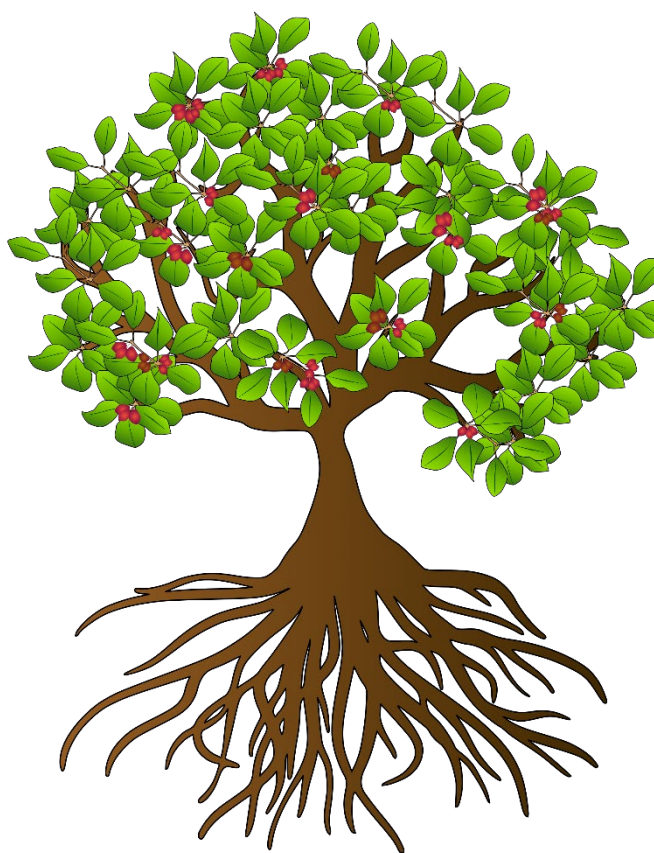


Growing old good way in the Torres Strait



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Foreword



This booklet was written following our yarns with several Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area communities. We yarned with community members on Ngurupai, Wug, Warraber and Kirriri. We also held two yarns in the Northern Peninsula Area in Bamaga and New Mapoon where community members from all five communities attended. In these yarns we asked people what ageing well meant to them. We wanted to know what things helped them to age well so others could learn from them. We also yarned about some of the challenges people faced to ageing well in their communities. Results reflect the voices of people living in these communities and how they view ageing well.

These stories were brought together and presented here as parts of a wongai tree. The words in the speech bubbles are the actual words that were said to us by the people that took part.

These findings, along with work we have been doing with the Primary Health Care Centres, will be used to develop an Ageing Well Framework to support people to age well in the Torres Strait and NPA region.

This research project is run by the [HEALTHY AGEING RESEARCH TEAM](#) (HART).

Many thanks for taking time to read this booklet

Eso

Aunty Betty Sagigi

Chenoa Wapau

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the people that came along to the yarning circles to share their stories and wisdom with us about ageing well. It is your words that we use. This story is for you all.

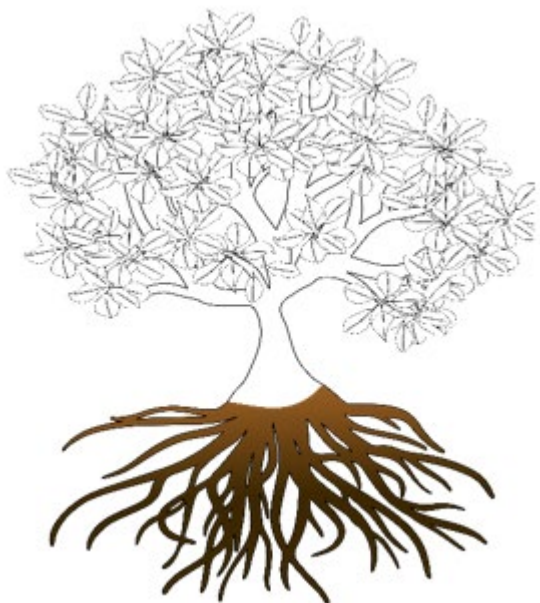
We would like to thank the staff at Warraber PHCC, Ngurupai PHCC, Wug (St. Pauls) PHCC, Bamaga PHCC and the PARAC team for helping with the yarning circles – big Eso.

We also want to thank Jimi Thaiday for his artwork of the wongai tree and the healthy ageing logo.

This story was written by: Auntie Betty Sagigi, Chenoa Wapau, Rachel Quigley, and Sarah Russell.



Living a Torres Strait Islander way of life: the roots



The roots of the wongai tree are strong and keep the tree healthy. Just like the Torres Strait Islander way of life, with strong relationships and connections which help people to grow old well.

Connections to *island home* keep people well and healthy:

People want to grow old in their own homes within their island communities. They don't want to leave their homes to access health care or aged care services.

"Having a beach day, the beautiful view, the land, and the sea means so much to our health up here. We've always got that place where we go."

