

SHARING OUR WAYS OF STAYING STRONG

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce



A GUIDE FOR WORKFORCE IN
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land and seas of Australia. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional connection with their lands and seas. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and emerging. We specifically acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who participated in this research and offer thanks for welcoming us onto their land.

The image on the front cover reflects the unity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and their diversity of knowledge. It was conceptualised by the Aboriginal-led research team and designed by CoLLECT Design.

Illustrations by Zahra Zainal for Digital Storytellers
Designed by CoLLECT Design www.collectdesign.com.au

A resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce to reflect on ways of staying strong.



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ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This resource has been informed by an Aboriginal-led research project which gathered the views and experiences of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and human services workforce.

EXPLORING WORKFORCE EXPERIENCES

Over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in health and human services participated in the Aboriginal-led research project. The research was conducted in regional, remote and metropolitan settings as well as across government, not-for-profit and Aboriginal community controlled organisations. Workforce took the time to yarn about the challenges they experience in their workplaces and the ways they stay strong.

The findings were shared with a large group of experts (leaders, managers, workforce) who gave their informed views on strategies to promote supportive and respectful workplaces.

IS THIS GUIDE FOR YOU? HOW TO USE IT

This guide reflects key learnings about how we overcome challenges and stay strong at work. Throughout the guide you will find stories about some of the challenges we all experience and ideas about ways to stay strong.

You might use this guide individually or within your team to check in with how you are going, and to reflect on what else you can do to maintain wellbeing and balance.

A COMPANION GUIDE

There is also a Guide for Managers and Organisations that is a companion document to this resource. Staying strong is a state of being that requires a collective effort. It is a good idea to share these two resources with your colleagues and managers to find agreed solutions and a path forward.

WHO ARE THE ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WORKFORCE?



We are a collective yet we bring unique lived experiences and cultural knowledge based on our connections to land, lore, language and community.

We respect the diversity of knowledge and experiences of one another and acknowledge that we experience common challenges. We are unified in our shared passion for improving the conditions, health and life circumstances of our mob. We are employed in government, not-for-profit services and Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

We are one of the most invaluable assets in our organisation since we bring our understandings of community and cultural ways. Our social connectedness and knowledge of kinship structures are vital to our work.

We face challenges every day yet we have and always will stay strong.



Despite working within western structures, we use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working when we engage with our communities in service delivery. Our community connections and cultural ways of working help to gain the best outcomes for our mob.

Working for our mob is what motivates us to get up in the morning and is what keeps us coming back to work every day. Our mob is central to who we are and what we do.

WAYS OF STAYING STRONG

Overview of ways for staying strong in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.



1

CULTURAL IDENTITY

We find strength in cultural identity which drives our passion and commitment to working for our mob.

Being strong in culture and 'knowing who you are' makes us confident and proud, and helps us to overcome setbacks during the challenging times.

Cultural identity includes strength in cultural knowledge, language and stories. We own who we are, and we're proud of our cultural identity.

Maintaining and strengthening culture looks different for everyone.



REFLECTION...

Take some time to reflect on your cultural identity, what working for your mob means for you, and what you can do to maintain and strengthen your cultural knowledge and identity.

Cultural wellbeing can be strengthened in a number of ways. See page 10 for some ideas.



We find strength in connection to family, connection to other workforce, and connection to community.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRUSTING AND RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

This is vital for connection and staying strong. It is also vital for working in multidisciplinary teams providing quality services to community. Keep in mind that these relationships need to be built and maintained which takes time and investment.

SEEKING SUPPORT AND CONNECTION FROM COLLEAGUES

In times of stress and triumph, support and connecting with colleagues is an important way to stay strong. You might seek the support of a manager or colleague you feel safe with or a mentor (at work or outside of work). Some organisations have a formal buddy system you might choose to access.

Think about how you share the load with your colleagues when you see them under pressure.

Supporting each other is important. Remember, it is OK for you to seek help from others. Think about when you need to reach out.

COLLEAGUES DUTY OF CARE



BUDDY SYSTEM



SHARE THE





HAVE YARNING CIRCLES WITH AN ABORIGINAL ELDER

CONNECTION WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Connections provide a personal network that can support you through the tough times and celebrate with you during the good times. A strong network of family and friends provides you with a solid foundation to take on the challenges of life and work.

