

The background of the cover features a watercolor map of Australia in shades of yellow and green. Overlaid on the map are various Indigenous Australian patterns, including a large white dot pattern in the top right corner and a series of concentric white circles in the center. A solid yellow rounded rectangle is positioned in the upper middle section, containing the title text.

Keeping Truth-telling Safe: Guide

**Acknowledgement of Country:**

Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

Legal Disclaimer:

Information in this guide is general information only and is not legal advice. Any reference to laws and policies are for general use only and should not be relied upon for legal advice for a specific matter. For such matters, it is recommended to obtain professional legal advice from a suitable, qualified legal practitioner.

Sensitivity notice:

This guide contains references to trauma and the impacts of colonisation. These topics may be distressing for some readers, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their families and communities. Readers are encouraged to engage with this material in a way that supports their wellbeing and to seek support if needed.

Graphics:

Truth-telling



Truth-listening



Truth-acting

These graphics are featured throughout the design of this guide to represent the three steps that form the basis of any truth-telling process. Reconciliation Australia commissioned Jordan Lovegrove at [Karko Creations](#), a Ngarrindjeri young man and experienced artist and graphic designer, to design them to support the work of the Community Truth-telling Pathways program.

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Introduction

If you are undertaking truth-telling as an organiser, truth-teller, or listener, this guide will help you plan for some important safety considerations.

Concerns about safety, particularly for First Nations truth-tellers, their families and communities, can discourage participation in truth-telling. With thoughtful planning and a willingness to adapt as needed, organisers and participants can create truth-telling spaces that are safe, respectful and supportive for everyone.

Truth-telling covers a range of activities that engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its ongoing impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It deals with colonial conflict, massacres, racism and dispossession. It also celebrates and promotes the strength, contributions, resilience and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

Truth-telling can be a profound healing experience for communities and catalyst for change, but also carries risks, including re-traumatisation. Even where truth-telling is an act of celebration, safety issues can emerge in unexpected ways.

Everyone has a role to play in keeping truth-telling safe. Being aware of and planning for a range of safety considerations reduces the potential toll truth-telling can take on individuals and communities. It is key to creating events and processes that people feel safe to join, and supports authentic relationships grounded in understanding and action.

This guide is broken into two sections.

For Organisers identifies some of the key safety considerations for *organisers* of truth-telling activities.

For Truth-listeners highlights considerations for *audiences of truth-telling* who are also part of ensuring safe truth-telling.

Each section provides brief overviews of common safety considerations with links to additional resources to help you action them.

The work of Reconciliation Australia's Community Truth-telling Pathways program is shaped by people working in truth-telling and social and emotional wellbeing across Australia. These *Voices in Truth-telling* have shared their knowledge and expertise to inform this guide.

All unattributed quotes in this guide come from their input. We acknowledge and thank them for their generous support.

Voices in Truth-telling

Key principles of safe truth-telling

Although every truth-telling activity is different and will have its own safety considerations, there are some key principles that apply across the board. Whatever form your truth-telling takes, and whether you are a truth-organiser or a truth-listener, understanding and following these principles will lay a strong foundation for safer truth-telling.

Understand the context

Being culturally safe goes beyond respecting important protocols such as Acknowledgements of Country and smoking ceremonies. Safe environments depend on awareness by all involved of the histories of First Nations peoples and how these impact First Nations peoples' experiences, perspectives and sense of safety every day. For non-Indigenous participants, self-education and self-reflection is essential to minimising harm and engaging safely.

➤ See 'Getting Truth Ready', p. 22

Put wellbeing first

Truth-telling can demand a lot of First Nations participants. It involves emotional risk and drawing on internal strength, often in the context of common experiences of ongoing trauma and loss, racism, social disadvantage and other stressors. In addition, First Nations participants can feel pressure to put the expectations of others above their own wellbeing.

Prioritise social and emotional wellbeing over cost, time and other expectations. Make sure First Nations truth-tellers, truth-listeners and organisers know from the words and actions of all involved that their wellbeing is the top priority.

➤ See 'Safe People', p. 7

Act don't extract

Truth-telling takes a physical and emotional toll on truth-tellers. Their stories are not just objects of interest; they place responsibility on listeners. Truth-teller safety and wellbeing are supported when they see listening and learning turn into determined action for real change.

➤ See 'For Truth-listeners', p. 21

Follow First Nations leadership

Truth-telling should always be First Nations led. This does not mean expecting First Nations peoples to have all the answers or do all the work. It means that First Nations peoples set the direction and make key decisions. This principle applies to truth-telling by both First Nations and non-Indigenous people. Always keep in mind: "Nothing about us without us".

