



# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES AND IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

*Some trees need more water than others*  
Uncle Harry Walker - Bundjalung Elder

Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson AM PhD



Artist: Kahlia Wayne  
'Wild Berry Dreaming'





**Acknowledging the Ancestors, Elders, Peoples, and Country of each Aboriginal Nation  
With greetings from Bundjalung Peoples and Country.**

*Photo: Samantha Power*

***“We live storied lives. We organise experience into stories as we share life interactively with others. The plot, characters, and morals of the stories we hear influence our synaptic connections, **they change our brains**. Stories also live through us. We are born into stories, those of our families, nations, religions and cultures.”***

(Lewis Mehl-Madrona in Healing the Mind through the Power of Story)

- \* Stories Teach.
- \* Stories are our Law.
- \* Stories are the foundation of Indigenous Healing Practices – Critical Indigenous Pedagogy.

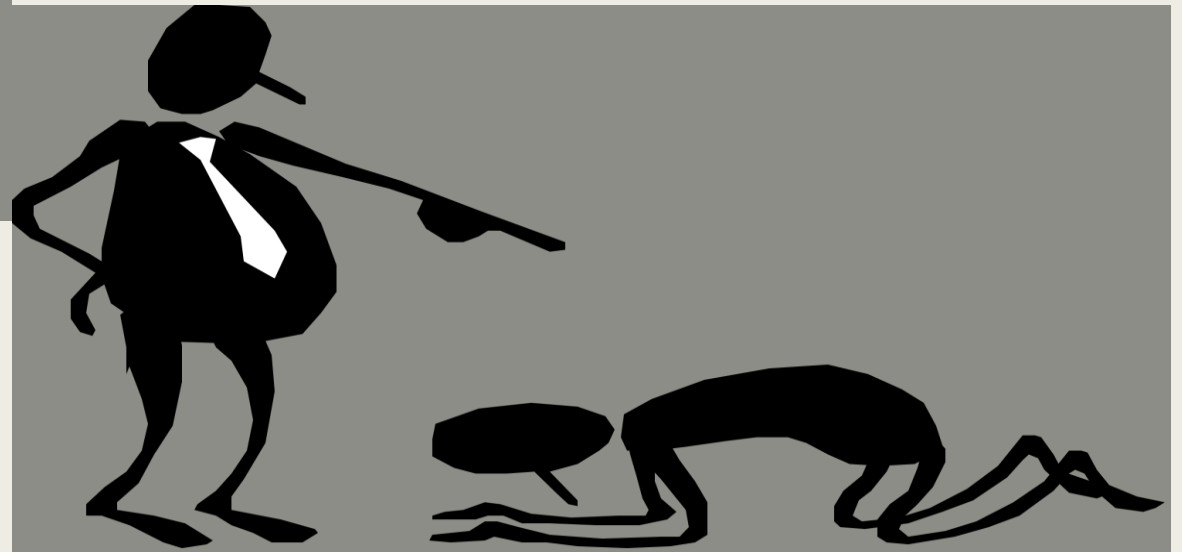
# World Wide Colonisations

## “Symptom as History”



- © Subjugation of Indigenous peoples -  
**Physical Violence** - **Structural Violence**  
- **Psycho-Social** dominance
- © The creation of culturally unsafe learning and living environments.

Understanding the trauma story  
Historic, Cultural, Social, Collective,  
Complex, Developmental.



# Colonisation as Traumatisation

Figure 1

A six-generation genogram

## History

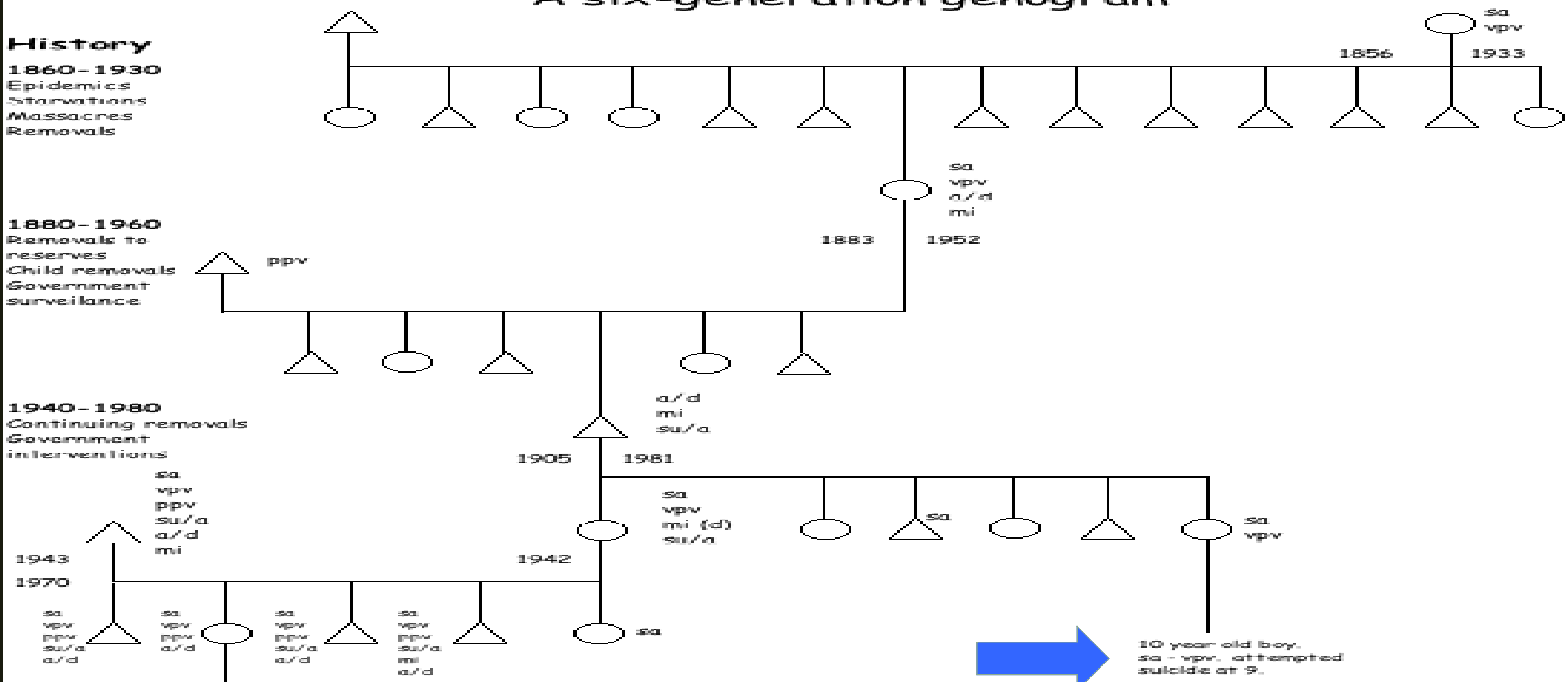
1860-1930  
Epidemics  
Starvations  
Massacres  
Removals

