



STRENGTHENING OUR SPIRITS MODEL

Together, the four elements – fire, land, air and water – create the perfect system. This system has provided Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with everything we have needed to survive and thrive for more than 60,000 years. Self-harm and suicide do not fit with our traditional story. Self-harm and suicide are not a part of our culture. Our culture is founded on a balance between fire (our spirit), land (our mother), air (our healing) and water (our identity). Self-harm and suicide occurs where there is an imbalance in the elements that results in a person’s spirit dying out or becoming detached.

Traditionally, we have ways to ensure that this does not happen – we use healing and ceremony to ensure that we all remain safe and connected. We have ways to ensure that our fire (our spirit) continues to burn bright. However, some of our people, especially our young people, have become isolated – their fire is cooling in the embers, or is rushing away, trying to find another place where there is sufficient fuel to keep burning. Today, the system that has supported us for so long is not in balance and we need our community and service providers to help us bring it back into alignment. The following is a description of our way of knowing a systems-based approach to suicide prevention. It draws on the concepts and symbols that are meaningful for us and links these to key elements that we believe are important when taking a systems-based approach to the prevention of self-harm and suicide.

FIRE – SPIRIT – PURPOSE

Fire represents **our spirit**. When the flames are burning high, our spirit is strong and has a clear sense of purpose. Our spirit is not the spirit of a single individual. It is the spirit of us – the fundamental and collective essence of us as individuals, families and communities – these are inseparable and without all, the fire (the spirit) will burn out. Our spirit gives us **our purpose**.

The goal of a systems-based approach to suicide prevention is to keep the fire burning. When the fire is burning bright, the spirit and our sense of purpose is strong. When the fire dies down and the coals begin to cool, the spirit is weakening and we are at risk of losing our sense of purpose. This creates a risk of self-harm and suicide.

LAND – MOTHER – BELONGING

Land represents **our mother** – our nurturer and provider. The land harvests the trees, bushes, wood, bark, leaves and grass that fuel the fire (our spirit) and keep it burning. We belong to the land – our spirit belongs to the land. Our spirit and the land are inseparable. The land gives us **our sense of belonging**.

How we deliver a systems-based approach to suicide prevention is to use the resources given to us by the **land** to tend to the fire. This is a whole-off-community responsibility. When the fire is burning bright, tending to the fire is light but important work. If we add sticks and leaves regularly, the fire remains ablaze. Similarly, if we have and take regular opportunities to connect with and celebrate our culture and build the capacity of our people, we will nurture our **sense of belonging** and keep the spirit strong. This is the ideal form of suicide prevention. However, if we neglect to tend to the fire regularly, the fire will die down and restocking the fire becomes a more urgent and intensive task. This is when suicide prevention training, crisis support and follow-up support are required to help a weakened spirit become strong again.

WATER – IDENTITY – HOPE

Water represents **our identity**. Larrakia are saltwater people. We share this identity with the many members of the Stolen Generations and Torres Strait Islander families who have come to live on our country. Saltwater not only provides us with our livelihood – it is our connection to the spirits of our ancestors. It is our cultural memory that connects us through past, present and future. The land (our mother) and the water (our identity) are a perfect union. Working together, they shape each other to enable saltwater and freshwater to meet, creating the perfect conditions for procreation and regeneration. The water gives us **hope in our future**.

Who delivers a systems-based approach to suicide prevention are those who share **our identity**. Like the water, they surround the land and keep the fire safely contained in its rightful place. These people and organisations have different roles to play in tending the fire – some will flow into the shore to tend the fire regularly while others will be further out to sea and in the waterways, ready to come if the tide turns. While they do not all come to the shore at the same time, that are always connected through the knowledge that flows seamlessly through the water. Because they are always there surrounding the land and fire, either waiting at the shoreline or further away in the sea and waterways, they provide us with **hope** that the fire will always stay alight.

AIR – HEALING – MEANING

Air represents **healing** – cleansing, change and adaptation. As the fire burns and comes into contact with the air, smoke is created. For our people, smoke heals, cleanses and purifies our spirit and wills it to keep burning strong. Sometimes our spirit can stray and can't find its way back home to us. When this happens, smoke guides and reorientates our spirit back into ourselves and our land. The air gives us **our meaning in life**.

The outcome of a systems based approach to suicide prevention is healing. The stronger the fire burns, the more smoke it creates to heal us and give us meaning. This healing is not just the healing needed after a suicide or suicide attempt. It is healing from our shared history, trauma and detachment of culture and language. This systems base approach can aid in rebuilding our strength and resilience as a community. It will support our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living within the Darwin Region to regain and/or strengthen our mental, physical and spiritual wellness.