

Mental health and wellbeing around the Voice to Parliament Referendum: Factsheet for the education sector

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 and beyond 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.

What we heard

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people told us they are experiencing extra sources of stress related 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.

“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.”

Participants 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.

National Centre for
Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
Wellbeing Research



Participants 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.

These impacts are already occurring in community, and the impacts could be long-lasting. It is important to recognise these additional burdens and take action to reduce the negative impacts.

This factsheet outlines ways schools, universities, training organisations, and tertiary institutions can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students.

For information you can share with your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students about available support services and information, see [this link](#).

For information you can share with your non-Indigenous staff and students about ways non-Indigenous people can help, see [this link](#).

What can we do?

Be equipped to refer students and staff to **a holistic range of supports** in order to meet their needs. See [this link](#) for a list of mental health, counselling, social and emotional wellbeing, relationships, and other holistic support services.

Provide opportunities and mechanisms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff to engage in activities that support connection to family, community, and culture, in order to protect wellbeing.

Provide education for students and staff about the Referendum, including what the Referendum is about, and the process of voting. Ensure that this information is provided in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. You can find factual information about the Referendum on [this page](#).

Explain that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are experiencing added stress, mental load, and racism and share tools to counter these negative impacts. Convey the importance of not adding to mental load for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff. Non-Indigenous people should educate themselves about the Referendum, to reduce the burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide this education. Teach students and staff how to have safe conversations around the Referendum, and model this behaviour. Empower students and staff to support each other; this could include providing cultural safety training.

Instil a sense of responsibility for reporting racism. Make sure your students and staff are aware of the importance of reporting racism, and of pathways for reporting racism. If you don't have internal pathways within your organisation, in the first instance, see this link for information on where to report racism: <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/take-action/responding-to-racism>.

Empower your non-Indigenous students and staff to be allies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For more ideas, see the Ending Racism video and Check Up resources at <https://mk-engaged.anu.edu.au/ending-racism/>.

Provide training in social media literacy to support students and staff to create supportive social media environments. The eSafety Commissioner provides resources about staying safe online: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/first-nations>.