

## NPY Women's Council Ngangkari Project

The NPY Women's Council Ngangkari Project employs anangu traditional healers (ngangkari) to provide traditional healing treatments to anangu in the NPYWC region, and to promote the value and importance of ngangkari and traditional healing practices in contemporary anangu life and culture. Ngangkari have been employed by NPY Women's Council since 1999 with funding from Country Health SA.

Anangu in the NPYWC region have a culturally based view of causation and recovery from physical and mental illness. Many anangu believe that some illness and problems are caused by harmful elements in the spiritual world. Ngangkari are highly valued for their ability to heal and protect individuals and communities from these elements. Ngangkari also say that there are substances and new diseases in modern society which they cannot treat with traditional methods, including the effects of substances such as petrol or cannabis, and that the best health outcomes for anangu come from western trained doctors and ngangkari working together.

There is strong acknowledgment and recognition of ngangkari by main stream health professionals in Central Australia. In 2009 Andy Tijlari and Rupert Peter were awarded the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry (RANZCP) Mark Sheldon Prize, and the ngangkari project also won the 2009 Dr Margaret Tobin Award for excellence in mental health service delivery. In 2011 the project was awarded the International Sigmund Freud Award by the World Congress of Psychotherapists. These awards acknowledge their extensive provision of consultation and treatment across Aboriginal communities and also recognise their work educating health professionals about indigenous healing methods and anangu cultural practices generally.

NPY Women's Council ngangkari are deeply concerned about the health and well being of young anangu in this region, as evidenced in this statement by **Rupert Peter**:

In so many different places, in so many different communities today you see a lot of problems associated with using marijuana, drinking alcohol, and petrol sniffing. People will be thinking about going and getting marijuana, they'll be asking, trying to get it the whole time, and not thinking about other people or how they relate to other people there. It's a different way of thinking. Using those substances leads to self harm and people thinking about suicide. This different way of thinking is something recent that's come about. It's just come up through the use and abuse of those substances.

When someone is talking about harming themselves, the first time that it's said it's really important to listen and to sit with that person.

Sometimes when people are sad they think about harming themselves. They might be upset and they are thinking along these lines: they'll say to someone 'Oh, OK! You're always saying bad things about me, always upset, irritated and annoyed with me! Right! Now I'm going to do something and later on you're going to cry!' Often these thought processes are the result of smoking marijuana and things that have come from outside Anangu culture. Smoking marijuana can really distort your thinking. Their thinking becomes really confused and they often think that people are angry with them and are 'out to get them' in some way; not caring for them, and irritated with them. Consequently they might think they'll do something so people will really think about them and be really saddened by what they do.

We see a range of people who have been affected by substance abuse; smoking too much marijuana, drinking, and other things which are causing them to become ill. Often people's thinking can be really badly affected by that smoking and drinking.

When someone is talking about harming themselves, the first time that it's said it's really important to listen and to sit with that person. It's important not to give them a hard time, but care for them, slowly talk with them, not say bad things about them, and try to help them think straight again about things. When they think people are saying bad things about them, or that people are irritated and annoyed with them because of their behaviour, they are under quite a bit of pressure. But if

they are given a chance to just sit quietly and be cared for, over a period of time they can start to feel good again and their thinking straightens out.

But on the other hand the pressure builds up on that person if one person then another and another keeps on saying bad things about them or says that they're crazy or is irritated and annoyed with them. If that pressure builds up and a whole lot of people continue to say those things, that's when the person starts to think, 'Alright! If all of you are thinking that way then I might finish myself off.'

It is important to tell people about the proper way to do things – to encourage them to listen and to learn about Law and to be with family. It's important to tell them that if they go down that broken road of smoking lots of marijuana they're going to get sick and it's a dead end there, it's a very unhealthy road to go down.

If you can see that someone wishes to hurt themselves you are in a position to be able to stop them, to talk with them and help them get through that time. But it's really hard to look after those people who do things in a way that you can't see; at night or in places where they are not being observed.

When we see people are in trouble and are suicidal we know that it's hard to look after them all the time. It's really important they get that help. As *ngangkari* we say that it's important that they can get to a hospital, be treated and helped. When we're aware of problems like people wanting to harm themselves then we can work with them and help get their blood flowing properly, help them think more clearly. We also think it's really important that they get professional help in the hospitals and are put there to be looked after at times when they can't be looked after or monitored in the communities.

So *ngangkari* can help those people by removing blockages which are stopping them from thinking clearly, or thinking well. And in the hospitals they can get good help too, so they are cared for properly and looked after so their thinking can be straightened out."

### **Andy Tjilari:**

Some *Anangu* suffer from depression and anxiety. You can see for example a person who will eat very little and will drink very little. They're sad inside, their spirit is sad. They won't drink much water or eat much meat; they are not well. Over time their spirit becomes weaker and weaker and makes them much more vulnerable to other sicknesses too.

When people are anxious it can be because they have witnessed something happen to their family members. And that's what's teaching them that fear or anxiety. They can think that the same thing might happen to them; that they might be harmed or die, and in turn that can lead to people harming themselves. We give treatments to help people's spirit.

It's this constant anxiety which really weakens a person's spirit. It makes their thinking go bad and over time they develop serious mental health issues and harm their mental health. *Ngangkari* could give treatments to these people. They would touch their heads and see inside and see that their brain had been harmed by what they'd seen. It was akin to a small ball that had shrunk and become narrow. They could also see the various blockages which had caused it to close off, a lot of heat coming from certain places.

We can see the things that are causing people's thinking to become bad and see the blockages which can be caused in different ways that can lead to people wanting to 'finish themselves off'. The anxiety can lead people to think about suicide.

So we will talk to people and family members will talk with the person who is feeling really anxious, if they've witnessed, say, the death of a family member in a car accident. Over time they'll talk and they'll talk until the person is feeling more balanced about things and thinking a bit more clearly. So it is a gradual process of talking with the person until they're comfortable again about going to the scene of the accident. And there *ngangkari* have the role of assessing the situation and they'll see where the spirit of the person is who has passed away, get that spirit and put it back inside a close

family member – a person who is part of that true family. They might put the spirit back into the brother of the person who passed away so that it can be looked after. And after that the surviving brother's thinking becomes clearer again and he recovers. The spirit is placed with the family member so that they can keep it. In that way the spirit continues to be nourished and fed. So the brother's spirit can be looked after and nourished by a brother; in turn, family look after each other's spirits.

When people have anxiety and are mistaken in their thinking it spreads down to their spirit and a whole range of illnesses can come from that. Those illnesses can in turn cause further anxiety. Ngangkari have an important role in treating and healing people who are fearful and have anxiety.

*“Ngangkari Work – Anangu Way: traditional healers of Central Australia,”* NPYWC publication documenting the work and life stories of various ngangkari (traditional healers), 2003.

CD - *Speaking up about Mental Health* – Rupert Peter and Andy Tjilari. Ngangkari, 2009