've got some staff absent and how do we take care of them. But also then it's "what's the best approach to the family. Who on the staff has got the best connection to the family to go there and find out what the needs are?" There's usually lots of family and visitors so sometimes, often what we'd do is say, "Ok we can give you some tea or coffee for your visitors". Because that's like a drain on the family, an unexpected expense that the family's not set up for and it might be that that's all we can do for the first couple of days. Then after that there will be contact about the next steps forward. It's trying to be really sensitive about all of that.

In one remote town, the Drug and Alcohol team performs 'assertive outreach' work daily, on the streets, providing support to any Aboriginal person who is perceived to be in need. They check on medication management, and the wellbeing of clients, making referrals where needed and inviting people for showers and breakfast, where discreet further monitoring can occur.

Ngangkari visit some services regularly and, in addition to providing grief and loss support, they can also provide advice about smoking ceremonies of buildings and perform them as necessary.



Counselling

Counselling is an important service for supporting Aboriginal people in bereavement. Although having a trusted friend or family member can be very therapeutic, professional counselling is needed by some people. One technique of counselling which was highly recommended by practitioners, managers and clients alike is Narrative Therapy:

I reckon narrative is the best counselling technique for grieving for me, when I'm working with Aboriginal people, because we're story-tellers... Telling and retelling the story helps that individual because that story-telling can go everywhere... when you see the body language of that person shows that they have hit a certain spot, when they've finished telling the story, then I'll say, 'Well when I talked to you about what happened that day, you said such and such, can you tell me more about that?' And that may bring out that grieving for what may have become a hidden loss.

For me back when I first began counselling, when people would tell me their stories it would hurt me so much as I would get caught up in feeling how it must be for them. But through doing the narrative therapy counselling it's kind of made me look at: Why is this person still sitting here today telling me their story? What courage, what strength, what knowledge do they have to be able to be here today and tell me this? So I'm building on their strengths and their qualities and what makes them so strong.

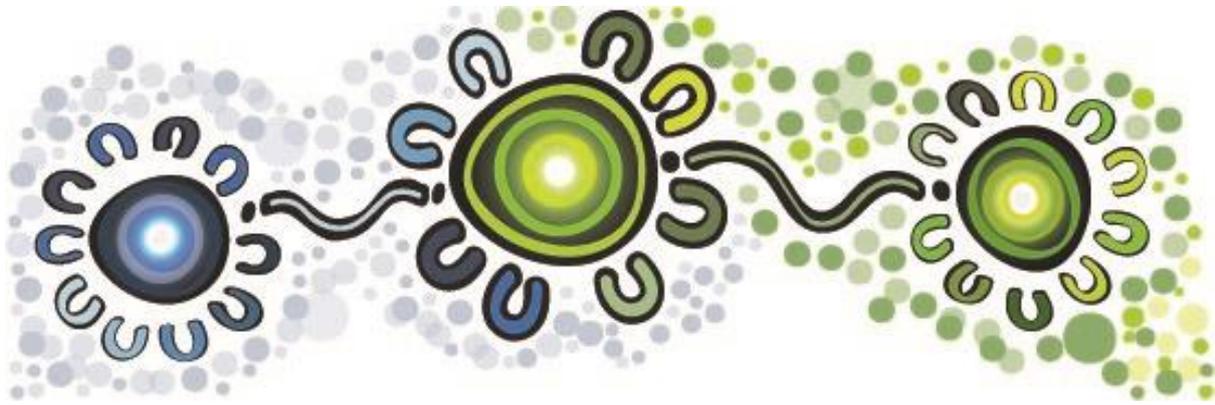
Going out bush

Many services provide transport and supplies to the bereaved to travel out bush whether for Sorry Camp or for more informal gatherings. Workers in various remote communities explained:

It's always good to go on a camp somewhere, to go travelling somewhere, that's the best medicine for grief besides comfort. You get a group of blokes and just get up and go somewhere for a week and have a camp, that's the best thing.

If they wish to attend 'sorry business' on country, a team member will transport them to the desired location and provide them with shelter, food and water and pick them up afterwards.