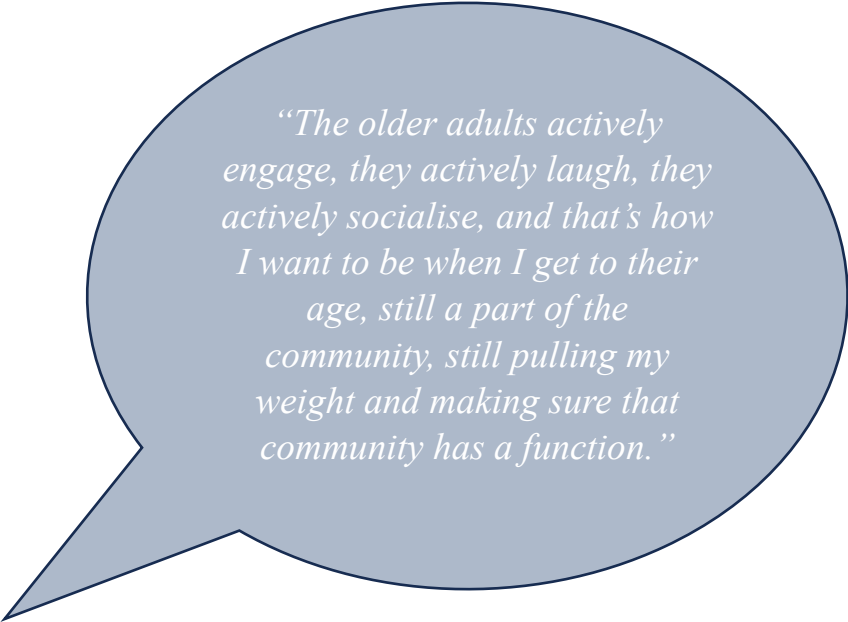
"We want to stay here. This is our home; we don't want to leave our home to go into an aged care home off the island."

Connections to family is an important part of a Torres Strait Islander way of life. Being with family makes people happy and keeps them strong. Being with grandchildren keeps older people active and on their feet.

"Ageing well, it's very simple, in my life experience, it's being with my family."

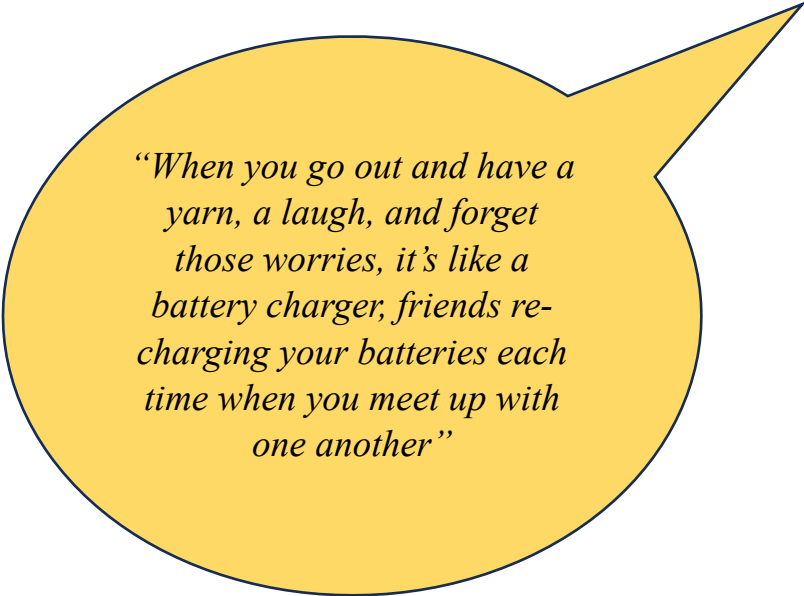
Connecting to the community helps people age well.

It gives people feelings of belonging, provides joy, and gives older people a purpose.



“The older adults actively engage, they actively laugh, they actively socialise, and that’s how I want to be when I get to their age, still a part of the community, still pulling my weight and making sure that community has a function.”

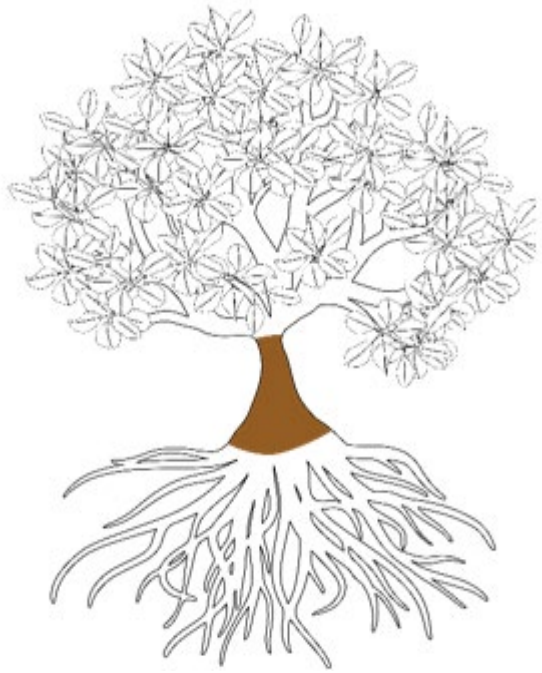
Being social and joining in community events makes people feel good. **Social connections** support holistic wellbeing.



“When you go out and have a yarn, a laugh, and forget those worries, it’s like a battery charger, friends re-charging your batteries each time when you meet up with one another”

Generally, people look forward to growing old with their family and friends by their side and doing all the things they enjoy together.

