

RESEARCH SUMMARY



Community perspectives of complex trauma assessment for Aboriginal parents

About Us

'Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future' is an Aboriginal-led community-based participatory action research project which aims to co-design perinatal (from pregnancy to two years after birth) awareness, recognition, assessment and support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) parents who have experienced complex childhood trauma.

The project commenced in 2017 with funding from the Lowitja Institute CRC and current National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funding runs until 2021.

Background- why is this research important?

Complex trauma can occur following repeated hurtful experiences (e.g. childhood maltreatment). Trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) people also stems from colonial policies, such as forced removal of children from families (stolen generations), violence and discrimination.

Complex trauma can cause long-lasting physical, social and emotional health problems. Parents may experience distressing trauma responses during pregnancy, birth and early parenting. This can make it harder for parents to care for or bond with their children, which can lead to **intergenerational trauma**.

The perinatal period (birth to child aged two) can offer **opportunities for healing** for parents who have experienced complex trauma.

What is the aim of this research?

We aim to understand perspectives of key stakeholders working with Aboriginal parents on how to assess complex trauma. We want to find out:

1. What are the key **domains** or main areas that should be included in an **assessment** of complex trauma in the perinatal period?
2. What are the key **issues** to ensure **safe recognition** of parents who are experiencing complex trauma, and could benefit from support in the perinatal period? We wanted to find out why, by whom, where and how should complex trauma be discussed with Aboriginal parents?



Nunukuwarrin Yunti of South Australia Inc.



How did we do this?

This second key stakeholder co-design workshop was held in Alice Springs, Northern Territory in September 2018.

Throughout the workshop, we asked everyone to rate how important **12 domains** (or main areas) of distress were, that relate to complex trauma.

We also asked **why, by whom, where and how** experiences of complex trauma should be explored or discussed with parents. This style of asking questions is called a Delphi-style method.



Who was involved?

57 key stakeholders associated with more than **25 institutions** across Australia shared their knowledge at the co-design workshop. The **majority were Aboriginal** (35 attendees) and all had lots of experience working with Aboriginal families.

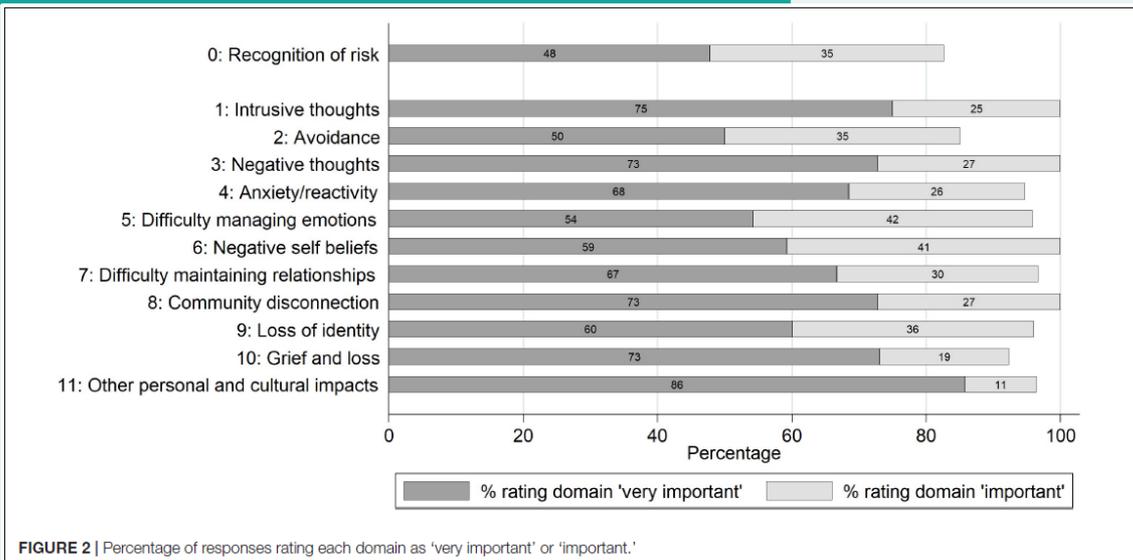
Attendees had wisdom from diverse areas. They were community members with lived experience of trauma; people in community organisations; perinatal, family or mental health professionals; senior managers of community and government organisations and researchers.

What did we find?

The majority of attendees thought that the assessment of **domains of distress** (or the main areas) related to complex trauma for Aboriginal parents was important.

- **All** attendees thought that *intrusive thoughts, negative thoughts or self-beliefs, and community disconnection* were 'important' or 'very important' to ask about.
- **Most** (at least four in five) attendees thought that *loss of identity, personal and cultural impacts, recognition, difficulty with relationships or feelings, anxiety, avoidance, and grief and loss*, were 'important' or 'very important' to ask about.

However, there were worries about **where, by whom** and **how** assessment of distress and trauma should occur. Attendees believed discussions with parents about complex trauma should only be considered when there is *safety, trusting relationships, respect, compassion, adequate care and ability to respond*.



What themes were discussed? What did we find about safe recognition of complex trauma?

We found 6 broad themes to ensure *safe recognition* of complex trauma:

- 1. Emotional, physical and cultural safety**- for example, having conversations in safe, confidential, and comfortable places; giving parents choices; showing kindness; and understanding connections to family, community and culture.
- 2. Establishing relationships and trust**- taking time to build trust and relationships, and/or involving people who already have a trusting relationship with the family.
- 3. Being able to respond appropriately and access support**- being able to speak with someone who has time to listen and can 'hold the space', skills and training in

- 4. Using less direct cultural communication methods** – communicating gently and indirectly, which can include noticing body language, yarning, Dadirri, storytelling, genograms (family tree) and 'educaring' (helping parents to feel safe and decide who they trust when accessing support).
- 5. Using strengths-based approaches and offering choices to empower parents** - explaining that complex trauma responses are natural, and valuing parents' hopes and dreams for their family.
- 6. Showing respect, caring and compassion**- important for building safety, relationships and trust.



Clay baby in a Coolamon created by a workshop participant

What happens now?

There are many ways this research could influence policy (*principles* that guide how organisations work) or practice (*how* organisations provide care). We need to think about:

Policy: how do we create spaces that allow safe and useful discussions about complex trauma in perinatal care? Potential strategies include models of care that:

- build **relationships and trust**;
- grow service providers' **understanding of and support** so they can respond to complex trauma; and
- **reduce risk of harm** from disrupting families unnecessarily.

Practice: how do we ensure safety before we **assess** parents who may be experiencing complex trauma?

Organisations need to think about how to:

- know when there is **trust** between workers and families;
- **build choices** into perinatal care to allow parents to choose care and relationships that feel safe for them;
- be **able to respond in ways that support parents to feel safe** when families talk about complex trauma and provide or connect families with appropriate support services.



Tree of life created at workshop. Deep roots, strong trunk, branches represent hopes, goals, dreams for the future

Suggested research summary citation:

Wells, O., Whetham, H., Gee, G., Gartland, D., Mensah, F., Mares, S., Clark, Y., Chamberlain, C., & the Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future group (2020). Research Summary 5: Community perspectives of complex trauma assessment for Aboriginal parents.

For more information:

Chamberlain, C., Gee, G., Gartland, D., Mensah, F., Mares, S., Clark, Y., Ralph, N., Atkinson, C., Hirvonen, T., McLachlan, H., Edwards, T., Herrman, H., Brown, S., Nicholson, J., & the Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future group (2020). Community perspectives of complex trauma assessment for Aboriginal parents: 'It's important but how discussions are held is critical'. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2014. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02014

Link to full article: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7522325/>

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