We should have more people taking them out to the creeks and letting them camp for one night. They talk 'Hey let's talk, I want to talk to you.' And they talk and they say, 'You know I've seen like, she's there at night when I'm laying down and sleeping and when I wake up she's patting my head.' That's what they say. And I say, 'Yeah, she's there in spirit... They only gone on a journey and we're gonna catch up with them soon.'



Sorry Camp

In many remote areas of South Australia, Sorry Camps are held to mourn those who have passed. Many people believe that practising sorry business in a traditional way, aids with healing. Sorry Camp traditions vary from community to community. One Aboriginal practitioner described her experience with such camps:

Family members return to country visiting and they all go over to the camp and shake hands with the bereaved. And they don't speak. The person who lost their loved one is not allowed to speak, and it's all sign language. Another person will interpret. And that's got to be respected. And through traditional way, like with my family I'm talking about, it's such a well-designed process that takes place, and it's something that's not written. It's all oral and played out from one generation to the other, even now. And it's all packed into one, where you can't go and question, and it just plays so well, and it's beautiful to watch because it just happens. And there's no input from services, people do it themselves.

Towns in remote areas such as Ceduna, Coober Pedy and even Port Augusta where many people have moved away from their home communities, Elders believe that town-based people would benefit from relearning the traditional practices of mourning.

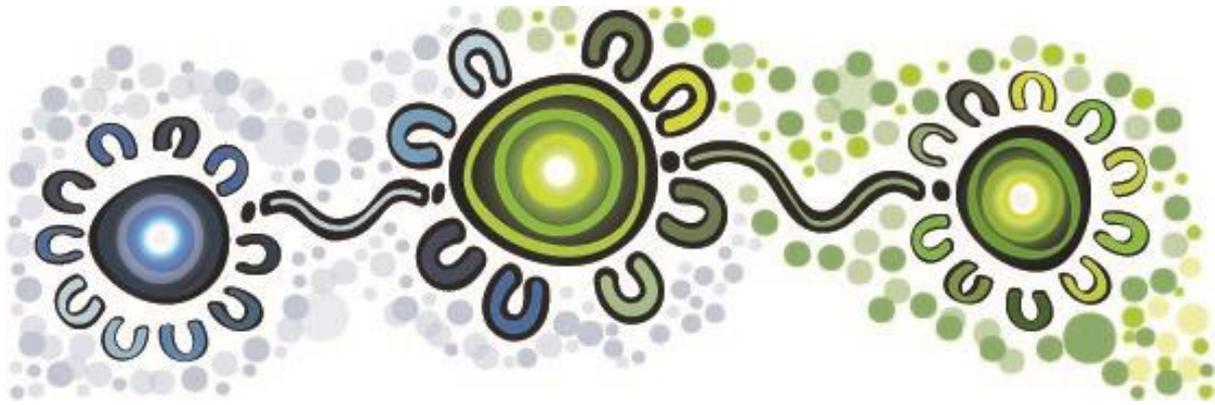
Visiting the grave

Some services facilitate clients' visiting the graves of loved ones. This can be very therapeutic. One SEWB worker explained:

What I usually do too, is take people out to the gravesite so they can grieve. In working with Stolen Generation, there was a lady from interstate who wanted to go visit sister's gravesite. I found the grave, and we went there and we left her there, and she was introducing herself and her two sons to her sister. And there was a photo of sister and beautiful writing on the headstone. So we left her and we went and visited other graves. And when we saw her get up, we thought we'd go closer now until she was ready to join us, and she said thank you for helping her to complete her grieving for her sister.

A family member noticed that a young relative was still grieving for her grandfather, several years after he had died. She describes how she facilitated the young person's healing:

I said to her, 'When you're ready to grieve for him, ring me and I'll take you to his gravesite, and you grieve for him'. And she rang me up that weekend...and she said, 'I want to go up there, clean grandpa's grave...And I dropped her off ... within half an hour she was walking into the community and she said, 'Thanks Aunty, I had a really good cry and I had a good talk to grandpa'.