Practicing Torres Strait Islander Identity: the trunk

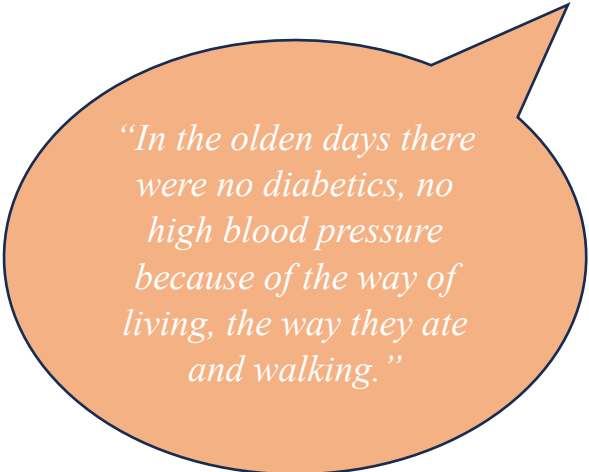


The trunk of the wongai tree is strong and shapes the tree as it grows, holding it together. Just like the Torres Strait Islander identity is shaped through tradition and culture.

The trunk of the tree must be strong to survive against the harsh winds, to be resilient against disease and to live for many years. Traditions and culture also need to be strong for people to age well.

“What does it look like to be ageing well? The cultural practices come with respect, acknowledgement, and contributes to the social and emotional wellbeing for individuals, families and communities. The cultural hierarchal structure, within the community, within the family, there is that acknowledgement of the processes, the wisdom and knowledge that comes with ageing and all that stuff. That is good ageing.”

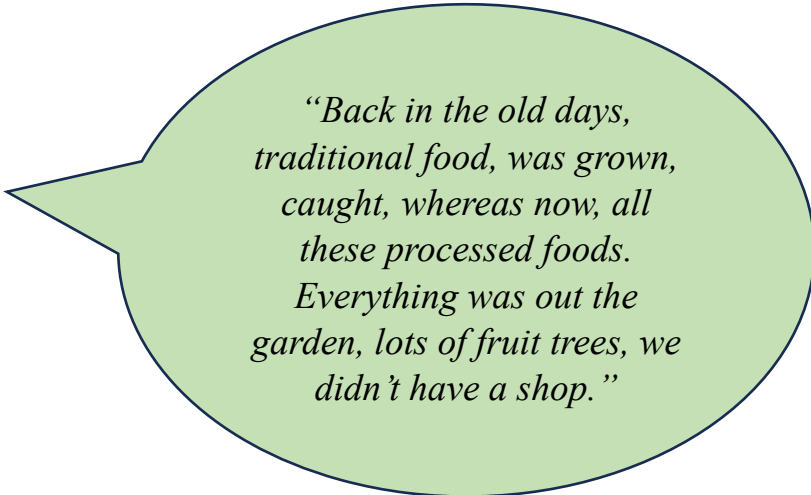
Each year that passes adds more height and width to the tree trunk, but it is the base of the tree trunk, the oldest part from years gone by, that is the strongest. This is the same for the ways of living in the old days. Back in the day, living a traditional lifestyle helped people age well and they were strong. The traditional way of life supported ageing well because of a healthier diet and people being more physically active.



“In the olden days there were no diabetics, no high blood pressure because of the way of living, the way they ate and walking.”

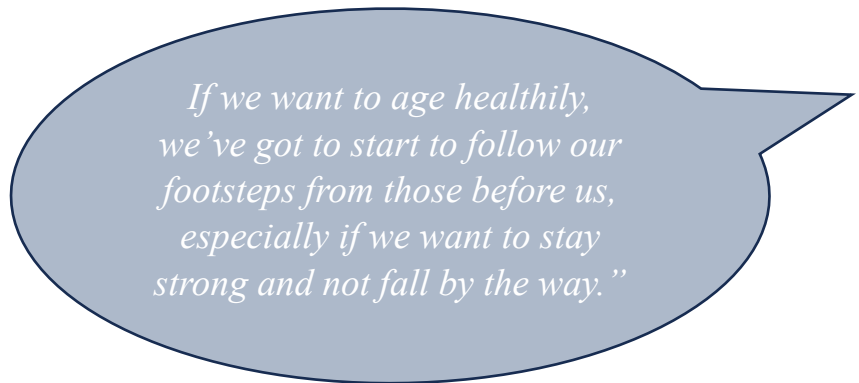
In the old days people would do a lot of hard physical work in their everyday activities such as collecting firewood for lighting and cooking, managing their gardens, carrying water from wells, going out hunting and gathering food, and rowing boats. These activities kept people fit, active and healthy.

Most people would eat garden food that they grew, and this was healthier and more satisfying than processed store-bought food.



“Back in the old days, traditional food, was grown, caught, whereas now, all these processed foods. Everything was out the garden, lots of fruit trees, we didn't have a shop.”

In days gone by, the traditional ways of living such as living off the island, community activities, and practicing cultural activities kept people strong and helped them to live long lives free from chronic disease. People say they have to follow the examples set by the older generation.



If we want to age healthily, we've got to start to follow our footsteps from those before us, especially if we want to stay strong and not fall by the way.”

Living a healthy lifestyle: the branches



A wongai tree has many branches, which shows it is growing well. Likewise, there are many parts to wellbeing that help people age well. A healthy lifestyle includes physical, mental, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing. All these aspects are connected and need to be balanced.

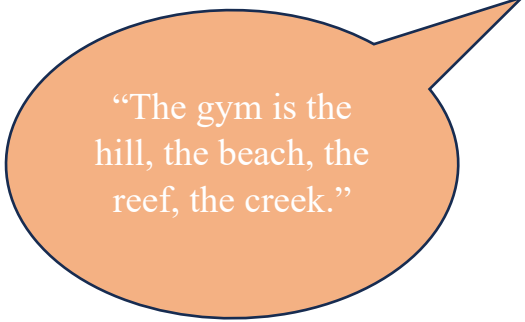
“Ageing well is holistic. It’s the whole thing – culture, spiritual, healthy eating, also wellbeing, individual wellbeing, psychological, but also socially as well, social with people. Interactions. Having everything, they all intertwine and makes a person. If one is out of balance the rest are unbalanced. For a healthy person I think everything needs to be all equal and level.”

