

IndigenousX

The gap won't close until we address intergenerational trauma

A lack of action in the past has compounded the trauma experienced by the stolen generations

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'On the 10th anniversary of the national apology, we need more strategic funding and a long-term commitment to address intergenerational trauma.'

I remember on the day of the national apology to the stolen generations thinking, "This is amazing". I couldn't register that the prime minister had said sorry. It was a pivotal moment in my experience of Indigenous affairs and it made me feel positive about the possibility for change and a better Australia for our peoples.

Many stolen generations members felt that their pain and suffering was acknowledged and that the nation understood the need to right the wrongs of the past.

But the apology speech was a starting point – not a solution.

Ten years on from the national apology, we are still tackling the same issues, having the same conversations and it is because we haven't properly addressed the core issue underpinning everything: intergenerational trauma.

Most of the social and health problems we see in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today can be linked to intergenerational trauma. This includes family violence, suicide and high rates of incarceration and out-of-home child protection.

It doesn't matter who you are, trauma affects the way people think and act and overwhelms their ability to cope and engage. Common symptoms include fear and anxiety, poor relationships, substance abuse and violence.

If people don't have the opportunity to heal from trauma it's likely that their experiences and negative behaviours will start to impact on others, particularly children who are susceptible to significant developmental damage when they experience trauma at a young age.

This creates a cycle of trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next, creating a snowball effect of cumulative damage.

In the case of the stolen generations, parents might also pass on the impacts of institutionalisation, finding it difficult to know how to nurture their own children because they were denied the opportunity to be nurtured themselves.

Research has shown that people are not just affected by the traumatic events that they directly experience. Witnessing or hearing about trauma for their family or community also has a direct impact.

As stolen generations survivor Florence Onus puts it:

[These children] don't have any role models because their parents didn't have any role models, and their parents didn't have any role models, and their parents didn't have any role models.

They don't have the parenting skills because they were institutionalised. They were told what to do, what time to wake up, what to wear, where they could go, who they could talk to ... They know how to make the bad decisions and the bad choices but sometimes they find it really hard to make good choices for their lives.

We've made some critical progress but we need to scale up the healing response and commit to strategies that have been proven to reduce the impact of unresolved trauma.

There's still a lot of work to be done. A lack of action in the past has compounded the trauma experienced by the stolen generations and also the impact of intergenerational trauma.

It's also created bigger problems to fix, at a greater expense to the taxpayer.

On the 10th anniversary of the national apology, we need more strategic funding and a long-term commitment to address intergenerational trauma so that we can:

- Finally heal the unresolved trauma that has been plaguing communities for generations
- Close the gap on opportunity and create a better future

- Stop wasting taxpayer dollars on programs and plans that fail because they're not focused on the long-term picture or the specific needs of our people.

We've put trauma in the too-hard basket for too long, wasting money on strategies that treat symptoms but don't change anything.

It's time for the government to listen to us, really listen to us, and put a greater focus on healing unresolved trauma for the stolen generations and the ongoing impact of trauma for their children and grandchildren.

The confronting truth is in the figures; the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care has doubled in the decade since the 2008 apology.

These shocking statistics reflect the failure of Australian governments to address intergenerational trauma and colonial policies, and effort should be focused on healing and supporting families before they reach the point where children are removed.

The system is failing Aboriginal families and communities because it is punitive, not supportive. We are spending the money in the wrong place. We are spending the money to remove the kids and put them in out-of-home care, separating them from their families and not putting any strategies in place to help them get their kids back.

The answers are with our communities. Over the past eight years we've seen reductions in violence, juvenile justice rates and out-of-home care for children where healing programs have been implemented. We've also seen big improvements in education.

A traumatised person can't benefit from programs around education, training and employment. People will only make the most of those sorts of opportunities if they've healed and are ready to move forward.

What our communities need is a committed national intergenerational trauma strategy – long-term commitment; long-term results.

As part of that strategy, the Healing Foundation is building Australia's first thorough study of the current needs of the stolen generations, which will give us a framework for looking at specific aged care requirements, national reparations and healing-on-a-larger-scale, for individuals, families and communities.

I hope that over the next 10 years our mob won't have to keep yelling out that we have the solutions and getting no response, or being told by the government they have better answers.

This anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate the strength and richness of our culture, but never forgetting where we've come from and the injustices suffered in this country. I hope every Australian will find a way to mark this important day in our history, and that the next 10 years we'll see these long term strategies put in place.