

# Staying Deadly:

Strategies for preventing stress and burnout among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alcohol and other drug workers



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**NCETA**

*Australia's National Research Centre  
on AOD Workforce Development*

National Centre for Education & Training  
on Addiction (NCETA), Flinders University



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Citation Details:

Roche, A.M , Nicholas, R. Trifonoff, A., & Steenson, T. (2013). Staying deadly: Strategies for preventing stress and burnout among Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander alcohol and other drug workers. National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA). Flinders University, Adelaide, SA.

ISBN: 978-1-876897-49-9

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Published by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Flinders University.  
[www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)

Design and Layout by Inprint Design  
[www.inprint.com.au](http://www.inprint.com.au)

The photography for the Kit was supplied by Colleen Raven Strangways, an Arabuna woman from Lake Eyre, central South Australia, founder and operator of Nharla Photography. Colleen's cultural vision, and photographic skill create unique and powerful images of Aboriginal people connected to their past, but with a stronghold on a positive future.

# Preface

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This booklet is part of the *Feeling Deadly: Working Deadly* Resource Kit aimed at reducing stress and burnout and enhancing wellbeing amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alcohol and other drug workers. The Kit has been developed by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) and was funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. It forms part of NCETA's program of work on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker wellbeing.

Copies of resources developed as part of the *Feeling Deadly: Working Deadly* Resource Kit are available for download from the NCETA website: [www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)

This is part of a wider program of work undertaken by NCETA. Please see the references at the end of this document for more information.

## Use of Terminology

The terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this document. We understand that some people have a preference for using one term over the other and we have used the terms interchangeably to be sensitive to these differing perspectives.

### NCETA

The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction is an internationally recognised research centre that works as a catalyst for change in the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) field.

Our mission is to advance the capacity of organisations and workers to respond to alcohol- and drug-related problems. Our core business is the promotion of workforce development (WFD) principles, research and evaluation of effective practices; investigating the prevalence and effect of AOD use in society; and the development and evaluation of prevention and intervention programs, policy and resources for workplaces and organisations.

NCETA is based at Flinders University and is a collaboration between the University, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and the SA Department of Health.



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## Introduction

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This booklet is about preventing and dealing with stress and burnout among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alcohol and other drug (AOD) workers. The booklet was developed in consultation with Indigenous AOD workers and other groups. Quotations from the consultations appear in italics in the booklet.

While stress and burnout can be serious problems for Indigenous AOD workers, doing this work can still be very rewarding.

Most Indigenous AOD workers work in this field to improve the health and wellbeing of their communities with whom they feel unified in heart and spirit.

Many workers feel rewarded and satisfied from their work in spite of the stress, pressure and demands placed on them and the conditions under which they are often required to work.

Rewarding aspects of Indigenous AOD work include:

- Being connected to community and building relationships
- Giving and receiving knowledge
- Speaking up for communities and peers
- Mentoring and training Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) co-workers
- Creating new services for communities and peers
- Seeing culturally appropriate accountable services provided for Indigenous people
- Involvement in decision-making and problem solving processes
- Being employed ethically in the Indigenous community
- Being part of solutions to improve Indigenous health and increase access to services.

*"The rewarding thing is when they (Indigenous people) come up to me in the community and they say, 'thanks for helping us!' ... that sort of stuff, that's rewarding. That's the stuff you can't measure on quarterly reports."*  
(Indigenous worker)

## What is Work-Related Stress and Burnout?

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Stress occurs when people feel they can't cope with the demands placed upon them. Work stress refers to what happens when work demands get too much over a short-term period.

Burnout is different to stress (but it may include signs and symptoms of stress). Burnout is a longer-term process where workers don't function well at work and develop negative and cynical attitudes towards clients and work in general. Stressful working conditions and job demands can result in worker burnout over time.

*"...what causes burnout? Frustration, overloaded, and the community's expectations." (Indigenous worker)*

When people are burnt out they:

- Feel emotionally exhausted (feeling over-extended and emotionally and physically drained)
- Have a negative, detached or cynical view of their work
- Feel like they are not accomplishing much at work
- Feel they are stupid or that nothing they do has any effect.