A tree branch that is mental health

Having strong mental health supports ageing well. People find it helps to share worries with family and friends. Using mental health services is also good, but more services across the region would be helpful.

“The mental side of it is really powerful, it drives a person. So, to be healthy is to look after your mental wellbeing”.

A tree branch that is physical activity:



“The gym is the hill, the beach, the reef, the creek.”

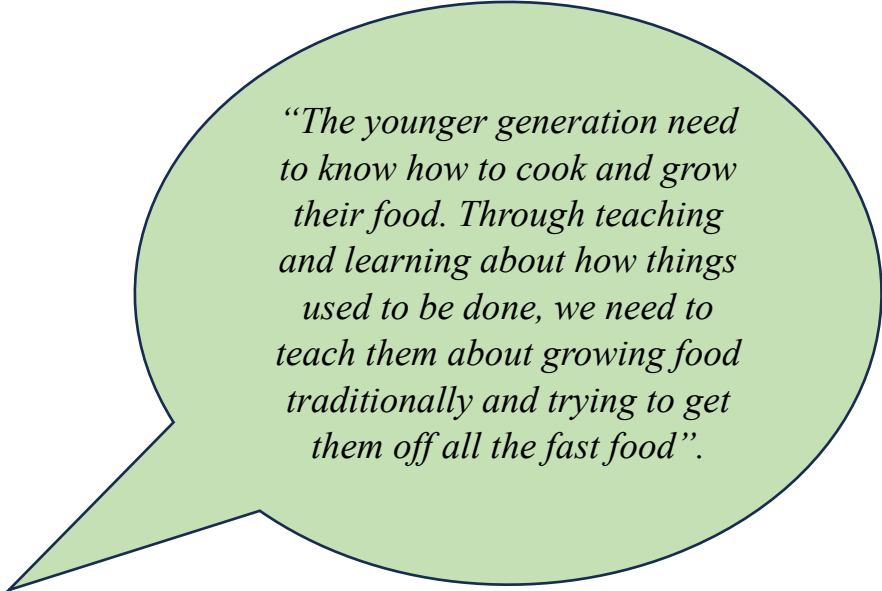
People know that doing physical activity is good for you and helps you to age well. The natural environment is a good place to exercise. People that remain active are living longer healthier lives.

A tree branch that is diet:

Most people know that the way we eat affects how we age.

A diet rich in fruit and vegetables and fresh fish, as well as portion-control is healthier and helps people age well.

The younger generation need to be shown how to grow and cook healthy food.



“The younger generation need to know how to cook and grow their food. Through teaching and learning about how things used to be done, we need to teach them about growing food traditionally and trying to get them off all the fast food”.

The branches of the wongai tree provide strength and support the canopy of leaves and fruit. Likewise, good lifestyle factors provide strength and support ageing well.

Displaying strong leadership and role models: the leaves



The leaves of the wongai tree are like leadership within a community. The leaves provide nourishment to the tree. Strong leadership and good role models provide support to the community.

Where old leaves die, new leaves grow and take their place and so when leaders pass, new leaders take their place.

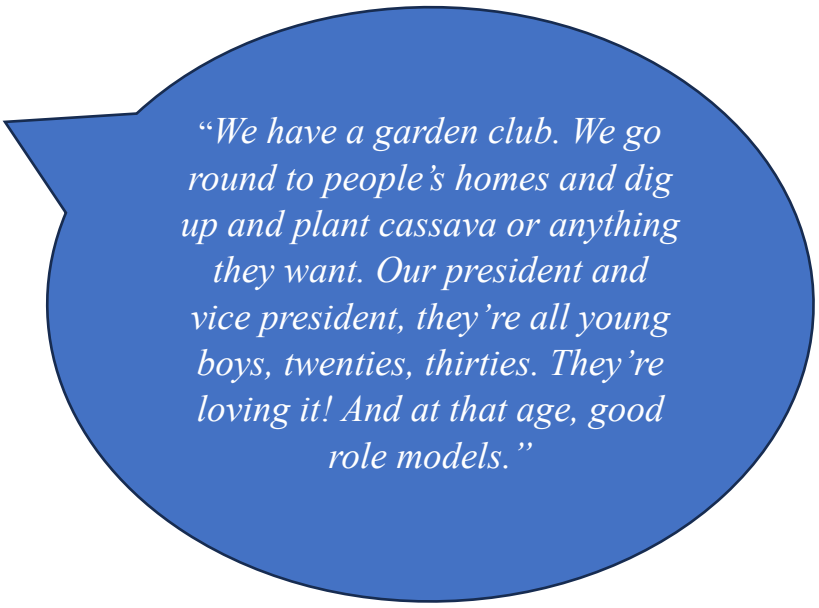
“We have to lead by example. I’m approaching my Eldership now, but we have to lead by example, and we have to lead in such a way that if the younger generation see us healthy then they will be healthy. If they see us make the change, they will make the change whether it’s culture, whether it’s education, whether it’s picking up something and helping others.”

Strong leaders in the community play an important role in ageing well by being good role models to the younger generation.

