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The Marumali Program: An Aboriginal Model of Healing

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Grappling with issues of identity is central to our healing... To us, the Stolen Generation is a social and emotional issue, not a mental health issue. In the first instance, we need access to services and counsellors trained to support us to heal and reconnect with ourselves, our families and communities, rather than psychiatrists or the mental health system. We are not saying we will never need mental health services, we are just saying our issues need to be seen as social and emotional issues first, and the bulk of our support should come from the social and emotional wellbeing sector. (Peeters, 2008, p. 298).

OVERVIEW

This chapter provides an example of a social and emotional wellbeing program, the Marumali Journey of Healing, which was developed *by* Aboriginal people, *for* Aboriginal people in response to an identified need. The program aims to ‘increase the quality of support available for survivors of removal policies.’ The Marumali Journey of Healing is grounded in Aboriginal knowledge systems and is truly holistic in its approach: historical, social, cultural and spiritual factors at an individual, family and community level are integrated throughout the healing journey. The diversity of Aboriginal ways of being is respected and a central concept is that clients must be in control their own healing journeys. The development and implementation of the Marumali Program followed correct consultation processes and protocols and has been endorsed as best practice in this field of work. Counsellors are encouraged to work in collaboration with other agencies and a number of workshops have been developed to support this: as well as training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors, workshops have been developed to train non-Indigenous mental health practitioners to work in partnership with Indigenous counsellors.

REMOVAL OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND ITS IMPACT

There is one particular blight on the history of this country that has had devastating and far-reaching consequences for its Indigenous inhabitants: the deliberate and systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and their placement in church or state-run institutions, or with non-Indigenous families. It is generally accepted that between 1910 and 1970, when forcible removal was at its peak, most families lost at least one child.

The effects of removal were not confined to the children taken away. Each removal left a legacy of fear, loss and grief in its wake. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

and communities were affected, and because of the deeply connected nature of Indigenous relationships, these effects have been transmitted from one generation to the next.

Evidence of the negative effects of removal policies and practices began to emerge through studies such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987), which found that out of the 99 deaths investigated, almost half (43) were people who were separated from their families as children. The *Ways Forward* report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health released in 1995 identified the need for specialised counselling to deal with the 'longstanding, past or profound, continuous and multiple traumatic experiences' associated with separation (Swan & Raphael, 1995, p. 49). A growing awareness of the extent and impact of removal of Aboriginal children led to a national Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry conducted to 'trace the past laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence, and the effects of those laws, practices and policies' (HREOC, 1997, p. 2).

Hundreds of people gave evidence of the profound and lasting physical and emotional problems that followed removal: anxiety, depression, suicide, violence, delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse. Most reported a pervasive sense of loss around identity, culture, family and community and, without a parental role model, many had trouble raising their own children. The wider Indigenous population reported high levels of anger, powerlessness, lack of purpose and a distrust of government, police and officials as a result of children being removed.

The inquiry resulted in the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) which brought about widespread recognition of the need to heal and reintegrate those individuals, families and communities affected by removal policies. The Marumali Program supports a number of the report's recommendations related to this need.

The *Bringing Them Home* report concluded that removal policies were in breach of the international prohibition on racial discrimination and amounted to a 'gross violation of human rights'. It made 54 recommendations to help repair the damage caused by the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families (HREOC, 1997). The report did not use the term 'Stolen Generations', preferring 'the forcible removal of indigenous children from their families'. Recommendations included the need for counselling to support those subject to forcible removal as well as Link-Up services to reunite Aboriginal people with their families.

The dedication of an annual National Sorry Day is a reminder to all Australians of the links between the political and social issues of reconciliation and self-determination and the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The Australian Government's Apology to the Stolen Generations on 13 February 2008 has potential therapeutic benefit as well as contributing to reconciliation.

The Marumali Program

Marumali is a Kamilaroi word meaning 'to heal' or 'put back together'. The aim of the Marumali Program is to increase the quality of support available for survivors of removal policies undertaking their healing journey. The Marumali model of healing is unique, original and unparalleled. While based on the healing of one individual, it offers an effective framework, structure and process which supports the healing of all survivors, whether removed to institutional care, foster care or adoptive families. The pathway to recovery involves mind, body and spirit and is holistic in that culture, identity and reconnecting with family, community and country are central to the healing journey.