## 1880-1960

Removals to reserves  
Child removals  
Government surveillance

## 1940-1980

Continuing removals  
Government interventions



8 year old boy.  
sa - vpv. School  
expulsion - aggression.

10 year old boy.  
sa - vpv. attempted  
suicide at 9.

## Legend

- (a/d) alcohol/drug misuse
- (mi) mental illness
- (sa) sexual assault
- (su/a) suicide attempts
- (ppv) perpetrator of physical violence
- (vpv) victim or witness of physical violence





# CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ...

## Adverse Childhood Experiences

Childhood trauma including abuse and neglect, is probably the single most important public health challenge ... [we face]... a challenge that has the potential to be largely resolved by appropriate prevention and intervention (healing).

- Van de Kolk, B (2007) Developmental impact of Childhood Trauma, in *Understanding Trauma, integrating biological, clinical and cultural perspectives*, Kirmayer, L. Lemelson, R, Barad, M. Cambridge University Press p 224.
- CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges and later-life health and well-being.
- The original ACE Study was conducted at Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with two waves of data collection.

# Adverse Childhood Experiences

- **Children:** Violation of child's sense of safety and trust, of self worth, with a loss of a coherent sense of self, emotional distress, shame, grief, self and other destructive behaviours,
- **Youth:** Un-modulated aggression, difficulty negotiating relationships with caregivers, peers and partners, Clear link between suicide, alcoholism and other drug misuse, sexual promiscuity, physical inactivity, smoking, obesity,
- **Adults:** More likely to develop heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, skeletal fractures, and liver disease,
- **People with childhood histories of trauma make up almost our entire juvenile detention, criminal justice population.**

- (van de Kolk 2007 Developmental impact of Childhood Trauma, in *Understanding Trauma, integrating biological, clinical and cultural perspectives*, Kirmayer, L. Lemelson, R, Barad, M. Cambridge University Press p 224.)



| Adverse Childhood Experiences. (ACE's)<br>10 questions asked                                  |  | Yes<br>/No |
|---|--|------------|
| 1: Parent/Carer - swears, abuses, humiliates, where you feel afraid of being physically hurt. |  |            |
| 2: Parent or carer hit you so hard you had marks or bruises.                                  |  |            |
| 3: An adult, a person 5 years older, forced you to have oral, anal, vaginal sex.              |  |            |
| 4: You have ever felt no one in your family loved or cared for you.                           |  |            |
| 5: Have you ever been hungry, - your parents unable to care for you. No money for food.       |  |            |
| 6: Your parents are separated or divorced (or just not there).                                |  |            |
| 7: Domestic - family - community violence including threats by knife or other weapon.         |  |            |
| 8: Living in a situation where alcohol or other drugs were used.                              |  |            |
| 9: Household – family member depressed or mentally ill – or suicidal.                         |  |            |
| 10: Household member serves time in prison  |  |            |