Palliative care

A counsellor in an ACCHS described how her role encompassed providing palliative care to a client who did not want to die in the hospital:

I was a counsellor, but my role can go beyond being a counsellor... I had a young client who was terminally ill. She was going through her last stages, and because she didn't have family in town, I had to move quickly. She was living at one house in the community. I said to the workers 'Look, I need a shed put up behind the house. I need somebody to pad down a dirt floor, do a windbreak. I need a bin put out there.' I had a palliative care team on board to say, 'This is where she's going to be living, I want you to visit her out there, I've got health services staff coming out, I got the old people's services to bring food in.' Because her mum died, I contacted her mother's sisters at one of the communities, because they were the mothers now. Those mothers came in. I contacted her brother and he made a makeshift little humpy there. I helped them, under CDEP¹, to put up another little humpy so everybody was comfortable, and wood, because it was around winter time, we had a bathtub put there where they can just bathe her. I scrounged everything, even to a barbeque plate, so she can die with pride and in dignity. I said 'Do you need to get bush medicine?' 'Yes'. And we couldn't go out because it was ceremony times ... so we went and got bush medicine up the hill and they sang the bush medicine and they rocked her. They put her in their arms, and she was really comfortable in all that and she died in the arms of her mums and with her brother present.

Working with children sensitively

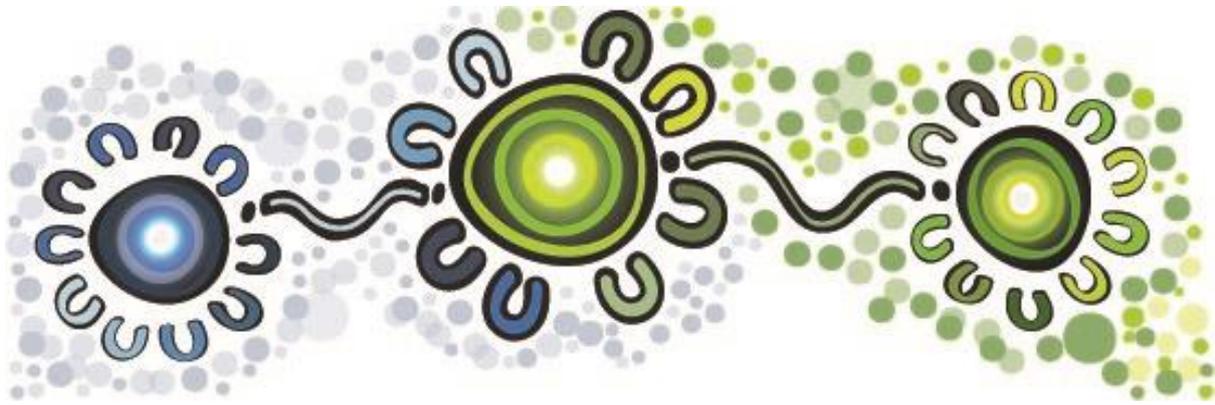
Practitioners explained some of the ways that they work with children:

You know our program works in this family model and a child's wellbeing is dependent on their family's wellbeing, so we can't fix a child without family being stronger.

With one family we ended up writing a story, which the family translated in language, about a girl who meets this pelican who explains death to her and explains where her brother is, which is heaven, which is what the family wanted, and then it talks about how she could keep a relationship with him even though he's not here. Then the family came up with some other stories that they decided to tell her which I think worked really well.

I want to take some kids to Camp ... which is on my traditional lands, because from what I know, healing happens if you go onto traditional lands – That's my understanding through my people. I also would like to give the kids some cultural knowledge, and also feel like they belong – a lot of kids feel like they don't know enough, so they don't have the right to stay they're Aboriginal.

¹ Community Development and Education Program – 'work for the dole'



The Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health Service *Grief and Loss Support Group*

The PLAHS support group is one of the few programs that we found which is aimed specifically at bereavement related grief and loss. It is a monthly gathering of people which aims to support the local community to share in a healing journey by providing a forum for people to talk about how grief has affected them and to support them on their journeys with activities and information. The activities include those mentioned above but also pamper days; visiting and dressing the graves; a ceremonial balloon release; and information sessions about self-care and relaxation, and about the difficult topics of living wills, funeral plans and lateral violence. For more information on this program visit <http://www.plahs.org.au/about-us/> .