The Marumali Circle of Healing model acknowledges that reconnecting with Aboriginal spirituality is a core healing tool to overcome the grief and loss experienced by Aboriginal people from past government removal practices (Peeters & Kelly, 1999). The Marumali Circle of Healing Model offers a comprehensive, coordinated and risk-managed approach which cuts through the pain and confusion and allows survivors to find a safe path home to themselves, their families and their communities. While the program was developed specifically to support the members

of the Stolen Generations to heal, all Aboriginal people have been affected by removal policies to some degree and may draw meaning and strength from the program. The Marumali Program was identified as an example of best practice in the *Bringing Them Home* report Evaluation (Wilczynski et al., 2007).

An overview of the development of the Marumali Program

Ten years ago, as an Aboriginal woman removed and institutionalised at age four, I developed a model of healing for survivors of the Stolen Generations. Frustrated by the lack of appropriate support to heal from my own experiences, I developed a model by documenting my own healing journey over the five years from 1994 to 1999.

This healing model was presented for the first time as an invited keynote address at the NSW Aboriginal Mental Health Conference held in Sydney in 1999. The support I received was strong and instantaneous. The conference audience requested that the model of healing and body of work be ‘copyrighted, published and circulated within Aboriginal communities, Link-up organizations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, to enhance the healing process for Aboriginal people’ (Peeters & Kelly, 1999, p. 139).

In response, I developed a five-day training workshop for Indigenous counsellors with my daughter, Shaan Gerrard, which was subsequently reviewed and endorsed by Professor Beverly Raphael (co-author of *Ways Forward*) as being safe, effective and ethical to use with Stolen Generations survivors (Letter of support, 2000). The program was piloted with funding from the Department of Health and Ageing. The Department of Health and Ageing contracted an external evaluator to assess the pilot workshop, which was delivered to experienced Link-Up workers. Further funding was dependent on achieving a positive evaluation. This was achieved and OATSIH supported the Marumali Program to train Indigenous counsellors employed in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health settings for a number of years.

Very few services were funded as an outcome of *Bringing Them Home*. Bringing Them Home counsellors, more Link-Up services and the training provided by the Marumali Program were some of the main strategies to be funded in response to this report. The Marumali Program harmonises with and underpins the work of Link-Up organisations and Bringing Them Home counsellors. The program has been endorsed by Link-Up organisations and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) as an appropriate model to use with Stolen Generations survivors. More recently, the Marumali Program was identified as an example of ‘best practice’ in the Bringing Them Home evaluation conducted in 2007 (Wilczynski et al., 2007).

The Marumali Program is designed to equip counsellors with the skills they need to aid Aboriginal people who are suffering from grief and trauma as a result of separation. An important aspect of the training is to respect the rights of the survivors of the removal policies and to allow them to control the pace, direction and outcome of their own healing journey. The program provides a basis for identifying and understanding common symptoms of longstanding trauma and an overview of the healing journey and how it may unfold. It offers clear guidelines about what type of support is required at each stage. It identifies core issues to be addressed and some of the risks associated with each stage (including misdiagnosis), suggests appropriate strategies to minimise the risks, and offers indicators of when the individual is ready to move on to the next stage of the healing journey. Training provided under the Marumali Journey of Healing is designed to empower Aboriginal counsellors to take the lead in this area of work. All participants in the counsellor training are required to have had previous formal training or work experience as counsellors.

The workshops have trained more than 1000 Aboriginal workers and counsellors to assist their brothers and sisters to find their way home to themselves, their families and communities. The program has also been successfully implemented with groups of survivors and Indigenous people in corrections facilities. The overwhelming majority (93%) of

workshop evaluations have rated the Marumali training as ‘excellent’. Many have identified it as a ‘life-changing’ experience.

