

Mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum: Factsheet for mob

Our research team from the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research (The Australian National University) want to understand any concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have about their mental health and wellbeing in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum. We also want to understand what mental health and wellbeing supports and resources would help. In April 2023, we talked to 84 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across six locations. This is a brief summary of what we heard, and we've included some links to existing support services.

This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome.

This factsheet discusses racism, stress, and mental health and wellbeing. This may cause sadness or distress. If you need to talk to someone, call 13YARN on 13 92 76 (24 hours/7 days) to talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support worker, or see your local ACCHO, AMS, GP, or social and emotional wellbeing service for mental health support. See [this page](#) for more information and links.

What we heard

Mob told us they are experiencing extra sources of stress in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament Referendum, adding to the load that mob are already carrying. The proposed alteration to the Constitution is about recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means that conversations about the Referendum are tied to identity and can have deep and ongoing impacts. While mob are strong and resilient peoples, it is important to recognise these additional burdens can have impacts on wellbeing. It is understandable if you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious.

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“I go onto social media and I see people debating ... It’s like who I am inside is the debate. It almost feels like entertainment for other people ... It’s a direct attack on who I am as a person and how I relate to my world and family which, I think, is the part that people don’t really understand.”

Mob told us they are experiencing increased racism. This includes unfair and harmful interactions in day-to-day life, overhearing racist comments, and negative messages in the media.

Mob also told us that they are facing pressure to educate and inform non-Indigenous people about the Referendum. This can cause a heavy mental load. Repeatedly walking people through history can also be triggering or re-traumatising.

“It’s like they’re constantly putting that Blackfella hat back on us in the sense of having to educate constantly, which then is traumatising ... it takes a toll. Massive toll. Burnout.”

We heard that discussions about the Referendum are causing division and conflict between some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the non-Indigenous community, and within some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. This can have negative impacts on wellbeing for individuals, families, and communities, now and into the future.

“Anxiety makes people lash out; frustration makes people lash out. You might be lashing out on the wrong person. This misdirection of the anger and frustration of what’s going on. For relationships, the home environments are really precarious, that extra level, it could just be that straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

These impacts are already occurring in community, and the impacts could be long-lasting. While it is the responsibility of non-Indigenous people and governments to address the root causes of these burdens, there are things we can do to help keep ourselves and each other safe and well.

What is the government doing to support mob during the Referendum?

The government has allocated funding in the federal budget to boost mental health supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the lead up to, during, and following the Referendum. The government has invested additional funding to develop an education campaign explaining what the Referendum is about and the process of voting.

What can non-Indigenous people do?

It is important that non-Indigenous people understand the impacts of the Referendum on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and educate themselves about the Referendum, to reduce the burden on mob to provide this education. We have created *another factsheet* outlining some ways non-Indigenous people can be allies during this time. You can also refer non-Indigenous people to the *Ending Racism Check Up*.

What can I do?

If you are feeling unsure about what the Voice to Parliament Referendum is or what it means for your family and community, see [this link](#) for **factual information** about the Referendum. You can also refer non-Indigenous people to this website if they ask you for your opinion or for information about the Referendum. This can reduce the burden of educating non-Indigenous people, and help you avoid getting involved in difficult conversations around the Referendum.

Make sure you look after yourself and **practise self-care**. The Healing Foundation has outlined some tips for looking after yourself and keeping your family and community strong: <https://healingfoundation.org.au/community-self-care-resources/>.

If you or others in your community **need support**, see [this link](#) for a list of mental health, counselling, social and emotional wellbeing, relationships, and other holistic support services. Staying **connected to culture, community, family, and Country** is important for wellbeing; for ways to engage, you can search for cultural organisations, Aboriginal Land Councils, or Aboriginal Corporations in your local area.

Mob want to be there to support each other. Getting support from people with lived experience is valuable to ensure the care you receive is culturally safe. See the Stronger Together webpage by R U OK (<https://www.ruok.org.au/strongertogether>) for stories and practical tips to **empower you to support others**.

If you experience or witness racism, you can **report it** to:

- [Call it Out](#), The First Nations Racism Register;
- The [Australian Human Rights Commission](#);
- The [eSafety Commissioner](#) (for online incidents);
- The [Australian Communications and Media Authority](#) (for incidents in the media);
- The Police, if you think you or someone else may be in danger, or if you think the behaviour was a criminal offense;
- Your State or Territory-based anti-discrimination commission; or,
- The [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency \(Ahpra\)](#) or your local health complaints organisation if you have concerns about a health practitioner.
- For more information, see: <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/take-action/responding-to-racism>.

Look after your safety online. The eSafety Commissioner provides resources about staying safe online: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/first-nations>.