The unspeakable  
can be spoken and needs to be heard



■ Behaviour is Language

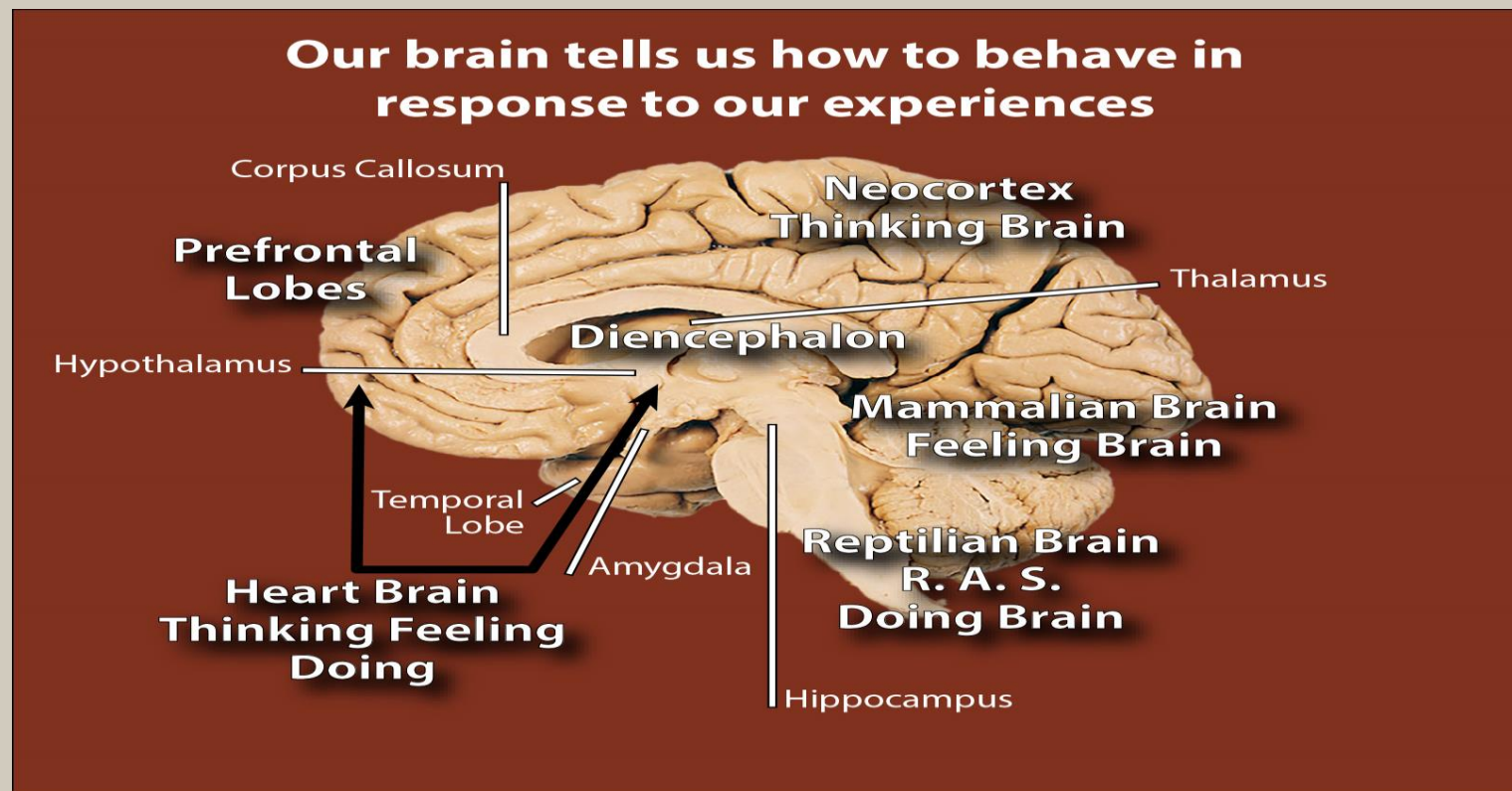
# Brains Bodies Trauma

After trauma, the brain and the body react with cells recording memories that become embedded in neuro-pathways which may repeatedly reactivate. Brain areas most relevant and implicated are amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex.

**Amygdala – the doing brain**

**Hippocampus – the feeling brain**

**Prefrontal cortex – the thinking brain**



**Reptilian** - doing - survival brain. Flight Fight Freeze

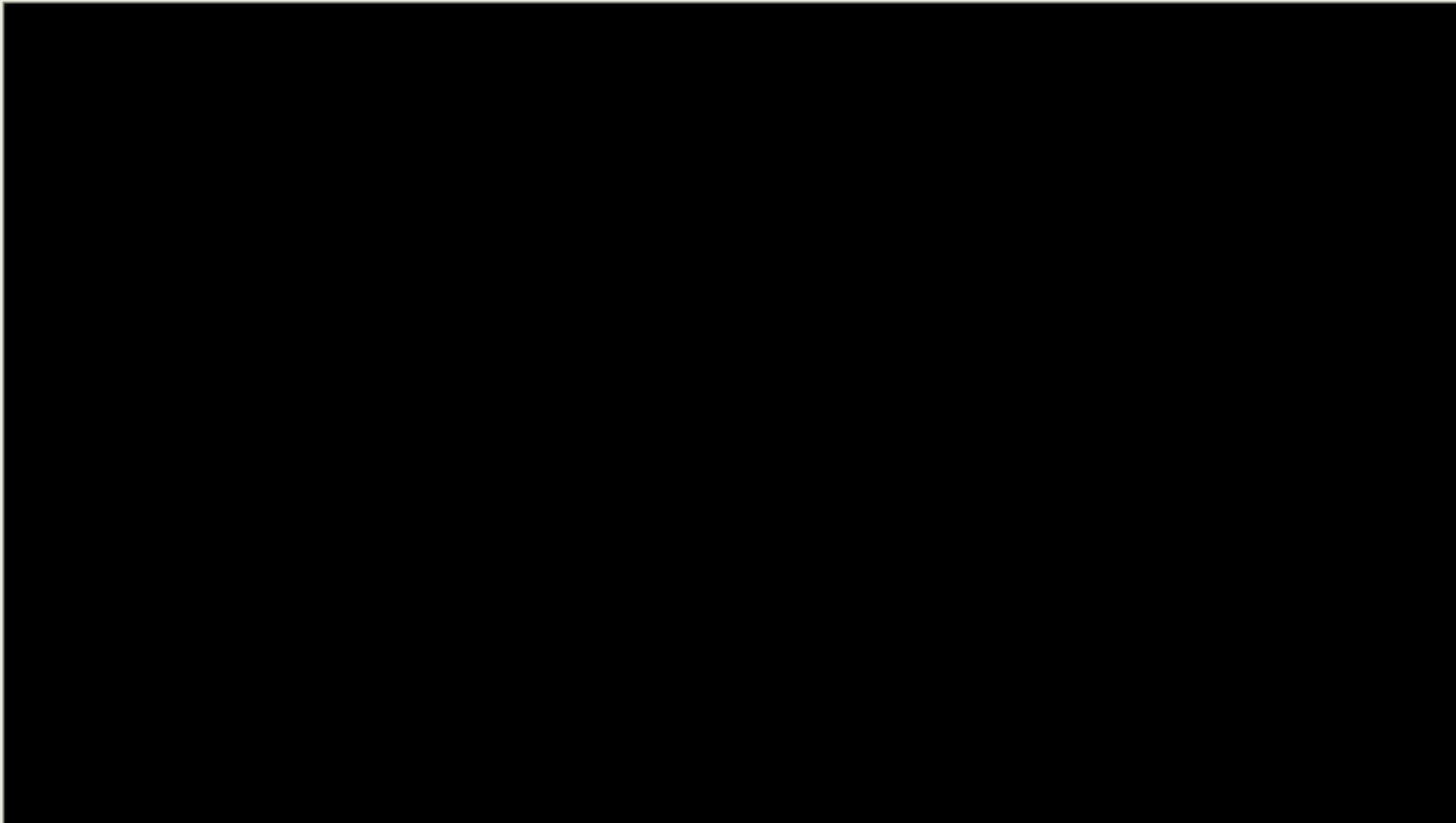
**Mammalian** - limbic mid brain processes emotions

