

Working with the Stolen Generations: understanding trauma

Providing effective GP services to Stolen Generations survivors

This fact sheet provides information for GPs to enhance services for Stolen Generations survivors. There is enormous diversity among Stolen Generations survivors, and this fact sheet should be viewed as a starting point only.

Being trauma-aware and informed

Stolen Generations survivors endured trauma and grief as a result of their forcible removal from family, community and culture. Survivors were often subjected to harsh and degrading treatment including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, exploitation and racism. Many survivors were also denied education, healthcare and appropriate nutrition.

When interacting with survivors and their families, it's helpful to recognise the trauma many people carry.

Common triggers for Stolen Generations survivors include reminders of childhood trauma, for example:

- Being touched, particularly without permission or during intimate examinations and procedures. Seek permission to touch and explain what you are doing at all times
- Clinical settings resembling a dormitory or institution, including certain smells, room or office colour schemes, uniforms and face masks
- Any situation that may cause anxiety or fear, including dealing with large bureaucracies like the health system
- An authoritative tone of voice, body language, facial expression and/or gestures



Health

- In 2018–19, 61% of Stolen Generations survivors aged 50 and over lived with a disability or restrictive long term condition¹
- In 2018–19, Stolen Generations survivors were 1.4 times as likely to report poor mental health (40%) as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people of the same age who were not removed²

Things to avoid

Making assumptions. For example about people's needs, their level of literacy including health literacy, their ability to understand, where they are at in their healing, their connection to their culture/Indigenous status, who the decision maker might be for them, and who they would like their information shared with

Using medical jargon or acronyms

Purposefully talking slowly or right in a person's face based on assumptions about their ability to understand, education level or language use

Shining torches in people's eyes/faces

Making negative statements that dismiss people's trauma and grief e.g. 'move on'

How you can help

Survivor-centred, culturally safe practice

- Let people know that their privacy will be protected; this is part of building trust. This can be a continuous process as part of maintaining relationships built on trust
- Talk to survivors about their individual needs which will vary significantly from person to person
- Explain what's involved in an assessment or treatment beforehand, during and afterwards
- Ask for permission before doing anything that involves touch and consider alternative arrangements if someone is uncomfortable. Include Stolen Generations survivors and their chosen representatives in discussions about potential alternative arrangements
- Check if survivors know their rights, if not support them to do so
- Be guided by the patient on whether they want to talk about their past, and how much they want to reveal
- If a person discloses they are a survivor or descendant at any point in the care relationship, ask them whether they would like that recorded in their file. Are there things that are important for the other staff in the service to know?
- When asking Stolen Generations survivors about family history, consider using a 'sometimes' phrase to let people know it's ok if they don't have this information. For example: 'Sometimes people don't know about their family's history of illnesses so can't tell us about this. That's okay. We ask because if you do know we can check you for illnesses that might run in a family'

Language

- Try to make Stolen Generations patients feel as comfortable as possible, consider your tone, communication style and mannerisms
- Be mindful of the language you use and be prepared to show people what you have written about them and make changes/additions at their request. Inadequate, inappropriate and false records were kept about many Stolen Generations survivors and their families in the past
- Use plain English and give clear, tailored explanations
- Reframe directions as suggestions wherever possible, such as 'If you're happy to take a seat we can work out what's going on'

Organisational

Policies

- Where possible, allow additional time for consultations with Stolen Generations survivors
- Ensure facilities and services are culturally responsive and welcoming for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Implement policies and procedures to prevent racism and discrimination and promote cultural safety and a trauma informed approach

Procedures

- Consider adding a tick box to new patient forms asking if the person is a Stolen Generations survivor. Include a tick box option of "prefer not to say". This provides an easy way for survivors to identify themselves if they would like to without engaging in a potentially triggering conversation
- Consider whether someone may need support during an appointment, including to complete paperwork. Ensure your practice procedures allow for Stolen Generations organisations and other advocates to take on this role if preferred by the survivor
- Build partnerships with trusted third parties such as local Stolen Generations/Link-Up organisations and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellors to better support Stolen Generations patients

Staff capability

- Ensure all staff receive ongoing education about intergenerational trauma, triggers and impacts
- Provide opportunities and actively encourage all staff to undertake ongoing cultural safety training specific to the local area
- Ensure trauma, grief and loss are not misdiagnosed as mental health issues by involving trauma informed professionals as required
- If possible, employ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff with an understanding of the trauma and potential trauma triggers affecting Stolen Generations survivors

Further information: To learn more about providing effective GP services to Stolen Generations patients view the full version of this fact sheet here

<https://healingfoundation.org.au/resources/working-with-stolen-generations/>