If you are feeling stressed at work, it may be a good time to check in with your family and community. Seek out opportunities to connect, especially on Country.

When you are working away from your own Country, seek one of the local mob to help you connect with Elders and the community.



REFLECTION...

Take some time to reflect on your relationships with family, colleagues and the community.

- Are there any events happening soon that you can go along to?
- Anyone you can phone up for a yarn?
- Which Elders or respected people can you reach out to in the community?

To stay strong, we need balance across work, family and cultural responsibilities.

Balance can be challenging when there are community and family pressures and when the organisational culture doesn't align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working.

WE BENEFIT FROM:

- Setting clear boundaries between work and home, including technological boundaries eg: turn off the work phone.
- Managing expectations from work, family and community by being clear and transparent about what you can and can't do.
- Being in culturally safe environments where we share knowledge and experiences with non-Indigenous colleagues only when we feel comfortable to do so (not under obligation).

DON'T FEEL PRESSURE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT ABORIGINAL ISSUES.



YOU ARE

LIVING YOUR LIFE!
PEOPLE NEED TO EDUCATE THEMSELVES

HOME IS HOME

NO WORK STUFF



HAVE THESE CONVERSATIONS AT HOME TOO

YOU NEED TO PROTECT YOURSELF



ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



REFLECTION...

Take some time to reflect on your balance – do you have a good balance between your family, community, cultural and work responsibilities?

What can you do to achieve better balance?

4

SELF-CARE

A strong workforce checks in regularly and practices self-care.

CHECKING IN

Taking the time to reflect, check in and assess how you are going helps to avoid burnout. You can assess whether your social and emotional wellbeing is on track, if your plate is too full, or if your workload is impacting your family and cultural obligations.

GIVE OURSELVES
PERMISSION FOR
SELF-CARE



Some people look for signs of burnout such as disturbed sleep, smoking or drinking too much, feeling disengaged, lacking empathy, or not being able to switch off.

If you are feeling out of balance or burnt out, you could:

- Request a change in work role.
- Seek support from colleagues to share the load, or;
- Change your work environment or organisation if it doesn't feel like the right place for you.



IS IT THE
RIGHT PLACE ?

TAKING TIME
for SELF-CARE
BUILDS
WORKFORCE
RESILIENCE



PRACTICING SELF-CARE

Caring for yourself is caring for your community because you need to be strong in order to look after your mob.

Self-care looks different for everyone. The table on the next page describes a range of actions that workforce use to promote their cultural, social, emotional, physical and collective wellbeing.

REFLECTION...

Take some time to:

- Check in with yourself:
 - Are you feeling strong?
 - Do you have signs of burnout?
- Practice self-care in relation to you:
 - Cultural wellbeing
 - Social wellbeing
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Physical wellbeing
 - Collective wellbeing
- What steps can you take today, tomorrow, next week and in the next month to practice self-care, find balance, and invest in your wellbeing?



GUIDELINES FOR SELF-CARE

Here are some of the ways to take care of your holistic wellbeing:

CULTURAL WELLBEING

Maintain your spiritual wellbeing through cultural practices, meditation or religious practices.

Connect with family, community and Elders.



Seek cultural mentors.

Spend time on Country (eg: fishing, hunting, cultural practices).



Reflect on your cultural and community obligations and how this relates to your job description.

Promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working in workplace practices.

SOCIAL WELLBEING

Attend networking events.



Seek to connect with staff working in different departments across your organisation.



Participate in virtual support networks when face-to-face isn't possible.



Engage with external organisations outside of work, such as, Elders groups and language groups.



PHYSICAL WELLBEING

Improve your physical wellbeing, by joining the gym, walking groups or walking the dog.

Ensure your physical safety by adhering to workplace safety policies, like undertaking home visits in teams.



EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Reflect on your emotional load and community expectations. Seek support from your manager or organisation as necessary to help manage your workload.



Take time out for creative endeavours like painting, listening to music or playing a musical instrument.

Seek support from traditional healers, counsellors or your employee assistance program.



Take time off from work to recharge such as being on Country.

COLLECTIVE WELLBEING

Have a yarn and a laugh and debrief with your friends, family and colleagues.

Check in with colleagues and share the load when someone's workload is too great.