*"Burnout, believe me, is shocking. I laid on the floor, and I was sleeping with my eyes open. I couldn't think, and I didn't want to go to work, you know. I didn't want to walk out that door. And your life becomes unmanageable." (Indigenous worker)*

### Stress, Burnout and Indigenous Alcohol and Other Drug Workers

Work stress and burnout are major threats to the wellbeing of Indigenous AOD workers.

Workers in health and welfare jobs often have high levels of work-related demands and stressors. They are more likely than other workers to experience stress and burnout.

Mainstream AOD workers face challenges related to:

- Their clients (e.g., complex lifestyles, stigmatisation and not wanting treatment)
- Negative community attitudes towards people with AOD problems (and the people who work with them)
- The need to always develop and refresh knowledge and skills as a result of new treatments and complex clients
- Poor working conditions (e.g., pay, availability of training, job security, access to clinical supervision, client workloads).

The situation can be even harder for many Indigenous AOD workers for a range of reasons.

There are 10 major sources of work-related stress which affect Indigenous AOD workers.

<b>Workloads</b>	Workloads can be very high and clients can have unmet needs.
<b>Expectations</b>	Workers often want to do their job very well but there are also complex community obligations that workers need to fulfil.
<b>Boundaries</b>	Many workers feel the need to be available 24/7 as part of their cultural obligations. As a result it can be difficult to “draw the line” around work lives.
<b>Recognition, respect and support</b>	Workers may not get the recognition or respect they deserve or they may be solo or isolated workers without enough support.
<b>Working conditions</b>	Working conditions can be hard and stressful, especially among workers in rural and remote settings.
<b>Racism and stigma</b>	There is a high level of stigma attached to AOD work just as there is about the Aboriginality of the clients and the workers. Co-workers and the mainstream community may also be racist.
<b>Complex personal circumstances</b>	Many workers have complex home lives themselves, such as being single parents or having dependent children, elderly and other family members. Many workers have had significant losses, domestic violence problems, and previous problems with AOD. Family members may also be AOD clients.
<b>Loss, grief and Sorry Business</b>	Deaths at a young age, including suicides, happen often in Indigenous communities. Mainstream bereavement leave may not be enough. Co-workers and managers may not realise the importance of Sorry Business and loss overall.
<b>Culturally safe ways to work</b>	Many workplaces don’t understand about Indigenous ways of working. This can cause conflict and clashes with mainstream co-workers and can have bad effects on the health and wellbeing of both clients and workers.
<b>Funding job security and salaries</b>	Short term funding and/or short term jobs with low salaries can lead to high stress levels and high turnover rates.

*“... work is hard enough. It’s really difficult doing the jobs I gotta do. I can deal with that to an extent, ... you just keep going and going and going.”  
(Indigenous manager)*

Clients can also have very complex needs and may have experienced high levels of trauma. Indigenous client trauma can stem from:

- Unresolved grief and loss
- Abuse
- Family and domestic violence
- Substance misuse
- Physical health problems
- Identity issues
- Child removals
- Being jailed
- Family breakdowns
- Cultural dislocation
- Racism, discrimination and social disadvantage.

Dealing with these problems on a daily basis can leave Indigenous AOD workers feeling stressed and burnt out.

*“We know that there are layers upon layers of issues that the individual or their families are currently dealing with and the impacts of that stem from colonisation, stolen generations and premature death within our community.” (Indigenous manager)*

## Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Stress and Burnout among Indigenous AOD Workers

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There are two main ways to prevent and reduce stress and burnout among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander AOD workers.

1. The first way is for health agencies and the systems within which they are located to provide better support for their workers.
2. The second way is for workers to do things that reduce their own stress and burnout.

# Things That Organisations Can Do to Prevent Stress and Burnout

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A lot of work stress comes from the ways that organisations are run. To improve worker stress, it is important that these things are addressed.

## Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Working

Many workers get little support for Indigenous ways of working. Indigenous ways of working uphold the values, beliefs and social structures of land, family and kinship and are shaped by the impact that the colonisation of Australia has had on Indigenous culture.

There are important differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of working. It is important for managers to understand these differences and create culturally safe workplaces to reduce stress on Indigenous AOD workers.