**Neo-Cortex** – Thinking Centre – cognitive processing, decision making – learning, memory, inhibitory – helping us to plan, problem solve / organize the world around us.



# The Thinking Brain

The **Neo-Cortex** – prefrontal lobes are responsible for cognitive processing, decision-making, learning, memory and inhibitory functions which help us plan, problem solve and organize the world around us. The neo-cortex or prefrontal cortex is known as the “*thinking centre*” – or **the thinking brain**.



# Brains that have been traumatised look different to non-traumatised brains in 3 ways

- The Fear centre is over-activated –  
Fight - Flight – Freeze ; fxxx
- The emotional brain is under-activated
- The thinking brain is under-activated

This has major impacts on physical,  
psychological, mental health.

# Freeze – Disassociate

- A woman who has **experienced abuse and violence as a child**, which was outside her control, is **more likely to freeze** and perhaps **move into a dissociated state** (van der Kolk, 2014). Van der Kolk, (2014) suggests that during any abusive incident survivors may **dissociate**, with emotions of fear and terror felt at the time of the **attack blocked out**, a survivor may then return to their abuser.
- She may have **injuries**, but not have a full body memory of the **feelings – the experience of the attack**. She can then return to her abuser, which may be distressing for support workers if they don't understand and they may ask ***why is she returning to the same situation over and over again?***
- She has no memory of the terror she felt at the time, she has shut down what is too painful to feel/experience.





# Fight – Flight

- A man on the other hand is more likely to react with fight-rage.
- ... However a woman experiencing a violent assault (if she has dissociated because that is how she survived as a child), may have no memory of the attack, may **move into fight mode** as though her life is in actual danger of serious harm or death (which it is). Some of the women in prison for serious assault have committed their offence while in a dissociated state, in some cases with no memory of what they have done.
- If she is using alcohol or other drugs to medicate, the reactive violence may occur under the influence, and hence she is fighting for her life in a situation, which may not actually be as dangerous as what this experience is telling her. Some women may live in continual **FLIGHT mode with no sense of safety, which may be true**, or may be her 'felt sense'.
- **I AM SEEING ALL OF THIS IN YOUNG MEN EARLY ADOLESCENT NOW, and the**



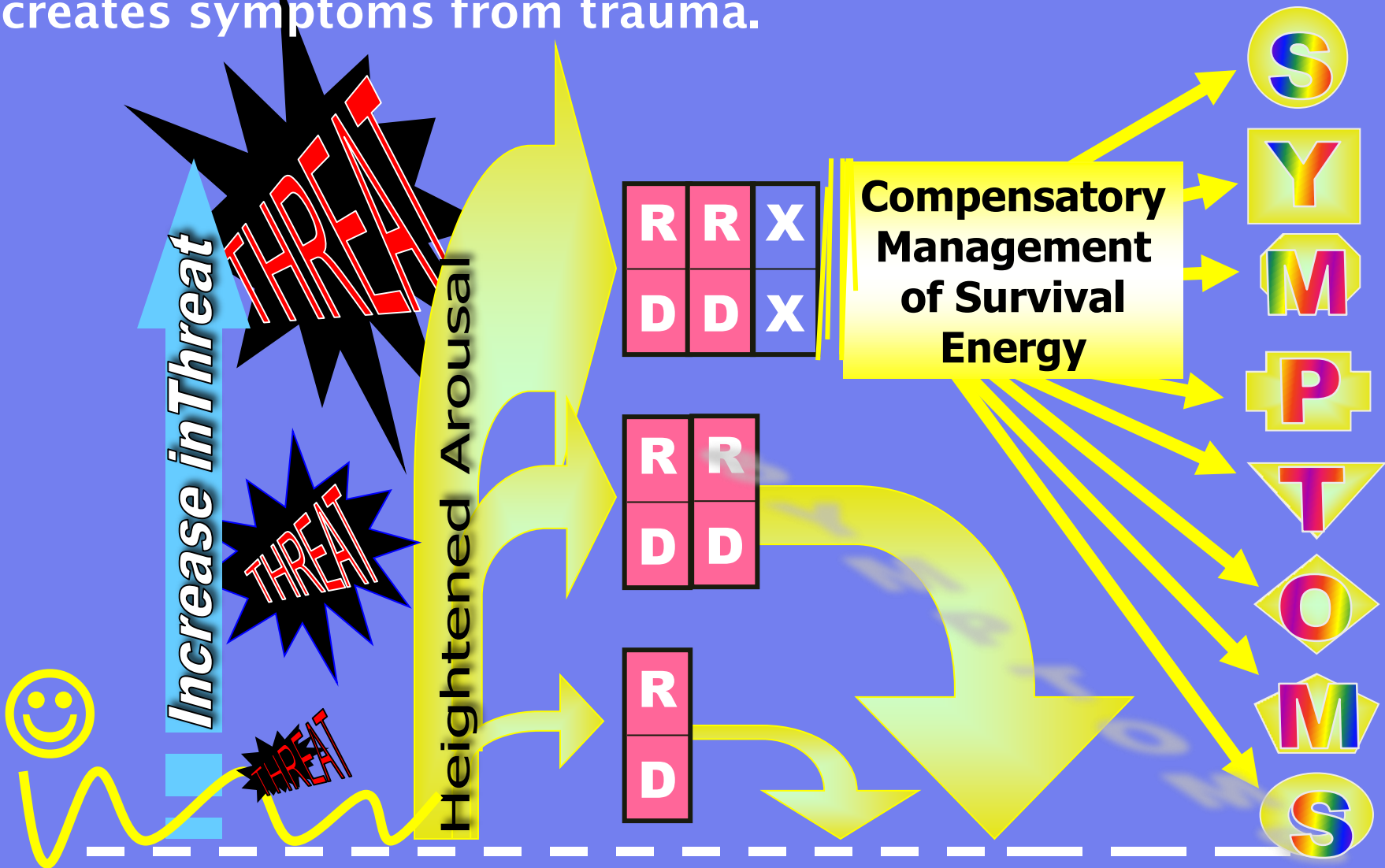
# Dissociative States can happen at any time

