

# Hope in action: largest First Nations suicide-prevention conference



**Vanessa Edwidge**

A few weeks ago in Adelaide, more than 500 people gathered for what we believe may have been the largest First Nations suicide-prevention conference ever held in Australia. The message was powerful and clear: the answer to the suicide crisis in our communities lies in community-led, culturally-grounded solutions. What I saw was something extraordinary.

Everyone was alive with hope and driven to create a better future for our Mob.

Not in an abstract or distant sense, but something you could feel in the room – and just as strongly, in the spaces in between. This was no ordinary conference.

Across two days at the National Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Conference, we heard from Elders, community leaders, clinicians, researchers, policymakers and, critically, young people. By bringing together those working on the ground with those shaping systems, the conference created a clear picture of what works: approaches grounded in social and emotional wellbeing, justice, youth support and community-designed models of care.

Mohawk psychologist Dr Gayle Morse, visiting from the US, delivered a compelling keynote address on how Indigenous-knowledge systems can transform mainstream psychology and create pathways to recovery.

This was followed by a panel of clinicians and researchers including Shannon McNeair, Jody Kamminga, Belle Selkirk and Stacey McMullen who discussed the urgent need to decolonise neuropsychology.

Palawa psychologist Emily Darnett from the Black Dog Institute spoke to the need to reimagine the content of higher-education psychology curricula to better serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, by embedding our knowledges.

Melbourne University's associate professor Graham Gee underscored the critical importance of addressing healing from child sexual abuse as part of suicide prevention, alongside building alternative, culturally-grounded pathways to support that healing.

And that's just to name a few examples.



AIPA chief executive Vanessa Edwidge and board at the conference. *Picture: Emily Watson.*

What really made this gathering different wasn't just who was there – it was how it felt.

There was weaving happening alongside conversations, led by First Nations Boandik artists Sonya, Suzy and Sarah Smith. They shared traditional techniques using contemporary materials. This was a delight to see, because I use weaving in my own practice. Weaving is patterned, rhythmic and repetitive. It restores a sense of safety to your body and assists with emotional regulation.

There were yarning circles where people sat together, not as professionals and clients, but as community. There were Ngangkari, traditional healers from the Western Desert, present and available to conference goers – custodians of ancient healing knowledge carried across generations.

Practitioners connecting. Stories being shared. People comparing what's working in their communities, learning from each other, supporting each other in work that can be both deeply challenging and profoundly important.



AIPA board member Kelleigh Ryan (left) with Boandik artist Suzy Smith (right) in the weaving room. *Picture: Ginger Gorman.*

That exchange – on the sidelines, between sessions, over a cup of tea or coffee – was just as important as anything on the formal program.

Because this work is not done in isolation. Work is done with us all working together for and with our people. The message of the conference was clear: community-led solutions work.

Across the program, we saw the power of culture, connection and self-determination in action – not as add-ons, but as the

foundation of healing. And crucially, we are learning from each other – building a shared understanding of what works, and how to strengthen it. Because this is a story about strength.

The mental-health challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the nation are real, and they are ongoing. They are not isolated or individual issues. They are the result of our colonial history.

We continue to see the impacts of intergenerational

trauma, alongside systemic racism, housing stress, and barriers to accessing culturally-safe care. These pressures build over time and show up in people's lives in ways that are often misunderstood by mainstream systems and discourse.

But to understand this properly, we also need to understand how we – as First Nations people – think about wellbeing.

When we talk about social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), we are not talking about a single issue or diagnosis. We are talking about connection – to Country, culture, and kinship. All those domains impact on our whole selves and communities. Our ability to move strongly through the world, heal and contribute.

SEWB sits at the foundation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. It is holistic and collective, grounded in connection to body, mind, family, culture, community and Country, and shaped by the realities of colonisation.

We have a very different way of viewing mental health and wellbeing. We view it as holistic.

For too long, mainstream psychology as a discipline has been shaped by a Western framework that has not recognised our ways of knowing, being and doing.

The work we are doing now is reframing that. We are decolonising psychology. We are clearly articulating that this is how we understand our social and emotional wellbeing, and we are adopting healing practices that we know work. For us.

There is growing recognition of this shift. Psychologists are working hard to be more culturally responsive and more culturally safe. AIPA is at the forefront of this change through an innovative and comprehensive learning program for psychologists on culturally responsive practice. But real change comes when First Nations communities have control and power over their own healing.

That principle – self-determination – was everywhere in Adelaide. What a joy to witness.

We saw what happens when communities lead.

Throughout it all, there was a quiet, steady certainty: the solutions are already here. And they are grounded in culture, connection and knowledge that has been carried for generations.

The task now is to listen, to invest, and to back what is already working.

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