The strengths of the Marumali Program are:

- It was developed by an Aboriginal survivor for Aboriginal survivors.
- It is a healing program, rather than a ‘therapy’ or a ‘treatment’.
- It is culturally appropriate for those who were removed.
- It is culturally appropriate for the families and communities they were removed from.
- It respects the autonomy and strength of survivors.
- It offers a clear path forward for survivors, regardless of how they were removed or what has happened since.
- It allows survivors to set the pace, rate and direction of their healing journey.
- It is holistic, and includes the spiritual dimensions of healing.
- It addresses the transgenerational effects of removal.

HEALING AND RECOVERY FOR THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The ‘Stolen Generations’ refers to the many thousands of Aboriginal children who were deliberately and systematically removed from their families using ‘laws, policies and practices which relied on compulsion, duress or undue influence otherwise known as “forcible removal”’ (HREOC, 1997, p. 5).

Removal took many forms and differed from region to region. It has had devastating consequences on all Aboriginal families and communities, not just the children who were removed. While those of us who were removed have had a chance to tell our stories, the families and communities we were removed from have not, and their pain has yet to be acknowledged.

It is worth noting that no studies have ever been done on the psychological effects of what happened to us, and a so-called ‘body of evidence’ still does not exist for mental health clinicians and others to draw on. Our trauma has been compounded by the widespread denial about what actually happened, and this has included mental health practitioners. For many years, those of us who tried to get assistance to heal were misdiagnosed, left to flounder in our distress, or met with blank stares that left us feeling that our pain had no meaning and made no sense. The *Bringing Them Home* report noted the lack of culturally appropriate mental health services, and how this gave rise to ‘critical problems relating to misdiagnosis, consequent inappropriate treatment, or failure to treat altogether’ (HREOC, 1997, p. 321).

Out of necessity, we were forced to become the experts of our own trauma and healing. We have learnt a lot about the long-term and transgenerational effects of removal by observing our own healing journeys, and assisting each other to heal. We are now a strong group of survivors, with clear views about what needs to happen to support other survivors to heal. We have learnt the hard way—by trial and error—and we ask that our views are heard and our knowledge respected. No other group has experienced what we did at the hands of governments and their agencies. For many reasons, we are a unique group with unique healing needs.

I have learned some things from facilitating over 100 five-day workshops throughout Australia for a number of years with more than 1000 Aboriginal workers from all walks of life, groups of survivors themselves, and inmates in jail. When questioned, all Aboriginal people already ‘know’ how removal would affect us as Aboriginal children, what our struggles would be when we were growing up, and some of the difficulties we would face when and if we tried to make our way home to ourselves, to our families, cultures and communities. If they can sit there, as Aboriginal people, and think, well if this happened to me, I would feel this way or that way, then it reassures me that the struggles we face as survivors are ‘normal human reactions’ to extremely damaging events. I always ask the same questions of a group

and I am amazed at how similar the responses have been for each of the 100 workshops. If our experiences have caused us to suffer from mental illnesses, why is it that other Aboriginal people are able to predict the ins and outs of what we will go through? This is an important point. A core belief of the Marumali Program is that when they embark on a healing journey removed people are experiencing normal human distress and suffering in response to what they went through, rather than showing symptoms of mental illnesses or disorders.

The Marumali concept of healing differs in this regard from other consumer-driven or Western models of recovery. Our journey of healing is one of recovering our culture and identity as Aboriginal people, not one of recovering from a mental illness. Healing involves mind, body, spirit, family, culture and sometimes (if we are lucky) country. It is about finding our 'belonging place', whatever that might mean to each of us. How we were removed, and the diverse experiences we had following removal, have created unique individuals, and the 'belonging place' we find for ourselves will reflect this diversity.

THE EFFECTS OF REMOVAL: DISCONNECTION

Although the means of removal may have varied (the main ones being institutions, fostering and adoption), most of us shared some common experiences. We were deliberately and systematically cut off from our families, our culture and our Aboriginality. We had our heads filled with negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people; we were told our mothers and families did not want us, and were forced to act and speak like non-Aboriginal people. We were punished if we acted 'naturally'—that is, if we spoke, felt and thought like Aboriginal people. I would like you to take a moment to stop and think about this. What if this had happened to you or your children? How would you feel now?