## Working in Culturally Appropriate Ways

Helping workers, organisations and communities to provide culturally appropriate (Indigenous) and culturally safe (mainstream) AOD services is important to reduce the stress experienced by Indigenous AOD workers.

*"Sick of it always being Aboriginal ways having to adapt to white, mainstream ways. Wish it would happen the other way round for once."  
(Indigenous worker)*

Measures that can be introduced include:

- Having flexible working arrangements
- Recognising the importance of connections and obligations to land, community and kin
- Consulting widely with communities.

## Salaries

Indigenous AOD workers do difficult and valuable work and deserve appropriate salaries. Equivalent salaries for staff from government, community controlled and non-government health services are important.

*"...the greatest issue is disparity of salary across NGOs, community and government. For example, government salaries have incremental increases allowing for promotional opportunities but NGOs are not able to provide these incentives."  
(Indigenous manager)*

## Hiring and Keeping Staff

Challenging working conditions may discourage people from becoming Indigenous AOD workers especially in remote areas.

This can be improved by:

- Telling Indigenous people about the good things involved in being an Indigenous AOD worker
- Offering professional development opportunities
- Providing career paths
- Offering mentoring and 'buddy' programs
- Improving 'work readiness' by supporting:
  - » basic reading, writing and maths courses, job rotations, traineeships, apprenticeships and on-the-job programs
  - » Indigenous high school students getting into courses that will prepare them for advanced education.

## Career Paths

Often there are limited promotion opportunities for Indigenous people in AOD work. This can make it difficult to attract and keep staff. It is important for agencies to provide career paths for staff and to create senior staff positions that can be worked towards.

## Qualifications and Training

Indigenous AOD workers and their managers may need additional and ongoing training to allow them to do their jobs well. A range of training programs and opportunities are needed. These programs need to go beyond the level of Certificate III and Certificate IV. Improved training and advanced skill development will also help reduce stress levels among workers.

## Role Clarity

Many Indigenous AOD workers have very broad job descriptions. This can mean that workers try to be all things to all people and may not be clear about their core role. Better job descriptions let workers know what their roles are within their organisations.

## Mentoring

Mentoring involves more experienced workers (mentors) working with less experienced workers (the protégés). Mentoring is important because it builds on the skills and knowledge of the current workforce and helps develop the workforce of the future.

Mentoring provides a safe and supportive way to help the person being mentored learn to manage stressful and hard situations. It also helps them develop problem solving skills to address issues and problems that happen in the AOD field.

Mentoring, along with clinical supervision and debriefing, can help workers to understand their roles and help them put limits on what is expected of them.

### Clinical Supervision

Clinical supervision usually involves an experienced worker helping a less experienced worker to develop their clinical skills by providing support and guidance. For Indigenous AOD workers, this needs to occur in an Indigenous-specific and culturally safe way. This is a very important way of preventing and managing stress but it is not widely used by agencies employing Indigenous AOD workers.

### Debriefing

Debriefing involves helping workers to carefully reflect on stressful events. This includes factors such as what led to the event, the worker's reactions to the event and how future stressful events can be prevented. This can be an effective way to reduce stress, but many Indigenous AOD workers are not provided with the chance to debrief. It is important for organisations to provide appropriate debriefing that best suits their workers.

### Team and Co-Worker Support

Team and co-worker support is important for all workers but it is particularly important for Indigenous AOD workers, especially those

working in remote areas. Co-worker support is considered so important to Indigenous worker wellbeing that it is recommended that Indigenous workers should never be appointed in isolation. Rather, appointments should be made in pairs – at a minimum – to ensure that daily support is always available. This is especially important for young or new workers.

*"I have to say they are very supportive of me and they have left me to my own elements to do what I do; and for that I am thankful." (Indigenous worker)*

### Flexible Work Times

Flexible work times are especially important for Indigenous AOD workers. It allows workers to balance work, family and community commitments and includes:

- Flexible working hours
- Time off in lieu for extra hours worked
- Access to additional cultural leave.