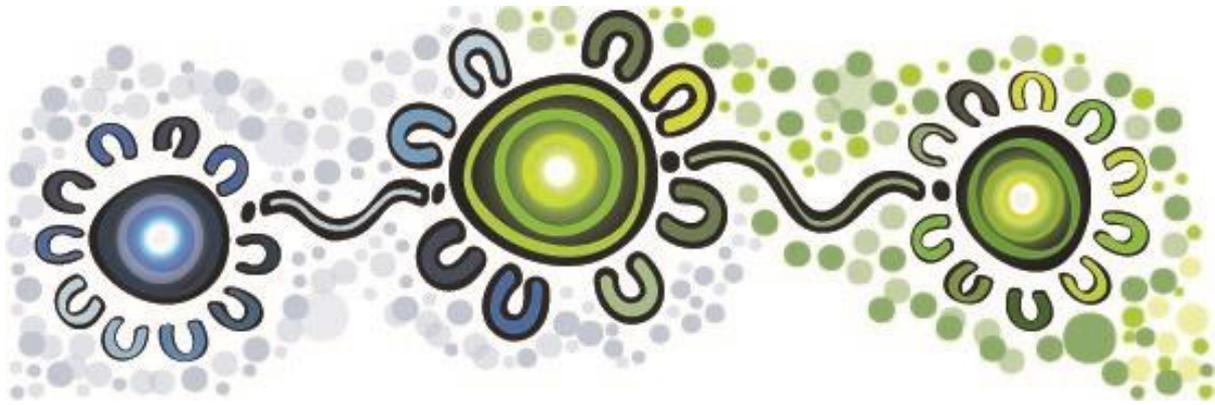
Women's, Men's, Elders' and Youth groups

Most of the ACCHS have regular support groups for Women, Men/Fathers, and Elders, where funding allows. These groups provide the opportunity for yarning, being listened to and sharing of stories. They usually include yarning over a cuppa and snacks, in a safe place, with the option to do a variety of creative activities, and bush trips. The kinds of creative activities include painting, leather work, poetry or song writing and singing,

That's how I got by, I wrote poems. And I just sat down and went on and on and on and wrote poems. And I got by my grief, by writing poems.

And we have a women's art group and women do dot paintings and tell their story and within their own story there's their family and sometimes what's missing in the family and so they're highlighting their losses through that, and while they're talking, they're kind of sharing over a meal together.

We've got a shed there and the men's group come there, play music instruments, write songs and stuff like that and that's when they talk about things. And those songs are about how they stopped the grog or it might be about a trauma and how they overcame that. So they're actually able to take a tune, go home, think about the words and then come back and put that together in a song and that seems to be a very powerful way of dealing with loss.



Staff supports

The high incidence of bereavement in Aboriginal communities affects staff as well as clients. Some services have flexible bereavement leave policies compatible with Aboriginal cultural obligations around attending funerals. One manager explained:

Our service allows staff to go to funerals. We never say no to any funerals and that might take several days absence from work and upset the team a bit but our organisation is very supportive of funerals.

Although they do not have excess finances to be able to provide significant financial support, some ACCHS provide transport to the funeral for some clients, where needed, and may provide petty cash for tea and coffee for the wake. One ACCHS has provided the venue for the wake and assisted in preparing funeral booklets and eulogies, despite the absence of a SEWB program. Staff in most ACCHS have developed their knowledge of where clients can receive local financial support for funerals as a result of the ongoing and regular requests to help clients during this emotional and stressful time.

Some ACCHS refer workers to local trusted counsellors outside their clinic. In many cases, SEWB staff support each other by keeping an eye on one another. They debrief regularly and share counselling experiences so they can learn from one another.

Health Workers need to look after themselves

This short film has been created for Aboriginal workers to promote the importance of looking after yourself so that you may sustain and enjoy your job and support your community to the best of your ability.

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/for-me/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>

The Healing Circles at Pangula Manamurrna

Aboriginal Health Service, in Mt Gambier, provide a safe healing and wellbeing place for people to go to sit and contemplate, or receive counselling, or to listen to Elders tell their stories. <http://pangula.org.au/>