

**By Grant Blashki**

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There is no denying that the First Nations communities in Australia have and continue to face numerous challenges and injustices. One issue that has garnered significant attention in recent years is the high rates of mental health issues within the community. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, First Nations people experience significantly higher rates of psychological distress and mental health conditions as well as higher rates of suicide and self-harm, compared to non-Indigenous Australians. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to these high rates of mental health issues within First Nations communities.

As a GP, I have observed that racism and discrimination can be like a wound that never fully heals, causing ongoing pain and suffering. Like a physical injury, these issues can take a toll on an individual's social and emotional wellbeing, leading to problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. First Nations people have experienced a history of colonisation, dispossession, and trauma, which have contributed to high rates of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These issues have often been compounded by ongoing racism and discrimination, which can lead to feelings of shame, worthlessness, and powerlessness.

A purely clinical mindset to mental health can often miss the larger societal and cultural context in which an individual's mental health problems are occurring. This is especially true when it comes to First Nations people, who have experienced, through a history of colonisation, the associated

intergenerational trauma that reverberates through families. By focusing solely on an individual's symptoms and treatment, a clinical approach can ignore the larger structural and historical issues that are contributing to mental health issues and diminished social and emotional wellbeing for people and their communities. This includes acknowledging and addressing issues such as ongoing racism and discrimination, as well as working towards reconciliation and social justice.

These are complex and hard to solve problems, however a step in the right direction which could improve social and emotional wellbeing is the introduction of the Voice to Parliament. It proposes a representative body that would provide a formal mechanism for First Nations people to have a say in the laws and policies that affect them.

There are several ways in which the Voice to Parliament could improve social and emotional wellbeing. Firstly, it would provide a platform for First Nations people to have their voices heard and their concerns addressed at a national level. This sense of being listened to and having agency in the decision-making process can be incredibly empowering and can help to alleviate feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Secondly, the Indigenous Voice to Parliament would provide a way for First Nations people share their culture and knowledge with the wider community. This sense of community and connection is essential for good mental health and positive social and emotional wellbeing and can help to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, improve the accessibility and comfort of First Nations people with mental health services.

Another potential benefit of the Voice to Parliament is that it could help to improve the cultural responsiveness of mental health services for First Nations people. By providing a forum to have their voices heard and their perspectives

considered, the Voice to Parliament could help to ensure that mental health services are more responsive to the needs and concerns of First Nations people. It could also help to raise awareness among policy makers and health care providers about the unique cultural and historical experiences of First Nations people and the importance of cultural sensitivity in providing mental health care.

It is also important to consider the potential mental health benefits for non-Indigenous Australians of supporting the Voice to Parliament. For non-Indigenous Australians, the Voice to Parliament can provide a step towards acknowledgement of past discrimination and injustices of historical policies and provide a way forward for reconciliation. This can help to contribute to a greater sense of national identity and unity.

Supporting the Voice to Parliament has the potential to significantly improve the wellbeing of all Australians, bringing in a new era of healing, reconciliation, and unity. By providing a platform, First Nations people will have their voices heard and their concerns addressed, as well as pave a way for all Australians to come together and work towards reconciliation. The Indigenous Voice to Parliament can be an important step towards healing and improving the mental well-being of all Australians.

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