Work with your team to determine an agreed strategy about sharing concerns and identifying solutions such as having hard conversations in a respectful way.

Know and understand what bullying is and actively participate in respectful relationships at work.



Taking control helps us to stay strong. Taking control means ‘our choice, our way’ and ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, doing and knowing are incorporated into organisational practices.

Taking control includes backing yourself across a range of actions:

KNOWING YOUR JOB ROLE, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Taking control includes being clear about your job role and your employer’s expectations (eg: scope of practice), and also your rights and responsibilities (eg: enterprise agreement or workplace policies). Consider joining a Union to become better informed.

You can set up clear professional and community boundaries when you know your job description and what lies outside of it (note: this helps achieve the other staying strong elements of balance and self-care).



LOOK AT YOUR
ENTERPRISE
AGREEMENT

CO-DESIGN ROLE WITH LINE MANAGER



SEEKING TO CO-DESIGN YOUR ROLE INCLUDING CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS

If your role isn’t clear, you can seek to co-design your job description with your manager. Once this is agreed upon, everyone can be clear about the expectations of your role.

PARTICIPATING IN ADVOCACY EFFORTS FOR COMMUNITY AND WORKFORCE

Workforce involved in advocacy activities promote the strengths of culture and community and strive to improve policies and programs for our mob. Some advocacy work also relates to improving conditions for us as workforce.



IT'S ABOUT BEING
ACCOUNTABLE
TO OUR COMMUNITY



HAVING THE CONFIDENCE
TO SPEAK UP

Having the confidence to speak up for yourself, your team, or your community is a strength. This confidence often develops over time and as a result of experience. Speaking up is complemented by the ability to listen and hear the views of others.

Sometimes you may feel like you can't speak up, and it may not be safe to do so. Reflect on why, when, how and to who you want to speak up. It is important to get these right. Be clear about what you want to achieve.

BEING TRANSPARENT
AND ACCOUNTABLE

A strong work ethic includes being transparent and accountable, two factors that help keep us strong. Community expectations can be managed by being transparent with clients and their families about what you can and can't do.

Clear and honest communication helps to manage expectations of what can be achieved and maintains both transparency and accountability to community and the workplace. It also allows you to maintain balance between work and community expectations.

REFLECTION...

Take some time to reflect on the ways you take control and why this is important for you in your work.



We can stay strong by seeking opportunities to grow and develop in both cultural knowledge and professional capacities.

CULTURAL MENTORS

Cultural knowledge can be strengthened by linking with a cultural mentor to walk with you, share yarns, and build community connections.

Using cultural ways of working strengthens how you approach work and provide services to community. Elders can support you by sharing their cultural knowledge and guidance. You could use technology such as Skype to seek guidance from Elders or mentors when working away from Country.

PROFESSIONAL MENTORS

Linking with a professional mentor in the workplace can assist with identifying your training and development needs, with career planning, and with setting short, medium and long-term goals.

You can seek out opportunities to shadow managers and leaders. This can support succession planning within your organisation.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Seeking support for professional development, such as study leave, can help you on the journey to strengthening your capacity.



REFLECTION...

Take some time to reflect on:

- Your short, medium and long-term goals.
- What professional training and development you need to reach your goals.
- How your professional development goals align with your current role.
- What cultural and professional mentors you need to help you on your journey.

7

CELEBRATING THE WINS

When working with clients who have complex needs, celebrating the small wins encourages us to keep going.

HAVING A POSITIVE MINDSET

Celebrating your wins creates a positive mindset. Reflect on your successes at work and how this contributes to building a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It's important to celebrate your personal successes too. Acknowledge what you have done well and be proud of it.

REFLECTION...

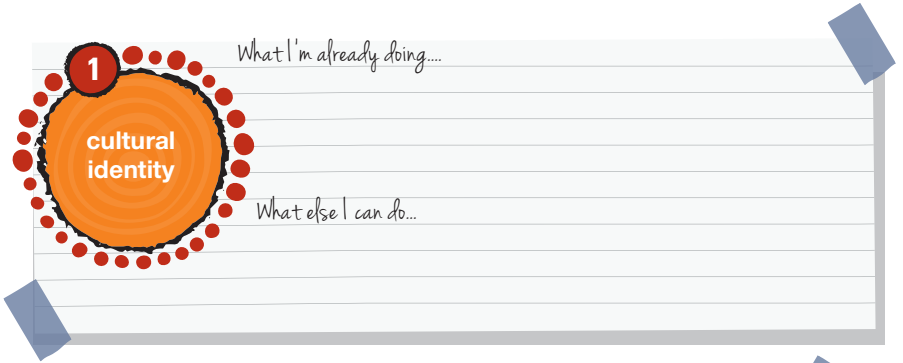
Take some time to reflect on your achievements at work, with clients, and in your personal life. How can you celebrate these with your team, family or community?



