

# Our health, our way



Healing circles are helping Aboriginal men, women and children create new opportunities, improve their health and deal with past trauma, as Communications Editor Marian Reid discovered during a recent visit to Western Australia.

"The word is healing ... we need to heal within ourselves."

From the steps of a little community hall Joyce Dimer looks out over the railway track and creek towards the town centre. "Change is when women are taking a stand, and saying, 'we've got something to do. How about you blokes or you young fellas start to think about what you're doing?'"

It's Wednesday in the small West Australian town of Narrogin — women's group day. About 15 Nyoongar women and their children are gathered in and around the hall. They come and go, endless cups of tea are made and outside in the sun a pocket of young women talk closely with an Aboriginal social worker. In the kitchen, group members and health workers prepare lunch for everyone.

LEFT: Bunbury, Western Australia: Tiara Thorn and Bianca Garlett are part of a girls' group which aims to strengthen self-esteem and leadership skills. Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.

RIGHT: Bunbury, Western Australia: Shaun Maher creates a painting about the Stolen Generation at the Bunbury Goomberup Men's Group, which has been running for just a few months. "I love it. I like this here, doing some painting. I'm getting good now." Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.

Amid the chatter, laughter and excitement is a single purpose — a group of strong Aboriginal women coming together to share, learn, heal and talk about issues that impact them every day.

Two hours away in the tiny coal town of Collie is another women's group. They proudly call themselves the Collie Yorga's, which means strong women.

Diane Barron lived in Collie until a tragic accident in her family changed everything. She moved to Perth, but after several years she came home. And it's the Collie Yorga's that finally helped her find her feet again.

"When I was in Perth I felt very lonely," she remembers. "There wasn't anywhere that I could go. Now, since I've joined this group ... I feel happy. They say it's a healing group, well, it really helped me."

Shirley Hayward has been with the Yorga's since it started more than a year ago. Over 50 years she has seen Collie change from a racist community to a far more accepting place to live. But she believes the healing group bridges more of those racial gaps and helps to heal relationships within the Nyoongar community.

"We share yarns and good times together, and it's a happy, happy group we've got here," Shirley says. "All the ladies are trying to work towards a better understanding ... there's been great achievement in the town among the younger and older ones. The impact from this group is very positive for people, especially for families."

Often health workers from other local organisations come to speak to the group about issues like domestic violence, drugs and alcohol or mental health.

"Everything, everything's changed," group participant Joy Ugle says. "We've never done this in the past. This here is really cool."

She's just finished some beautiful beadwork and shows them off to the group. It's her first attempt. "I might just end up doing these beads permanently, selling them. I can't believe what I just made girl. Unbelievable!"

Joyce Dimer is a Nyoongar social worker with the South West Aboriginal Medical Service (SWAMS), and she profoundly believes healing circles are the best way for Aboriginal people to change their lives.



## AT A GLANCE

- » SWAMS provides outreach to individuals of all ages and families across the South West Region of Western Australia, including Bunbury, Collie and Narrogin.
- » They are a Nyoongar Community Controlled Health Organisation, founded on the principles of self-determination, empowerment and freedom of choice.
- » Their mission is to provide healthcare services to Nyoongar people in Nyoongar ways so that their health problems are properly overcome, now and in the future.



"I work as part of a caring team ... with women, men and youth. Here it's a healing space to get the community to stand up and take a strong stance against family violence and child abuse.

"People are doing nothing ... and it brings out drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence and feuding. But since I've set up the groups people are taking a leadership role. They're standing up and doing things for themselves.

"The groups are their space. Some people tell me it's the best thing that ever happened to them."

Back in Bunbury a vibrant girls' group gathers after school. The girls are learning to model locally-made dresses and create their own fabric designs. But, like the women's group, this is just a way in to start bigger conversations.

"The girl's youth group is about self-esteem and it's about them recognising that they're important, that they're our next leaders," Joyce says. "We started off with nothing ... the kids were at risk. They felt they had no hope for their futures."

Imogen was one of the first three girls to join the group. "It's part of what we do, me and my sisters. We come here every Monday and we talk together about stopping violence and everything." One year later and there are 10 to 15 girls who regularly drop in.

"There has been a significant shift in how these young people conduct themselves in the community ... they now have a sense of expectation of a more positive future," Joyce says.

Healing circles are integral to improving the health of Aboriginal people in a culturally-appropriate environment. The bigger picture of healing is better health.

"Healing circles have given people an opportunity to talk about how they feel," SWAMS Chief Executive Officer Glenda Humes explains. "It also gives [SWAMS] an opportunity to give good healthy messages about different things. Back-up is there if people need some clinical support like a doctor, health worker. If they are feeling down, we've got social and emotional wellbeing.

"SWAMS do a lot of work around trans-generational trauma. It's about the people who were taken to the missions or separated from their families."

Before SWAMS and healing groups there was no outlet for Nyoongar people to deal with this trauma. "It was going absolutely nowhere," Glenda says. "And healing circles are not just about the people that attend, there's a ripple effect. It reaches out to their families and their children as well."

Men are also becoming involved. "The men are starting to recognise that the women are doing something," Joyce says, "and there's a cry for help here at the moment to get more men's groups started.

Joyce has recently started a men's group in Bunbury — it's just been a few months but word is spreading and there are big plans.

"With depression men usually keep it within themselves, but here they are open to let it out," Joyce says. "We'll get our veggie garden up and running in line with our healthy cooking groups that we are planning ... so what they plant they can eat also.

"Our people were dying younger than non-Indigenous people. But if we can change a little bit of the lifestyle, like healthy eating, outdoor activities, health programs, but keep our culture, bush gardens, look after our rivers, then we'll be able to get up and look forward to a better way of life."

Collie, Western Australia: SWAMS Social and Emotional Wellbeing Worker Joyce Dimer talks with Joy Ugle as she tries her hand at beadwork at Collie Yorgas Women's Group. Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.



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Read more about how SWAMS works with Aboriginal men, women and children in the Nyoongar community by visiting [www.oxfam.org.au/australia](http://www.oxfam.org.au/australia)