### Regularly Consulting With Staff About Their Workloads

Many Indigenous AOD workers feel a strong obligation toward their communities. It can be difficult to decline requests for help. As a result, workers can easily become overloaded. This can be a major source of stress. Managers should ensure that:

- Staff are not overloaded
- Workloads are shared evenly
- Staff are involved in decision-making concerning issues which impact on their work.

### Improving Administration and Coordination

Making administrative processes as simple as possible can help to ensure that workers don't get "bogged down" in administrative work instead of helping clients and communities. Better coordination with other services can also help streamline client care and provide greater networking opportunities.

### Other Measures

Other things that organisations can do to reduce stress and burnout among Indigenous AOD workers include:

- Ensuring that there are enough staff to do the work
- Providing training that focuses on stress management
- Offering pampering sessions to staff (e.g., neck massages)
- Allowing staff to take cultural leave, including taking time off for Sorry Business and funeral leave to enable them to grieve properly
- Providing rostered days off for case managers if they have worked on the weekend or done overtime
- Providing staff with flexible working arrangements

- Building professional and social networks
- Letting staff know when they do well
- Giving staff lots of chances to attend training
- Paying for workshops and training costs
- Building informal networks with workers from other agencies
- Having training programs available in management and leadership.

Many of these strategies can be put in place easily and cheaply. Others are more complex and will need more funds and other forms of resourcing to make change possible.

# Individual Strategies to Help Worker Wellbeing and Reduce Stress and Burnout Among Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander AOD Workers

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Despite doing stressful, difficult jobs many Indigenous AOD workers are very resilient even in the face of extreme pressure. Workers can put helpful stress management steps in place themselves. Regardless of the stress prevention or management strategies that staff use, they need to use them regularly and over a long period of time.

Individual stress reduction strategies should be used in conjunction with organisational stress management strategies, not in isolation.

It is important for workers to recognise how they personally respond to stress in their work role. This is different for each person. Understanding the factors and events that trigger stress and applying strategies to lower stress levels is essential for worker wellbeing.

*"We learn a lot off them too. They learn off us of course, but we learn a lot off them. We learn it's not a one-way thing, where we expect them to listen to us, but we've got to listen to them too. We hear their stories." (Indigenous worker)*

## Cultural Backgrounds

Many Indigenous people have overcome extraordinarily difficult experiences and have gained great strength and resilience from their cultural backgrounds.

Key elements in maintaining worker wellbeing include:

- Having close family bonds
- Telling and hearing cultural stories
- Spirituality.

## Connections to Community

Doing work that allows workers to keep and strengthen their links with their communities is an important stress management tool for many workers. Being able to give to and receive support from their communities is extremely important to worker wellbeing.

## Laughter

Laughter is a helpful way to remain positive and resilient. Humour can also be used within the workplace as a way to manage distressing events and contain minor irritations.

*“Aboriginal people joke all the time. It could be about a death, but we try and make something funny about it, just to cheer everyone up. It’s good to have a cry, but you have to laugh too.”  
(Indigenous worker)*

## Having Realistic Expectations

Developing an understanding of what can and can’t be done, and being aware that it is not possible to help everyone, is essential for worker wellbeing. Developing realistic expectations can reduce the stress on Indigenous AOD workers. Recognising stressful situations that are likely to occur as part of Indigenous AOD workers’ roles can help reduce stress when these situations do arise.

## Prioritising Work

Prioritising the jobs to be done at work is important to reduce stress, particularly where workloads are overwhelming. Prioritising tasks is a key way to keep on top of the demands and expectations from communities, peers and managers. It is important to learn techniques and strategies to prioritise work tasks that are most important and need to be attended to first.

## Work/Life Balance

Work/life balance concerns the relationship between work and the commitments in the rest of workers’ lives and how they impact on one

another. Many Indigenous AOD workers struggle to balance work and the responsibilities of caring for children, community and kin.

*“Community often forget that you as a health worker are also a member of the community and are suffering just as much.” (Indigenous worker)*

There is no ideal work/life balance. Everyone is different and the ‘right’ balance may change as commitments change.

Flexible work arrangements help to manage work and life demands, for instance by allowing employees to work in patterns and places that fit their personal commitments. Having a good work/life balance can lead to improvements in overall quality of life. Organisations can also benefit from employees’ higher morale and commitment.