People said that those in leadership roles can facilitate change within their communities.

“People would look to them, and they’d give the advice, and everyone would follow”

And that people of any age can be a good role model by showing respect and displaying cultural values.



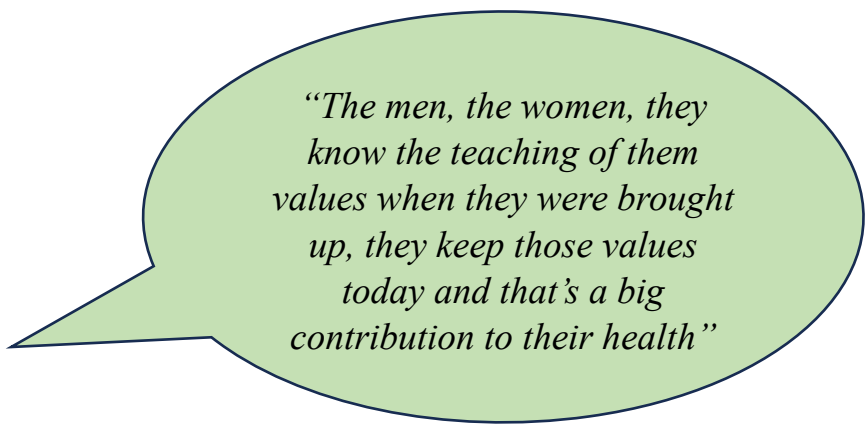
“We have a garden club. We go round to people’s homes and dig up and plant cassava or anything they want. Our president and vice president, they’re all young boys, twenties, thirties. They’re loving it! And at that age, good role models.”



“All of them nephews they listen to me when I ask them to do some things for me, so ageing well can be done if we have respect”.

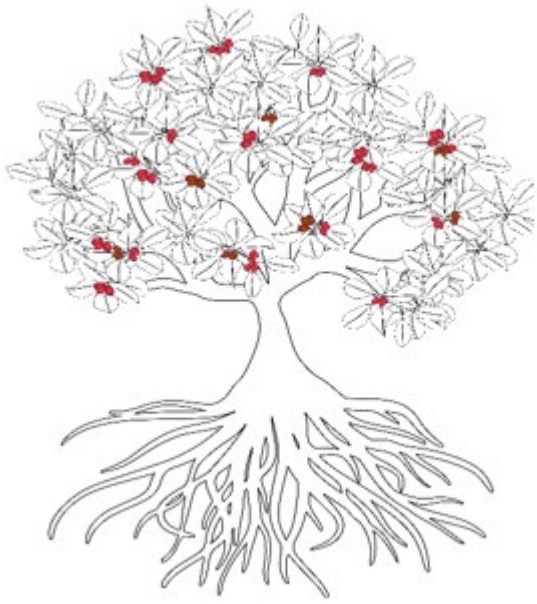
Older people feel appreciated and valued when they are shown respect, and this helps them to age well.

Keeping the traditional values that were handed down as children, keeps people strong and helps them to age well.



“The men, the women, they know the teaching of them values when they were brought up, they keep those values today and that’s a big contribution to their health”

Passing on knowledge, tradition, and cultural practices: The fruit



Passing on knowledge, traditions and culture is like the fruit of the wongai tree. New fruit and their nuts are passed on to create new trees. The passing on of knowledge, tradition and culture is central to the continuation of a Torres Strait Islander way of life and identity and supports people to age well.

"It is important to me to pass on my knowledge and culture. Now, today all the boys say, "We should go and sit down with Grandad and learn. He will explain to us how to make the harpoon"."

Passing on knowledge brings benefits not only from those that are learning, but also from those that are teaching. For elders, it gives them pleasure to know they are sharing their wisdom and skills.

Passing on knowledge also provides the older generations with a sense of purpose and fulfillment from being able to pass on skills and language to the young children and seeing their joy in learning from elders.

For those being taught, they have gratitude for all that they learn.

"I have the best job in the world. I sit with the elders and get their wisdom all day, every day".

Experiencing challenges: Damaging events



Damaging events have interrupted Torres Strait Islanders' way of life and identity, ability to live a healthy lifestyle, pass on knowledge and maintain leadership roles. This is like a cyclone passing through that breaks off branches, blows off leaves and fruit, causes root damage and exposes the inside of the trunk allowing disease to take hold.

Impacts of colonisation as a damaging event

Colonisation is like a decay that has caused ill health. Diseases are being passed onto the younger generations. People said that some turned to substance abuse to lessen the pain and negative emotions.

"We have a cultural hierarchal structure and practices which worked. Being tampered with have dismantled us slowly and surely and that then contributes to many factors that leads to ill health".

"All of my fathers have gone. They're all our compasses, for us young men. It's hard trying to do something where you haven't been brought up to learn or see it portrayed in front of you, it's hard. That's what Torres Strait is lacking, all of us, every island, is leadership."