- A dissociate state often starts in childhood.
- Children will detach or disconnect from their bodies while being subjected to abuse. This is protection of self.
- Women will also dissociate to manage the terror of the abuse.
- As a result of this disconnection significant safety problems will arise and may include **suicidality, self-harm, impulsivity, aggression, reckless behaviour, self-medication, and re-victimisation.**

(Courtois & Ford, 2014).



Missing resources plus non-discharged survival energy creates symptoms from trauma.



•Personal functioning baseline

Pre-event → Activation → Discharge →

R = Resource D = Discharge X = Not available



# When we ignore generational trauma

## 5 generations – South America

- 1<sup>st</sup> generation: colonised – males killed – enslaved - imprisoned – females sexually misused
- 2<sup>nd</sup> generation: Men turn to alcohol **and other drugs** as their cultural and spiritual identity is damaged – self worth eroded
- 3<sup>rd</sup> generation: Spousal Assault – Societal Trauma
- 4<sup>th</sup> generation: Abuse moves from spousal assault to child neglect / harm, or both
- 5<sup>th</sup> generation. Cycle repeats as trauma begets violence begets trauma
- 6<sup>th</sup> generation. **(where are we now! The kids on the streets at night. The children of the conquered terrorise their parents – grandparents – communities).**
- 7<sup>th</sup> The grown children of the conquerors begin to live in fear of the grown children of the conquered. (Merida Blanco cited in Levine, 1997).

# Brad ... Our services are failing us!

## Diagnosis:

- Emerging psychosis with mood depressive content – some paranoia (he thinks the world is unsafe)
- Suicidal ideation
- Chronic compound grief
- Chronic Complex Post Traumatic Stress
- Trauma ... seeing his mother killed at three, and his Aunty at 11. His world is unsafe.
- Records show that in the two suicide attempts, they said he was just “attention seeking”.
- Prescribed Ritalin.

■ (obviously not his real name)

# Who teaches us?

When racism defines us ... And love calls us home.

- A racist phone call - an assumption, an arrest, and ...
  - then they find they were wrong,
- BUT the damage is done.
- He feels labeled, leaves town, chooses drugs for a while ...
- BUT returns. And seeks out those who stood by him, believed (in) him.
- This year he is back at school but this weekend the drugs hit town
- And his short time in JJ has changed him. He is now a bad ass.



# Who teaches us?

## When we fail in our care! And what is success?

- A young women, raped with injuries enough to be hospitalised for corrective surgery.
- Asks ... **“Can you fix me?”** I freeze. How can I ‘fix’ such pain?
- **And how do we fix the community that allows such pain?**
- But she is fixing herself.
- She wants to join the police force to prevent, and help improve services for other young Aboriginal people subjected to - going through what she went through.
- **Our Youth – Our Future!!**

# Memories: “She loved me”.

## What are they teaching us! What are we learning?

- Sitting in the Culture Room, in front of a photo on the wall, one among 40 of female Elders, now passed on.
- I ask: “tell me about her”. His Gran. Died when he was 4. *The last time he can ever remember feeling loved.*
- He is troubled ... has anger outbursts ... yet one day he finds a small plastic bag near where he lives and brings it – hands it in to the school ... Meth ... ICE.
- He goes on an excursion, and hears I am returning home that day. So he insists on coming in to say goodbye, .... And asks permission to hug me.
- **We all need to feel and know we are loved. Our Youth - our Future**

Timor Leste - the Prun – being asked two questions.  
What is the difference between political, social or cultural trauma?  
What is the difference between loss, grief, victimization, traumatization?





# Papua New Guinea – Asking Permission

## “Youth for Change”

“How does sexual violence effect a nation’s economy?”

