



## **Communication Methods- Working with Older People from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities**

### **Who is Australia's ageing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population?**

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent approximately 3.3% of the total Australian population (ABS, 2016), with 91% identifying as being Aboriginal, 5% identifying as being Torres Strait Islander, and 4% identifying as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are defined by the Australian Government by a three-pronged definition:

1. A person who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
2. A person who *identifies* as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
3. A person who is *accepted* as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the communities in which they live or have lived.

It is important to note that although many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may speak their native language, many do not. It is important to always ask if someone identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, as this opens up a platform for people to disclose their cultural identity.

Everyone in Australia has the right to access quality, inclusive and culturally safe aged care services that cater to their individual needs and respects their background and life experiences.

### **Did you know?**

New South Wales has the largest population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ABS, 2016), and in South-Western Sydney, there are over 13,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents (ABS, 2011), with a younger age profile than for non-Aboriginal people in the area. This may be due to the lower life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or the tendency for younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify more than their elders who were involved in the Stolen Generations. It is important when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, to understand their perspectives and cultural barriers that may prevent them from accessing aged care services.

### **What are the issues facing older people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?**

- High levels of socio-economic disadvantage
- The impact of the Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders' trust of services, and government agencies
- The impact of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders' ability to engage with services
- Lateral violence- for example, questioning a person's Aboriginality- and its' impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders' engagement with services
- A lack of Aboriginal services and workers, and culturally-safe services

- Different understandings of the concept of ageing and disability within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Differences in the importance of Elders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Cultural protocols such as Sorry Business and other end of life values in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- The kinship system, and the importance of extended family members in the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders.

### **How can we better communicate with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ageing community?**

- Always asking a client if they identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and not assuming a person's cultural identity by the way they look
- Having strong partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations (e.g. Land Councils) to ensure that services are culturally safe
- Ensuring that services are trauma-informed when working with Aboriginal elders, particularly those who are survivors of the Stolen Generations
- Reducing racism in aged care services, and increasing cultural competency for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Educating non-Aboriginal people within services on the diversity of Aboriginality (physically and culturally) to reduce occurrences of covert racism and empower light-skinned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders to access services
- Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the design, implementation and delivery of services
- Learning more about the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people conceptualise ageing, and other cultural protocols around dying and ageing
- Acknowledging and respecting the important roles Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders play in their communities, and involving them in decision-making processes
- Provide resources that are culturally appropriate and easy to understand, for example, displaying easy to read material
- Make service locations Aboriginal friendly- using acknowledgements to Country, displaying Aboriginal artwork, and engaging actively with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community
- Engage in important events for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for example, NAIDOC week
- Implement an organisational Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access and Equity Plan to ensure the cultural needs of the older person are met, having regular consultations with the older person, carers and families to ensure the standard of the quality of care of the older person is met

### **Sources:**

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2016. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15. ABS cat. No. 4714.0. Canberra:ABS.
- ABS, 2011. Census of Population and Housing.