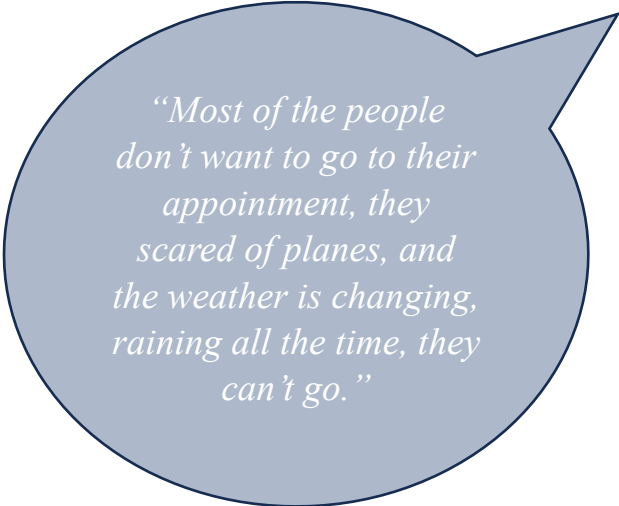
Some people feel that connections to culture have been weakened and the structures within families and communities has changed. Others feel that where there is a lack of leadership and good role models, communities are affected.

Inequitable access to services as a damaging event

Being able to access health care, aged care and recreation programs across the region is a challenge for some people, especially those on the outer islands. Local aged care homes and respite services for older adults are needed.



“We want an aged care facility here for our people, those that are getting ill and older, so they are not getting sent away.”



“Most of the people don’t want to go to their appointment, they scared of planes, and the weather is changing, raining all the time, they can’t go.”

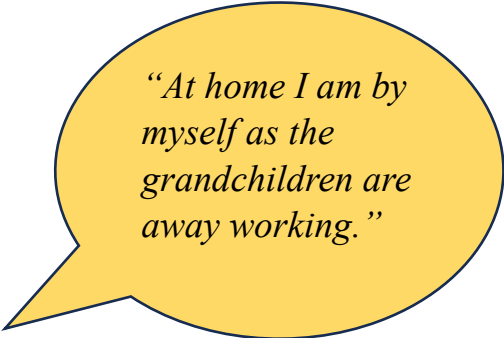
It can be difficult getting to specialist appointments that are based on Thursday Island or in Cairns, getting to see a dentist, seeing a regular GP, and accessing mental health services.

More affordable sports venues, more activity programs and more child day care services are needed.

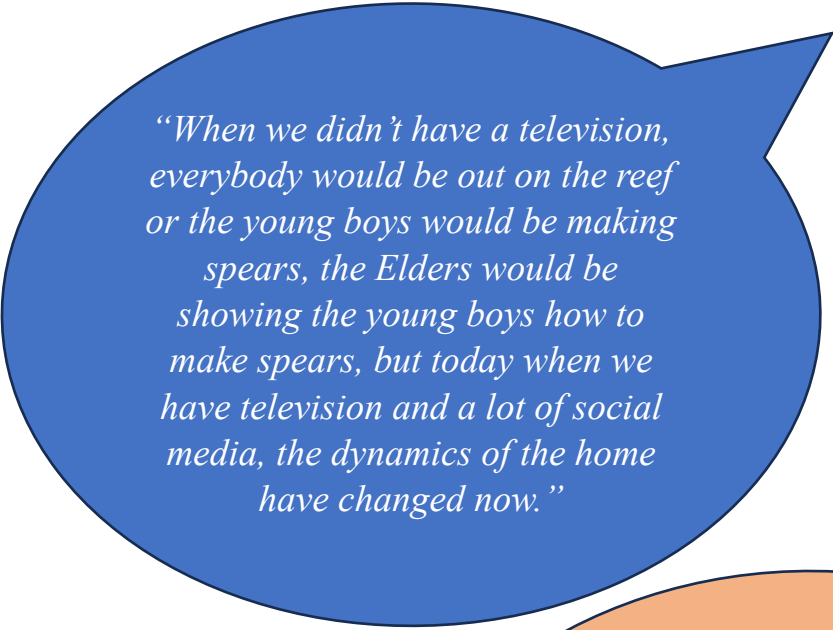
Modern-day challenges as a damaging event

The cyclone damages the roots of the tree, and some people feel that modern day living, like a cyclone, has weakened the connections and relationships amongst families and community members.

In some cases, family members have to leave the island to access employment, education or housing.

