

Working with the Stolen Generations: understanding trauma

Providing effective GP services to Stolen Generations survivors

This fact sheet provides information for GPs to improve 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.

Trauma

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

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
- clinical settings resembling a dormitory or institution
- situations that bring back feelings of the lack of control they experienced when they were taken from their families, including dealing with large bureaucracies like the health system
- a tone of voice, such as a person projecting authority
- a look on someone's face or a gesture.

Health

- 67% live with a disability or restrictive long term condition
- 39% report poor mental health



How you can help

- Try to make Stolen Generations patients feel as comfortable as possible.
- Ensure all staff receive basic education about trauma and its impacts.
- Talk to survivors about their individual needs which may vary significantly from person to person.
- Ask for permission before doing anything that involves touch and consider alternative arrangements if someone is uncomfortable.
- Explain what's involved in an assessment or treatment beforehand, during and afterwards.
- Be guided by the patient on whether they want to talk about their past, and how much they want to reveal.
- If people do share their stories, consider how this can be included in their file with their permission (for example practice consent forms that allow for it to be shared with other staff). Being asked to retell their story can be distressing for Stolen Generations survivors.
- Consider adding a tick box to new patient forms asking if the person is a Stolen Generations survivor. This provides an easy way for survivors to identify themselves without engaging in a potentially triggering conversation.
- 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 particular illnesses that might run in a family.'
- 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. For example consider demonstrating a medication dose or describing it using the number of teaspoons rather than providing written information.
- Frame directions as suggestions wherever possible, such as 'If you're happy to take a seat we can work out what's going on'.
- Where possible, allow additional time for consultations with Stolen Generations survivors.
- 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.
- Let people know that their privacy will be protected; this is part of building trust.
- Ensure people know their rights, encourage them to speak up if these are not being respected, and support them to do so. For example, who to go to and what the process is if they need to make a complaint.
- 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.
- Ensure facilities and services are culturally friendly and welcoming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Implement policies and procedures to prevent racism and discrimination, and promote cultural awareness/safety (where not already in place).
- Encourage all staff to undertake cultural awareness/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 Torres Strait Islander staff with an understanding of the trauma affecting Stolen Generations survivors.

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 Aboriginality, who the decision maker might be for them, and who they would like their information shared with.
- Using medical jargon or acronyms.
- Shining torches in people's eyes/faces.
- Making statements that dismiss people's trauma and grief e.g. 'move on'.

Further information

To learn more about providing effective GP services to Stolen Generations patients without retriggering trauma, view the full version of this fact sheet here <https://healingfoundation.org.au/working-stolen-generations/>