Many of us were also subject to a range of abuses: physical, emotional and sexual. As kids, in order to survive, many of us had to detach ourselves from what we really felt and thought, and try not to feel anything at all. We were powerless. To be fully present during those times might have destroyed us. It was as if we had to play dead, emotionally and spiritually, in order to survive. Our spirits had to hide.

As a result, many of us left important parts of ourselves behind, and have paid, and continue to pay, a high price in our everyday lives. Disconnection of mind from body, thinking from feeling, and spirit from mind and body are core issues that many removed people struggle with inside themselves, as well as the more obvious disconnections from family, country, language, history, culture and spiritual heritage.

Many of us have lived lives of fear, and have been running from ourselves—and sometimes our Aboriginality—ever since. Some of us don't trust anyone, including ourselves. Many of us who grew up in institutions feel most comfortable with each other. Others have become good at putting their feelings on hold and withdrawing when life gets difficult. Some use alcohol and other substances to drown the pain and anger inside. Feeling like an outsider is common to all of us. Many still don't know who they are, where they have come from, and where, if anywhere, they 'belong'. Many say they feel 'empty' inside.

Despite this, those of us who survived have developed an incredible strength. When the chips are down, we know we can do whatever we need to do, to survive. Although we have this strength, many of us also have special vulnerabilities. Every removed person has their own set of triggers, shaped by their experience of removal, and these can tap into the pain buried deep inside and unleash strong reactions. At certain points in our lives, usually in response to certain events, these triggers can lift the lid on our pain and destabilise us. Whether a trigger will set off a healing journey will depend on what else is happening in the person's life. If they are not safe enough or strong enough to face the pain of healing, they can just close down and keep going. It is very dangerous to push someone to heal before they are ready to do so. No one has a right to set another person's healing agenda. Nor is it possible for one person to 'heal' another. Each of us needs to be recognised as the

expert of our own healing, and it is crucial that we are able to control the speed, direction and outcomes of our own healing journey. This includes the right to refuse to look at any removal issues at all until we feel ready to do so.

For many of us, our healing journey will be triggered by an event in our lives. This may take us by surprise. We might have thought we were OK and did not have any 'Stolen Generations' issues to deal with. Some might not even identify as Aboriginal people. But once our memories start to resurface, our healing journey has usually begun.

Once a healing journey begins, it cannot be stopped. Memories that had to be 'disremembered' in order to survive come flooding in, accompanied by a volcano of emotions. We see this as the spirit coming back to life to reconnect with mind and body. The first stage of our journey can be a stage of crisis. For example, I started crying and couldn't stop—I cried for days on end. We might be full of anxiety, fear, grief and loss, and think we are losing our minds. It is important that good-quality support is available to help us through this stage of crisis, to reassure us that many other survivors have successfully used this time to begin a healing journey, and to offer us some guidance about what to expect. Often there are spiritual dimensions to this part of the journey that only other Aboriginal people can understand. It is important that Aboriginal counsellors are available to explain these things to us, and to non-Aboriginal mental health practitioners if they are involved, so that we are not misdiagnosed early on.

DISCONNECTION IS THE DISEASE: RECONNECTION IS THE CURE

Reconnecting with and healing our spirit can be a painful and difficult path to follow—all those memories of things we wanted to forget, layers of pain and bottomless grief and loss to deal with, before we can even start to think about reconnecting or reclaiming anything. Without guidance and support on our journey, many survivors could become overwhelmed or even give themselves over to mental illness, suicide or substance abuse as a way out. Others might be at risk of 'acting out' their distress in violence or other self-destructive acts.

The Marumali Program provides an overview of the healing journey and how it might unfold, identifies the core issues that need to be addressed at each stage, the risks associated with these issues and how to anticipate and manage the risks throughout the journey to ensure safe passage for the survivor.