➤ See 'Safe Processes', p. 13

For Organisers

This section is for organisers of truth-telling activities. This includes both First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people invited to be co-organisers.



Safe People

First Nations peoples have identified safety concerns as the number one barrier to their participation in truth-telling. Given one of truth-telling's central aims is to advance the wellbeing of First Nations peoples, minimising harm and maximising the wellbeing of First Nations participants must be a priority for organisers.

This section identifies ways to reduce some of the physical, social, emotional and legal risks for participants in truth-telling. It highlights the importance of culturally appropriate psychological and emotional support, being trauma informed, preparing carefully with truth-tellers and considering legal advice.

Create a culture of readiness to hear personal safety needs and act on them, making any changes necessary to keep people safe and feeling safe.

1. Provide wellbeing support

Reliving or hearing difficult stories can be distressing or even re-traumatising. Ensure culturally appropriate emotional and psychological support is in place for truth-tellers, their families and all listeners at every stage of the planning and implementation process. This support should be in place before, during and after stories are shared – including for the longer term.

Look for people and services who can support a First Nations' Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) approach. In addition to providing ongoing emotional and psychological support as needed, SEWB workers can:

- help participants prepare safely for truth-telling
- look out for signs of distress or trauma during truth-telling activities
- debrief with truth-tellers and other participants
- provide feedback to organisers about how to improve safety.

It is critical to check-in on truth-tellers in the days and weeks after truth-telling finishes. People often experience a high immediately after sharing, but an emotional crash in the days following.

Support may come from trained professionals, such as counsellors and health services, as well as trusted peers, including Elders and family members. Both forms of support are valuable but avoid placing the full burden on community members when professional support may be needed.

Organisers should identify, provide information about and connect participants with suitable services.

- See our [First Nations Social and Emotional Support Services Directory](#) for national and state specific support services. Identify suitable local services, check if they have availability and prepare them for potential referrals.
- Read more about SEWB in this [factsheet](#) or watch this [explainer](#).

2. Be trauma informed

Many key knowledge holders in truth-telling have experienced intergenerational and transgenerational trauma and loss. When triggered, trauma can overwhelm someone's ability to cope and engage. They might experience symptoms like fear and anxiety, difficulty with relationships, impulsive behaviour, and feeling sad and hopeless or tired and confused. Triggers for trauma may be unpredictable.

Creating safe environments for truth-telling planning and implementation depends on everyone being trauma informed, and on co-designing processes that are aligned with trauma-informed principles.

Take time to learn about trauma-informed approaches and principles.

This will help you to avoid triggering trauma, recognise signs of trauma, and respond appropriately and with compassion. Some places to start:

- Watch The Healing Foundation's short explainer on intergenerational trauma.
- Read Blue Knot Foundation's factsheet for applying trauma-informed principles, Talking About Trauma.
- Listen to We Al-li's Dr Judy Atkinson and Dr Carlie Atkinson talk about intergenerational trauma and healing.

'You will never be able to predict every trigger. Just do as much as you can and then be willing and open to respond to feedback. Explicitly invite the feedback. You have to take steps to prove you are safe so truth-tellers know that they can give feedback and it will be actioned. This includes being ready to be told "you are doing this wrong".'

Voices in Truth-telling

3. Plan closely with truth-tellers

Truth-tellers carry the greatest risk in any truth-telling activity and centring their wellbeing is a key safety principle. Yet it can be easy for other people, planning priorities and agendas to take precedence over wellbeing when making decisions.

The best way to keep truth-tellers safe is to ask them what they want and need. Do not assume they will speak up – their commitment to the truth-telling means they may not always put their own wellbeing first, and they may feel pressure not to disappoint the expectations and plans of others. Planning together ensures their safety and wellbeing needs are understood and centred at every step of the process.

Prepare with First Nations truth-tellers in advance and on their terms to understand things like:

- *What* parts of their story they want to share
- *Where* they want to share their story
- *How* they wish to share their story: publicly, with a limited audience, in private (or a combination of these options for different parts of their story)
- If they want their story to be *recorded* or *published* (e.g. online)
- *Who* can access, retell or share their story and in what form
- How their information will be *stored* and *used*
- What physical and emotional *support* they need before, during or after.

Make sure you continually check in with truth-tellers along the way. Be ready to support requests to change or withdraw their consent at any time. This includes requests to take a break, removing information from the public realm, or pulling out of an activity altogether.

➤ See p. 11 for checklists to help prepare with truth-tellers.