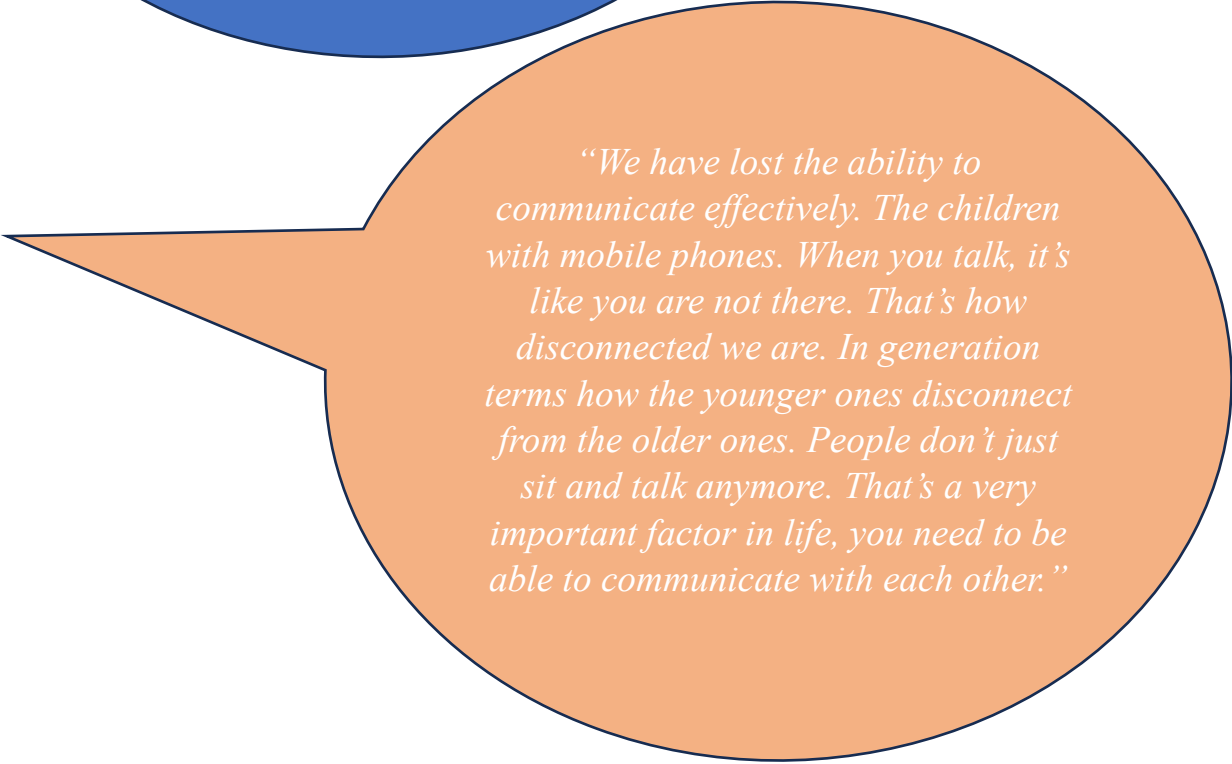


“At home I am by myself as the grandchildren are away working.”



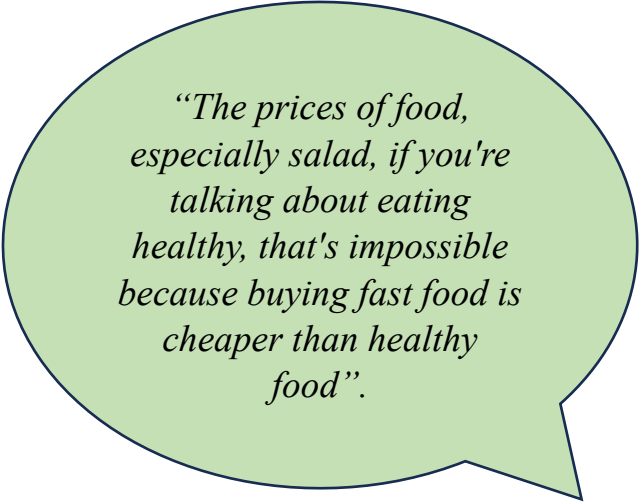
“When we didn’t have a television, everybody would be out on the reef or the young boys would be making spears, the Elders would be showing the young boys how to make spears, but today when we have television and a lot of social media, the dynamics of the home have changed now.”

The influence of phones, social media and other technology is negatively affecting traditional practices and the traditional lifestyle.



“We have lost the ability to communicate effectively. The children with mobile phones. When you talk, it’s like you are not there. That’s how disconnected we are. In generation terms how the younger ones disconnect from the older ones. People don’t just sit and talk anymore. That’s a very important factor in life, you need to be able to communicate with each other.”

The cost of living, lack of housing and environmental factors as a damaging event



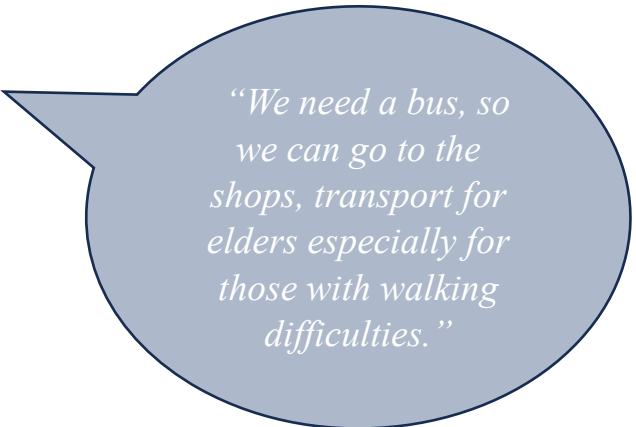
“The prices of food, especially salad, if you're talking about eating healthy, that's impossible because buying fast food is cheaper than healthy food”.

The high cost of food makes it hard to feed large families on a healthy diet.

Other high costs that make it hard to live a healthy life are, access to sporting venues, airfares, and fuel.

The high cost of living is putting a strain on families.

More public transport is needed. For older adults, lack of transport makes it difficult to get out to the shops and around in the community.



“We need a bus, so we can go to the shops, transport for elders especially for those with walking difficulties.”



“We have kids and our grandkids, and our great grandkids in the one house. It's hard to get housing for us.”

Lack of housing and overcrowding makes ageing well difficult. People also have to wait a long time to get their houses fixed.

The environment can make it hard to live a healthy lifestyle. Growing garden food is difficult because of the bush turkeys, mice, dogs and horses that dig up the food.

Increasing temperatures due to global warming, and the wild dogs and horses makes exercising outdoors difficult in some communities.

Demonstrating strong sustained life: Regrowth



The cyclone may have damaged the tree but there is still life in the tree and new growth appears.

This is like the strong sustained existence of Torres Strait Islander people.

People stay strong because they are resilient and can see the need for change.

“If I want to be able to play with my grandchildren, I’ve got to look after me”.