## Enjoying the Successes

Working with clients, particularly one-on-one, and helping them to achieve their goals is a major source of worker satisfaction. Seeing clients who previously had AOD problems living, working, and participating in community activities is rewarding and can balance out the stress and demands experienced by workers.

Focussing on successes, no matter how small, is very important.

“...you don't see somebody for two or three years and you see them after a couple of years and they're being sober. And you think great, they're doing fine.

And that's the most rewarding thing ... when I see people completing and staying successfully off the drugs and alcohol for a few years ... It makes it worthwhile working here.” (Indigenous manager)

**Things that Indigenous AOD workers can do to reduce their stress**

<b>Traditional things</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take time out to participate in traditional activities</li> <li>Go home to community</li> <li>Practice your spiritual understanding of the world</li> </ul>
<b>Recreational things</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take time out to participate in an enjoyable activity</li> <li>Listen to music</li> <li>Meditation, yoga, breathing exercises</li> <li>Go for a walk with a friend/dog</li> <li>Have a regular massage</li> </ul>
<b>Social things</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share knowledge</li> <li>Learn new things</li> <li>Have a close personal support network</li> <li>Spend time with family</li> <li>Visit friends</li> <li>Eat well, go out for dinner</li> <li>Laugh</li> </ul>
<b>Domestic personal things</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take a nap</li> <li>Turn off the phone, lights, TV; spend time alone</li> <li>Do not answer the door</li> <li>Enjoy a movie or favourite TV show</li> <li>Go for a long drive</li> <li>Gardening</li> <li>Have regular medical checks</li> <li>Practice healthy living (i.e., do not smoke, drink, use illicit drugs)</li> </ul>
<b>Work-related things</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have a coffee and debrief informally with work mates</li> <li>Have a routine</li> <li>Take one day at a time</li> <li>Consider things from another perspective</li> <li>Accept your limitations</li> <li>Look forward to the end of the working day; do not take work home.</li> </ul>

## Where to Get More Information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Support

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For more information about what is available to you locally, we recommend that you contact your relevant state or territory's peak community controlled health organisation.

Most of these organisations offer a wide variety of workforce support options, including workforce development units, health worker networks, accredited training courses and newsletters and magazines. In most instances they should be able to refer you to an appropriate organisation in your region.

ACT: Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services  
Ph: 02 6284 6222

NSW: Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales (AH&MRC)  
Ph: 02 9212 4777

NT: Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT)  
Ph: 08 8944 6666

QLD: Queensland Aboriginal & Islander Health Council (QAIHC)  
Ph: 07 3328 8500

SA: Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia (AHCSA)  
Ph: 08 8273 7200

TAS: Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc.  
Ph: 03 6234 0700

VIC: Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)  
Ph: 03 9411 9411

WA: Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA)  
Ph: 08 9227 1631



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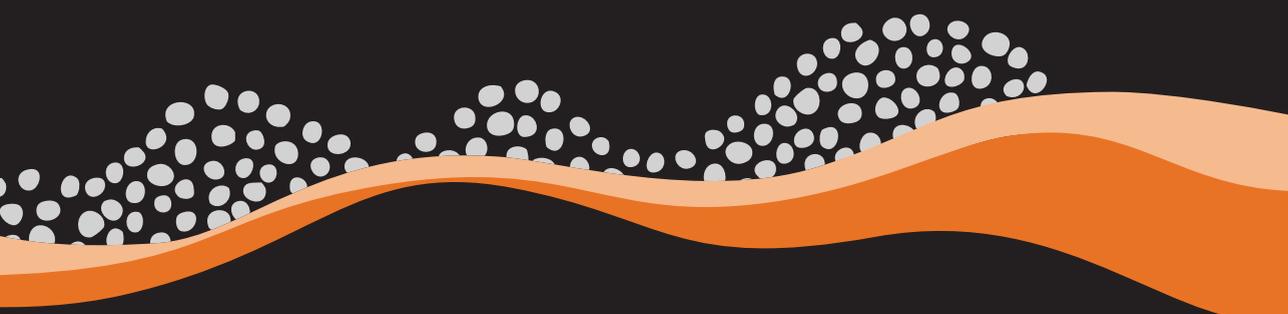
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