Paving the way to healing complex trauma

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A major study led by researchers at La Trobe University in Australia has identified key themes that will be used to inform strategies to support Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in the first years of their children's lives.

The Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future project aims to break the cycle of intergenerational and complex trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, by co-designing strategies for new parents.

The international research team, led by Associate Professor Catherine Chamberlain of La Trobe's Judith Lumley Centre and published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*, reviewed more than 20,000 scholarly articles to build a comprehensive understanding of pregnancy and birth for parents who have experienced trauma in their own childhood.

The study identified seven themes, derived from studying interviews with more than 350 parents who experienced trauma as children, relate to parents' experiences during pregnancy, birth and the first few weeks after birth.

Associate Professor Catherine Chamberlain said the research is critical for informing discussions with Aboriginal parents and communities to create a strong foundation for work to heal complex trauma.

"This gives us a thorough and deep understanding needed to help co-design support strategies with communities to improve the lives of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their babies," Associate Professor Chamberlain said.

"We have shared these themes in discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members to see if any are relevant. Doing so also helps parents to understand these experiences are shared, even in other countries.

"The next stage of our Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future project will use these themes to examine what support strategies have been evaluated in research. We will look at whether this research reflects what support parents say they want and what they feel works."

The seven themes are:

- New beginnings: Becoming a parent is an opportunity for 'a fresh start', to put the past behind them and move forward with hope for the future to create a new life for themselves and their

  child.

- Changing roles and identities: Becoming a parent is a major life transition, influenced by perceptions of the parenting role.
- Feeling connected: The quality of relationships with self, baby and others has major impacts on the experiences of becoming a parent.
- Compassionate care: Kindness, empathy and sensitivity enables parents to build trust and feel valued and cared for.
- Empowerment: Control, choice and 'having a voice' are critical to fostering safety.
- Creating safety: Parents perceive the 'world as unsafe' and use conscious strategies to build safe places and relationships to protect themselves and their baby.

- 'Reweaving' a future: Managing distress and healing while becoming a parent is a personal ongoing and complex process requiring strength, hope and support.

Associate Professor Chamberlain said the seven themes also resonated strongly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and she was grateful to the research team for all their hard work and expertise, and to Lowitja Institute and the NHMRC for funding this phase of her work.

More information: Catherine Chamberlain et al, Healing The Past By Nurturing The Future: A qualitative systematic review and meta-synthesis of pregnancy, birth and early postpartum experiences and views of parents with a history of childhood maltreatment, *PLOS ONE* (2019). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0225441

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