*I am Gold,  
strong and shiny  
like stars in the cold of winter.  
I am a river that gives life to the land,  
and the rose that blooms in  
the soft black night.  
I am as brave as a lion.  
I am friends with the ants,  
and I am like the Bird of Paradise,  
beautiful but strong like the father  
of loving care and compassion.  
I have a fire in me that burns  
bright for the world to see  
that there is hope in me,  
for we can make a change  
for you and for me,  
that you will see!*

Doyle Kailap







## GENERATIONAL IMPACTS

# INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA MAPPING

## WHAT MAKES OUR SPIRIT SICK



## EFFECTS ON COMMUNITY

### 1869-1894

Arrival of British surveying ships (colonisers).  
Forced dispersal of Larrakia from traditional land.  
British colonisers create Larrakia Kings and Queens to make treaties and agreements easier.  
Access to sacred sites restricted.  
Introduction of flour, sugar and alcohol.

### 1894-1919

Chief Protector NT given legal guardianship over Aboriginal children.  
Mixed Blood children removed from mothers.  
Darwin declared off limits to Aboriginal people.  
Kahlin Compound setup 1912.  
Permits needed to be outside of Kahlin.

### 1919-1944

'Half Cast Policy' of assimilation.  
Segregation by skin colour and tone.  
Mission's utilised to aid in overcoming the 'half cast problem'.  
Legal status and rights given to lighter coloured people.

### 1944-1969

Larrakia of mixed descent start to publicly denounce their heritage to bypass laws against them.  
Removal of Larrakia during War.  
Larrakia servicemen not paid for service.

### 1969-1994

Division within Larrakia community due to historical impacts of removals, assimilation policies and colour separations.  
No decision on Kenbi Land Claim for over a generation.

### 1994-2019

Decision to hand back land in native title remains unsigned.  
Aboriginal incarceration rates in NT justice system 3 times the national average.  
Mandatory Alcohol Treatment Program bill passed with over 95% Indigenous representation.  
Paternalism within organisations and governance.

### 1869-1894

Dispossession, loss of land and the right to walk freely upon the land. Loss of language and cultural continuity.  
Nutritional balance upset as traditional diet supplemented by processed foods.

### 1894-1919

Loss of trust, sense of belonging and safety.  
The beginning of intergenerational trauma from forced removals and separation. Self medicating via drinking to ease the pain leading to alcoholism.

### 1919-1944

Subjugation, inequality, disadvantage and poverty. Ongoing and multi layered grief and loss from continued removals.

### 1944-1969

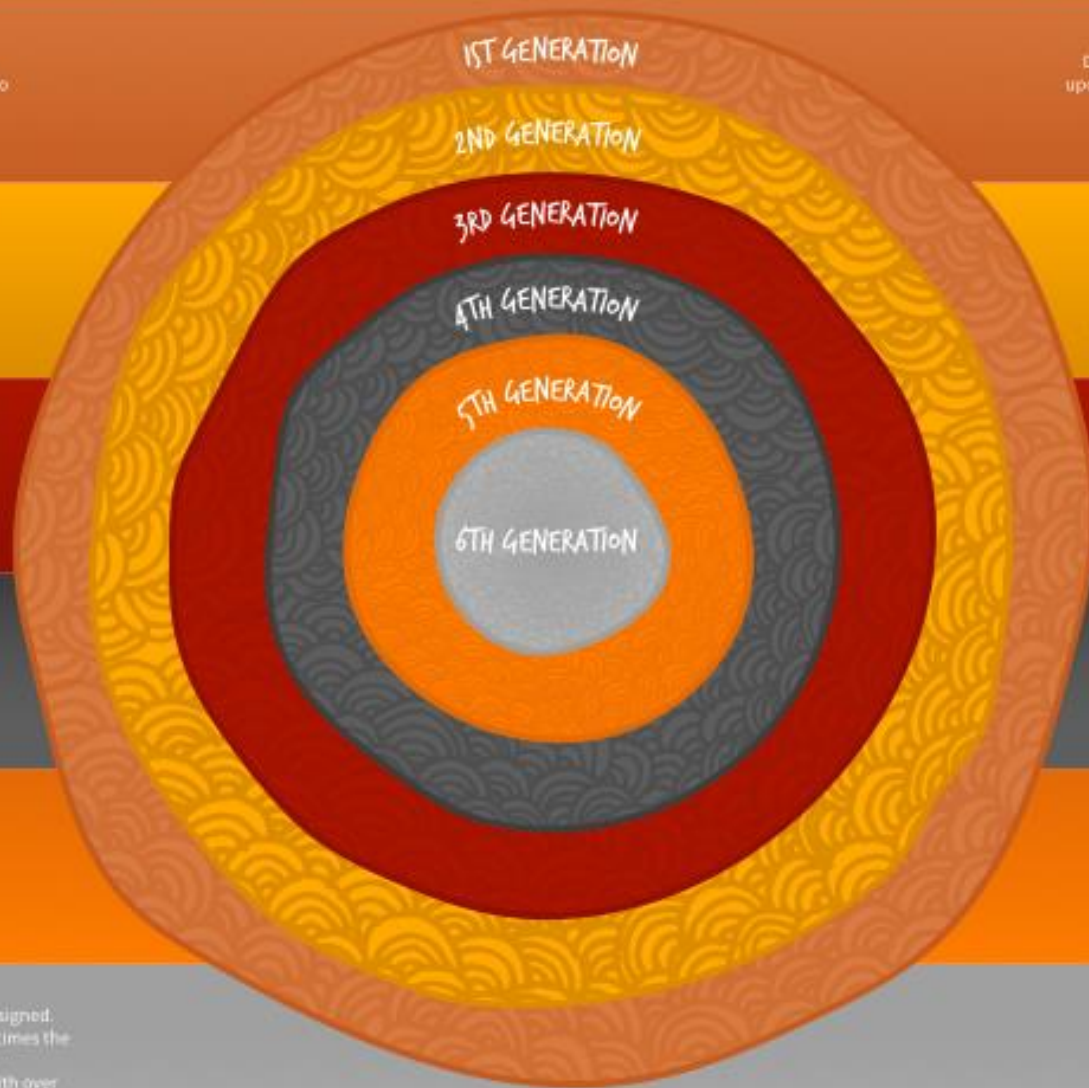
Lateral violence. Disunity, anger and mistrust. Community and domestic violence. Depression and other mental health issues affecting whole communities.

