The ‘Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future’ Project

Why is this project important?
Child maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to ongoing impacts on physical, social and emotional wellbeing. These distress symptoms are often called ‘complex post-traumatic stress disorder’ or ‘complex trauma’. Aboriginal people are also affected by grief and loss from current or historical events.

Becoming a parent can be ‘triggering’ for those who have experienced childhood maltreatment. However, it is also a ‘window of opportunity’ for healing and nurturing the parent-child relationship. Currently, there is a lack of evidence about how we can best support Aboriginal parents experiencing complex trauma.

What does this project aim to achieve?
HPNF aims to co-design safe, acceptable and feasible perinatal strategies to support Aboriginal parents experiencing complex trauma. Strategies will be developed under 4 domains:

1. **Awareness** of the impact of trauma on parents and the potential for triggering during the perinatal period
2. **Safe Recognition** of parents who may benefit from assessment and support
3. **Assessment** of areas where parents may be distressed, to understand their experiences of complex trauma
4. **Support** strategies for parents to heal and to help nurture the parent-child relationship

About Us
‘Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future’ is an Aboriginal-led project which aims to co-design awareness, recognition, assessment and support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) parents during the perinatal period (from pregnancy to child age two) who have experienced complex childhood trauma.

The project commenced in 2017 and current funding runs until 2021. We are grateful for funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Lowitja Institute CRC.
What are the values guiding the project?

The Conceptual Framework guiding the project (right) was developed to ensure safe research processes, drawing on Aboriginal meanings of social and emotional wellbeing.

Illustrated in this framework are the 8 core project values and the 4 domains of perinatal care we aim to address (awareness, recognition, assessment, support).

The project will be guided by Indigenous Research Excellence criteria.

Where will the research take place?

Key stakeholders from all Australian jurisdictions will be involved in workshops. However, research activities will take place in three areas: Melbourne, Victoria; Adelaide, South Australia; and Alice Springs, Northern Territory (below). These were selected based on existing relationships as well as interest from key stakeholders.

Who will be involved?

This is a community-based participatory action research study (action research). This means that we will follow the “plan, act, observe, reflect” cycle for each part of the project, and we will work with:

- Aboriginal parents
- Service providers and health professionals
- Community leaders and researchers
- Wider Aboriginal community
What is ‘co-design’ and why is it important?

An important part of our co-design or ‘action research’ is working alongside the community to develop strategies that are meaningful and culturally safe. This is particularly important for the HPNF project because:

- There is limited published evidence about how to best support parents experiencing complex trauma;
- Aboriginal understandings of social and emotional wellbeing and knowledge need to be central in our research and care for families;
- We need to be mindful of the potential risks and harms and avoid unhelpful ‘labelling’ of parents which might undermine their existing resilience, coping skills and ways of parenting.

How will we do this?

We will facilitate 4 stakeholder workshops across 3 study phases (right) in which we plan and reflect on a range of research activities including:

- Evidence reviews
- Community leader and parent discussion groups
- Service provider discussion groups
- Development and evaluation of an assessment tool to identify parents experiencing complex trauma

Overview of the Research Plan
What are the expected outcomes?

- Development of a safety framework for working with parents, service providers, key stakeholders, team members and the wider Aboriginal community.
- Understanding of parents’ experiences of complex trauma and evidence for support strategies that are safe, acceptable and feasible when working with Aboriginal parents during the perinatal period.
- Development and evaluation of an assessment tool to assist service providers to recognise and assess symptoms of complex trauma experienced by Aboriginal parents.
- Sharing of our research with the community in a variety of ways, including community meetings, scientific publications, conference presentations, a study website, a YouTube video, and Research Summaries (such as this).

Suggested citation


For more information


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