Consider what you do to stay strong and what else you can do...

TIME TO REFLECT

WAYS OF STAYING STRONG IN THE WORKPLACE



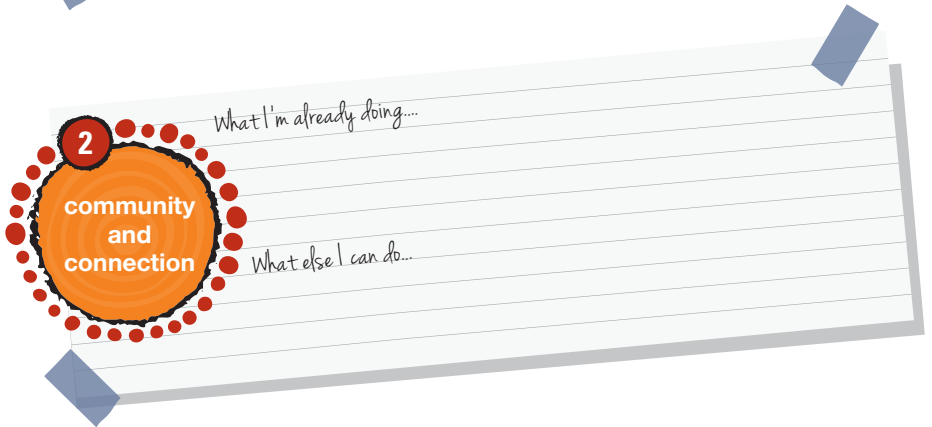
1

cultural identity

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

This reflection card is titled '1 cultural identity'. It features a central orange circle with a red dotted border containing the number '1' and the text 'cultural identity'. To the right, there are two sections of lined paper for writing, each starting with the prompt 'What I'm already doing...' and 'What else I can do...' respectively. The card is held in place by blue corner tabs.



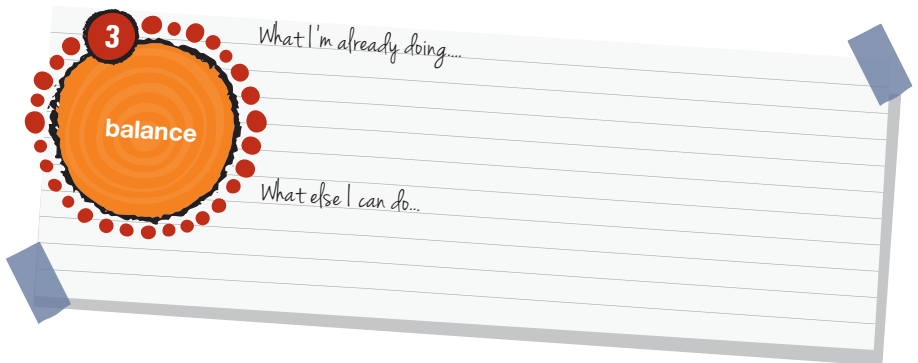
2

community and connection

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

This reflection card is titled '2 community and connection'. It features a central orange circle with a red dotted border containing the number '2' and the text 'community and connection'. To the right, there are two sections of lined paper for writing, each starting with the prompt 'What I'm already doing...' and 'What else I can do...' respectively. The card is held in place by blue corner tabs.



3

balance

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

This reflection card is titled '3 balance'. It features a central orange circle with a red dotted border containing the number '3' and the text 'balance'. To the right, there are two sections of lined paper for writing, each starting with the prompt 'What I'm already doing...' and 'What else I can do...' respectively. The card is held in place by blue corner tabs.

4

self-care

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

5

taking control

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

6

growth opportunities

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...

7

celebrating the wins

What I'm already doing...

What else I can do...



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