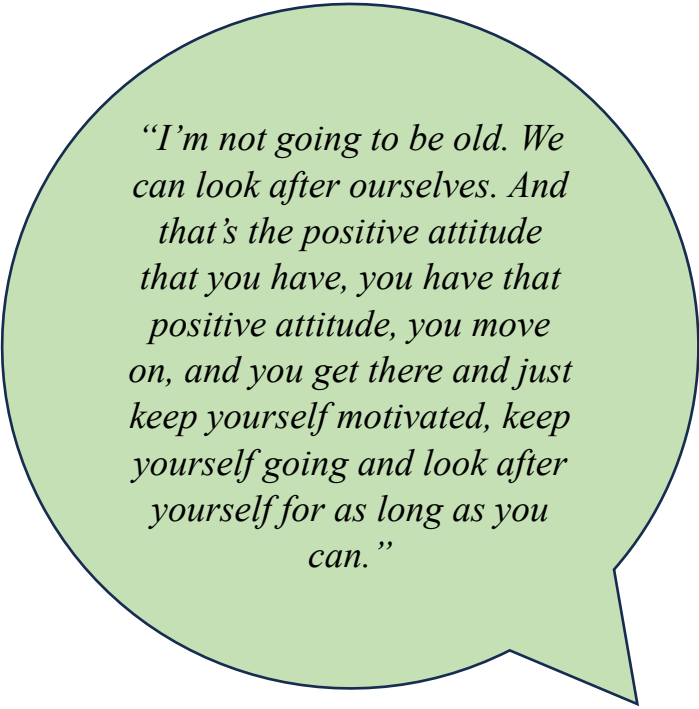
“When I talk about healthy age, we have to change the way we think, you’ve got to look after yourself and don’t be sick. If we look after ourselves, we’re going to be healthy. If we’re going to drink until we’re 50 we’re not going to be healthy. If we’re going to take drugs, we’re not going to be healthy. I’ve been through all this. I’ve been through that life. I’ve seen people die in front of me. So, I have to make choices.”

By making healthy lifestyle choices people understand they will be healthier and live longer.

Having a positive attitude and being motivated helps people grow old well.

People want to stay active and independent in their own homes and on their island home.

Doing things that make you happy and keeps you busy improves well-being and helps you to age well.



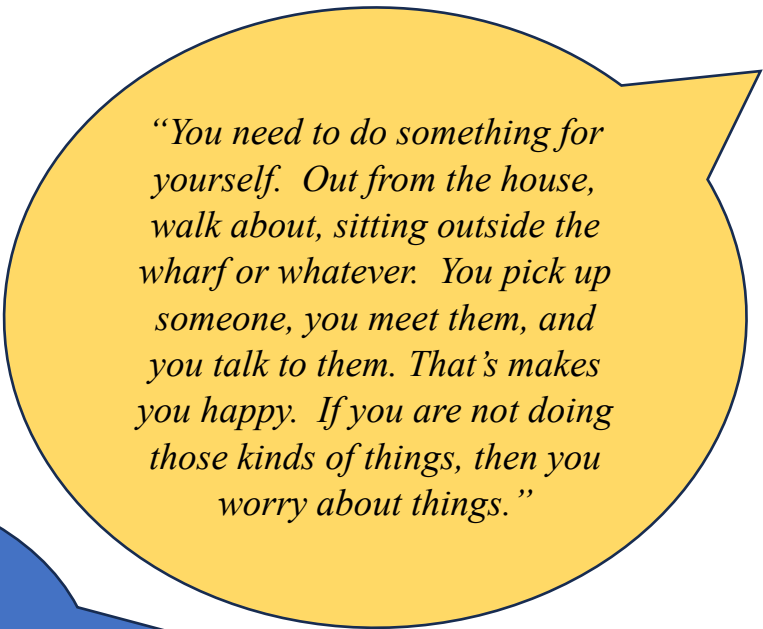
"I'm not going to be old. We can look after ourselves. And that's the positive attitude that you have, you have that positive attitude, you move on, and you get there and just keep yourself motivated, keep yourself going and look after yourself for as long as you can."



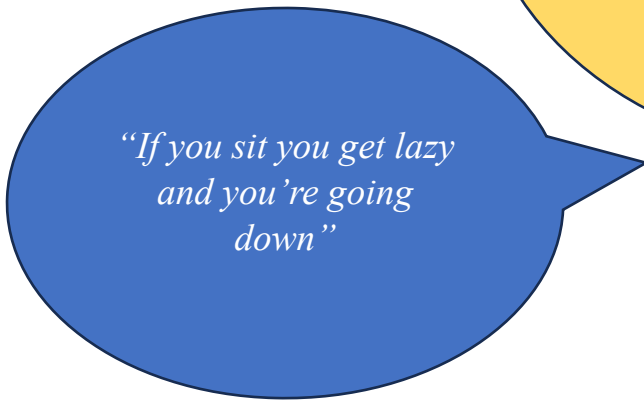
"I think ageing well for me is being at the seaside and doing my own things. Doing the things that I used to do with my parents, go bush, looking for bush food."

This may be being with family and friends, practicing your faith, being socially active in the community, working, or just being busy in the house.

Keeping busy is good both for your physical health and for your mental health. Being with family and friends helps you to have good social and emotional well-being. All these things help us age well.



"You need to do something for yourself. Out from the house, walk about, sitting outside the wharf or whatever. You pick up someone, you meet them, and you talk to them. That's makes you happy. If you are not doing those kinds of things, then you worry about things."



"If you sit you get lazy and you're going down"