The Marumali model is only a guide though, and each journey will be as different as the experiences of removal were. It aims to help people who were removed to face the pain, and to work through it in manageable steps so that they can reclaim their identity and eventually arrive at a place of peace and strength. The journey may include learning about removal policies; making sense of the memories as they come up; taking stock of what has been lost; accessing files and reports written about us; putting all the pieces together to find out what really happened to us and why; finding out who our family is and where we are from; facing our demons; reconnecting mind, body, spirit; reclaiming our spiritual heritage; working through issues of blame; retracing our steps; looking at what has been taken, left behind or unlearned; stripping away some of the mainstream values implanted by others, and replacing them with relearned Aboriginal values. Some may choose to reject their Aboriginality altogether, and that is OK too. The journey is about finding out who we were and who we are now, in light of all that has happened to us. We want to heal from our past, so that our future belongs to us.

No two healing journeys will be alike. For some it will be a long journey, for others it will be short. It depends on what actually happened as part of removal process. For many of us, the journey will be lifelong. The healing journey is a circle, and many of us will go around the circle many times as we deepen our healing each time our memories and experiences are triggered. I cannot overstate the importance of recognising the removed person as the specialist of their own

healing, and the need to ensure that they are able to control what happens, and when, as well as what does not happen.

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR ABORIGINAL COUNSELLORS

The overview of the healing journey above should help to explain why we need Aboriginal counsellors as guides to our healing. The support and information we need is not taught in universities and cannot be obtained from non-Indigenous people, no matter how 'culturally competent' they are. It can be a barrier to our healing process if a non-Aboriginal counsellor dabbles in core issues for our recovery, such as our Aboriginal identity or reclaiming our spiritual heritage. For this, we need authentic Aboriginal input, which reflects the diversity in Aboriginal cultures, not 'mainstream' interpretations of what it is to be Aboriginal.

The Marumali Program recommends that if non-Aboriginal counsellors have become involved during our stage of crisis, they should look for removal in our history, and if they find this, they should aim to refer us as soon as possible to Aboriginal Bringing Them Home counsellors. If they are unable to refer us immediately, this should occur by the time we are ready to start reclaiming some of what we have lost (stage three of the Marumali journey). Link-Up workers are trained and highly skilled in cultural and spiritual matters and the delicate consultations required to reconnect us with our Aboriginal families and communities. For this reason, no journey should be embarked on without the involvement of Link-Up workers at key stages of the journey.

CONCLUSION

What happened to us as Aboriginal people was unprecedented. Our identity as Aboriginal people, our culture, our land, our mothers, families and communities, were forcibly and often brutally removed from us as little children. We were systematically punished for being ourselves, until we learned to act like non-Aboriginal people. Often the process of removal was designed to prevent us from ever finding our way home and also to prevent our families from being able to find us. Then, as a nation we went on to pretend that this never happened, right up until last year, when Prime Minister Rudd made the Apology to the Stolen Generations. The truth about what happened to us can no longer be denied.

No one warned us what we might go through as adults, that something might trigger our trauma and set off a volcano of feelings and memories. As a result, when this happened we thought we were going mad. We have had to work out what was happening to us and how to deal with it ourselves. We feel we know what we are doing now and invite Aboriginal counsellors to learn from us, since we have much to share. We also invite non-Aboriginal mental health practitioners to work with us and to support us to do this healing work, but in a way that allows us to determine how much is done and in what way. We, the first generation removed, are elders now, and we ask that you listen quietly to us, to learn from what we have to say. We do not want to raise our voices or strain to get your attention. The silence has been broken now and we will talk if you will listen.

Reflective exercises

Throughout this text, students and mental health and wellbeing practitioners/counsellors are asked to reflect on their privilege, their whiteness, their discipline. Some of this requires reflecting on our common humanity. This chapter describes how many of us were deliberately and systematically cut off from our families, our culture and our Aboriginality. We had our heads filled with negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people, were told our mothers and families did not want us, and were forced to act and speak like non-Aboriginal people. We were punished if we acted 'naturally'—that is, if we spoke, felt and thought like Aboriginal people.

Take a moment to stop and think about this and consider the following questions:

- 1 What if this had happened to you or your children?
- 2 How would you have felt then?

- 3 How would you feel now?
- 4 This chapter provides a particular perspective on the impact of Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health. Discuss these perspectives and your thoughts on this issue.

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