### 1969-1994

Drug use becoming accepted as part of growing up. Moving through the justice system becomes an accepted right of passage for young people.  
Community suicides increase. PTSD.

### 1994-2019

Self harming behaviour increases. self-medication. Suicide. Substance abuse.  
Paternalism within organisations and governance.  
Sense of ongoing oppression, lack of opportunity and sense of hopelessness.







## SUGGESTED ACTIONS

### CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

Network across Indigenous services and programs.  
Employ and train local Aboriginal people with genuine support into long term employment.  
Choose holistic models of working that consider both family and community connections.  
Take responsibility for developing culturally competent staff.

### CONNECTION TO FAMILY/KINSHIP

Gain an awareness of local family groups & history.  
Practise professional critical reflexivity.  
Employ local community engagement officers.  
Allowing flexibility within professional frameworks so staff can work alongside family, elders and community effectively.

### CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

Collaborate with local Elders to design and run cultural connection camps and programs.  
Sponsor a Larrakia public art project.  
Support welcome to country by local Indigenous people.

### CONNECTION TO CULTURE

Enrol staff in cross cultural training.  
Involve the whole workplace to actively engage with national Indigenous recognition days.  
Take an interest in your clients culture.  
Encourage connection to activities that promote clients connection to culture.

### CONNECTION TO BODY/MIND

Use of familiar vocabulary when explaining test results or western concepts of health.  
Recognising and understanding the cultural implications of behaviours.  
Be self aware and care for your own body/mind.  
Consider language/images used in health resources.

### CONNECTION TO SPIRIT, SPIRITUALITY

Critically reflect on your own cultural influences and biases.  
Support two way interaction between traditional and western approaches to healing.  
Develop your capacity to understand and interact with cultural spiritual frameworks and world views.

# HOLISTIC MODEL OF HEALING

## WHAT KEEPS OUR SPIRIT STRONG



## EFFECTS ON COMMUNITY

### CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

Increased trust and openness towards services.  
Willingness for community individuals to self refer.  
Genuine community participation when invited into two way sharing.  
Stronger community support for services.  
Longer lasting therapeutic relationships.

### CONNECTION TO FAMILY/KINSHIP

Healthy relationship building between services and families.  
Clients will feel seen, heard, acknowledged and understood.  
Clients and families will experience genuine support.

### CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

Growing sense of empowerment and cultural pride.  
Clients experience increased sense of belonging and connection to land and and culture.  
Employment and recognition of local Aboriginal expertise.

### CONNECTION TO CULTURE

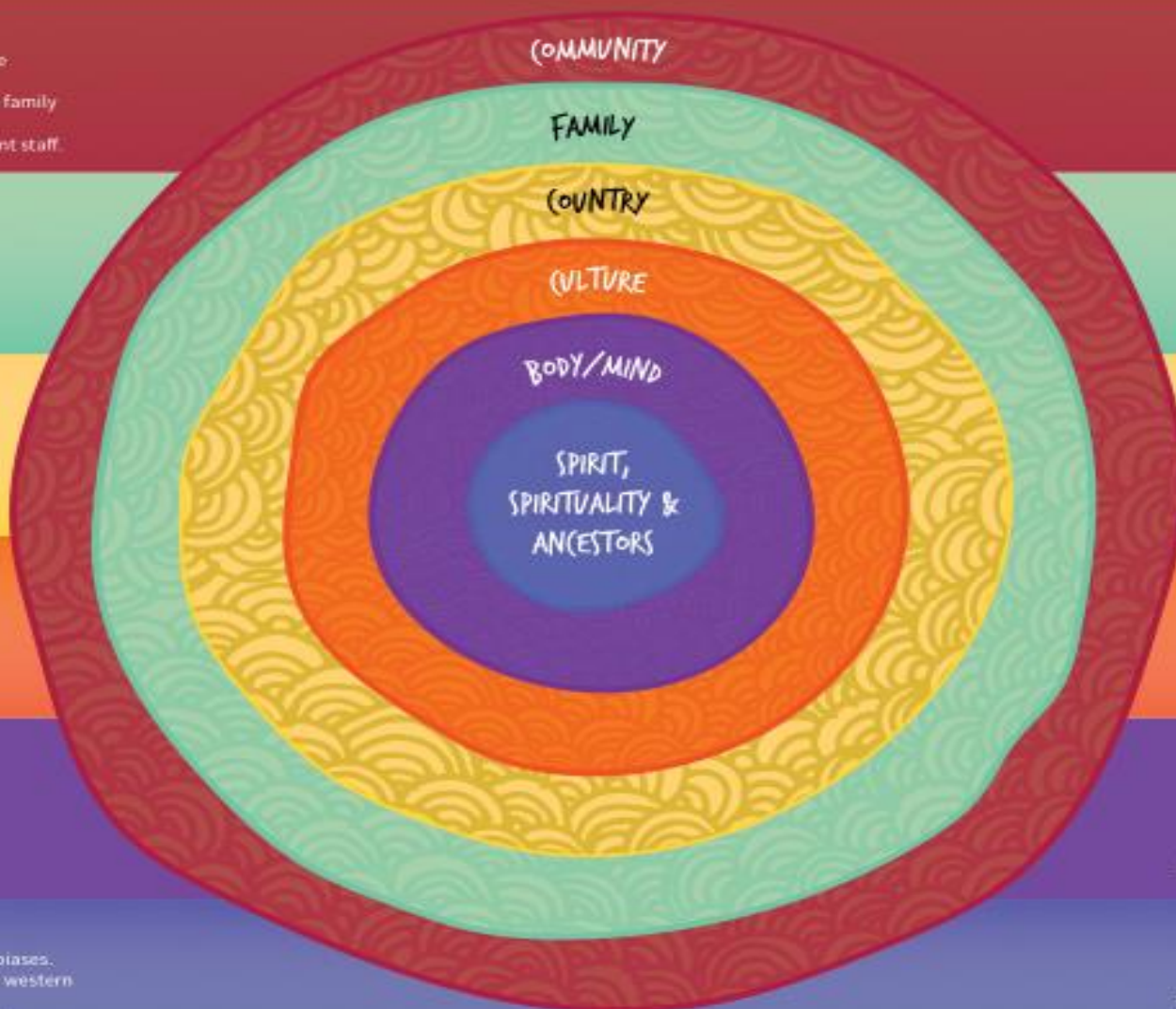
Clients feel validated and valued in relation to their cultural identity.  
Increased understanding of and connection with local Indigenous culture.  
Clients experience increased positive cultural identity.

### CONNECTION TO BODY/MIND

Increased likelihood that clients will experience cultural safety.  
Increased cross cultural understanding leading to increased relevance and effectiveness of therapies and other services.  
Reduction in over pathologising Indigenous clients.

### CONNECTION TO SPIRIT, SPIRITUALITY

Indigenous clients feel safer to share what is being experienced.  
Increase in participation in longitudinal therapeutic strategies.  
Feeling understood and acknowledged.



# Trauma Stories can be Healing Stories if we work with focused intent

- Mental Health cannot be separated from Social Emotional Spiritual Physical Cultural Health and Safety.
- History - Racism - Lateral Violence – *Kids in the Middle*
- Families > Community > You and Me ... *Are the Answer*
- Schools > Every child under law, has to attend school. If schools are racist, abusive, they fail. We need **EDUCARING**
- WE are all accountable. *Choosing to Walk the Circle of Wellbeing*



# Healthy Country Healthy People body mind heart spirit

The diagram is a circular flow chart illustrating the interconnectedness of four domains: Spirit, Mind, Body, and Heart. Each domain is represented by a quadrant and contains various concepts, questions, and illustrations.

- Spirit (Top Quadrant):**
  - Spirit:** Connection to Earth, Mother & other living creatures. Places of Living Wills of Concrete or Creek & Clean Air?
  - Spirituality:** Relationship with Higher Being. Connection to Spiritual Self. Creator, Dream Time.
  - Sacred World:** Place of Law which does not change. Stories explain the world.
  - Environment:** Connection to Earth, Mother & other living creatures. Places of Living Wills of Concrete or Creek & Clean Air?
  - Healing:** Healing visioning the future.
  - Law:** Punishment for wrong doing.
  - Rights:** rights Teaching Responsibility.
  - Life Purpose:** Completing the Circle.
- Mind (Right Quadrant):**
  - Mental World:** Place of Light and Knowledge.
  - Places and Ways of Learning:** Places and Ways of Learning.
  - Stress:** Are you always 'stressed out' or are you able to deal with the normal stress of daily life?
  - Sexuality:** Is your sexuality a true reflection of your inner self or constructed from social pressure?
- Body (Bottom Quadrant):**
  - Physical World:** Place of Life.
  - Physical Body:** - a body that is healthy or being battered and abused and needs a fix?
  - Land:** Land.
  - Animal Life Forms:** Animal Life Forms.
  - Human World:** Place of Love and Emotions.
  - Emotions:** A true reflection of your own true choices or controlled by what others have done or do to you?
  - Relationships:** Partnership-based or Power Over-based? Healthy Families or Families in Crisis?
  - Family Relationships:** Family Relationships.
  - Capacity to Change and Grow:** Capacity to Change and Grow.
  - Rules of Behaviour:** Rules of Behaviour.
  - People:** People.
  - Ceremonies:** Ceremonies.
- Heart (Left Quadrant):**
  - HEART:** HEART.
  - Human World:** Place of Love and Emotions.
  - Emotions:** A true reflection of your own true choices or controlled by what others have done or do to you?
  - Relationships:** Partnership-based or Power Over-based? Healthy Families or Families in Crisis?
  - Family Relationships:** Family Relationships.
  - Capacity to Change and Grow:** Capacity to Change and Grow.
  - Rules of Behaviour:** Rules of Behaviour.
  - People:** People.
  - Ceremonies:** Ceremonies.

The diagram is surrounded by illustrations of Indigenous Australian art, including a kangaroo, a lizard, a bird, and a person.



# Whole of community – Multiple Event Crisis intervention

(Silove 2007, Hobfall 2007, Atkinson 2007, Brooks/Atkinson 2011)

| <b>ADAPT (Silove)</b> | <b>Five Essential (Hobfoll)</b> | <b>Atkinson / Brooks</b>                              |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Security / Safety     | Sense of Safety                 | Safety / Security                                     |
| Attachment            | Calming                         | Calming, re bonding from crisis<br>– Hope and Courage |
| Justice               | Self and collective efficacy    | Attachment and Belonging                              |
| Role/Identity         | Connectedness                   | Justice, Fairness and Dignity                         |
| Existential Meaning   | Hope                            | Valuing Self – Valuing others                         |
|                       |                                 | Meaning and Coherence                                 |



**Self Care: the Coolaman holds the stories. You hold the Truth within the Story Space**







The future  
belongs  
to those  
who know the  
smallest seed  
will grow  
towards  
the light.

Our Youth  
Our Future