4. Access legal advice

Truth-telling can raise legal considerations. This includes things like self-incrimination, defamation, breach of non-disclosure agreements, mandatory reporting obligations, copyright, confidentiality, family law arrangements and child protection orders.

Consider if a story involves:

- Sharing confidential information (e.g. a court case or details about a legal settlement)
- Information or photographs of children in care (past or present), or children who have been harmed
- A legal dispute (e.g. a custody dispute, work incident, criminal investigation etc)
- Making allegations against someone else (e.g. about a former teacher committing abuse, or a police officer assaulting someone), or
- Recording or publishing photographs or written work of others.

If this is the case, organisers should support truth-tellers to access independent legal advice before deciding to share their story.

There are legal risks for organisers too. Organisers may wish to seek their own legal advice, especially if they plan to record or publish what is shared.

Many free legal services are in high demand and there may be a wait time for their help, so aim to approach them early in the process.

- Search for Aboriginal Legal Services, Legal Aid and/or Community Legal Services in your state and territory for free legal advice or support.
- Justice Connect is a community legal centre that provides free legal assistance to eligible individuals, not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises. If your not-for-profit organisation or social enterprise needs legal help, you can apply for assistance here. If you're an individual, apply for help here.

5. Keep truth-listeners safe

Research shows that people can be affected by traumatic events they have not directly experienced. Witnessing or hearing about trauma can also cause distress and traumatisation. This is called vicarious trauma.

It is important to consider what support and protections are needed for listeners.

This is especially important for family of truth-tellers and other First Nations participants. Family members may be hearing about the traumatic experiences of loved ones for the first time. Other vulnerable groups include truth-listeners who have experienced traumas, truth-listeners who know the truth-teller, and anyone closely involved in the process.

Keeping truth-listeners safe can look very similar to keeping truth-tellers safe. This could include things like:

- Plan with family members of truth-tellers to understand what support they may require. If that's not possible, ask truth-tellers about what their family might need to keep safe.
- Provide SEWB support service information to all participants and encourage people to use them.
- Remind participants to look out for and take care of each other.
- Provide trigger warnings for content that may cause distress.
- For activities and events, plan to have supports available, a safe location and set-up, and so on. See '[Safe Events](#)', p. 19

'It was actually people other than the truth-teller who needed more support than the truth-teller in the moment – the MC or the cameraman or the staff assisting to run the event. Truth-tellers have lived with their stories for a long time, but for others hearing them for the first time it can be very distressing.'

Voices in Truth-telling

Organisers also need to take care of themselves.

Even people who are deeply familiar with Australia's full history and/or are experienced with working closely with traumatic stories, can be strongly impacted by truth-telling. Consider:

- accessing SEWB support for your team
- organising training in vicarious trauma, managing your wellbeing and so on
- scheduling opportunities to check in with each other.

Checklist: Safe Truth-Tellers

Use these lists as a guide to discuss and plan for truth-teller safety. These lists are not exhaustive, so you might have more things you want to add.

Truth-teller safety checklist for organisers

- ☐ **Truth-tellers have provided their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for participating in the activity.** This means they understand everything they need to know to make an informed choice about participating; what is required of them, all of the risks involved, what support is (and is not) available, and what the purpose of the activity is.
- ☐ **They have also given their FPIC for sharing their information, stories and knowledge.** Written agreements, like a consent form, have been signed with truth-tellers who have requested one. *See p. 14 for more information about protecting information.*
- ☐ **Truth-tellers are aware that sharing their story may involve legal risks.** They have been given contacts where they can access legal advice if they wish.
- ☐ **Social and Emotional Wellbeing support has been arranged for before, during and after the truth-telling activity.**
- ☐ **You have planned to brief and debrief with truth-tellers before, during and after their participation, including in the days and weeks afterwards.**
- ☐ **Truth-tellers know:**
 - there is no obligation for them to continue sharing or participating in the activity if they start feeling distressed
 - how to access a range of support services, such as counsellors and helplines.
- ☐ **You have prepared for truth-tellers' physical comfort** e.g. have snacks, tea and water available, food for longer activities, shade, sunscreen and insect repellent if outdoors etc.
- ☐ **A dedicated safe space has been created for use by truth-tellers to take a break if needed.**

Questions for organisers to discuss with truth-tellers☐ **Do you want to share publicly or privately?**

If public, in what format? In a yarnning circle, around a table, on site etc. Or do you want to record your stories, and tell us how you want them to be shared?

☐ **Who do you want to be present?**

E.g. your family; anyone except for your family; everyone except your children; open to the public; no one? Do you want a support person with you when you share? Is there anyone who should not be present?

☐ **Do you want what you share to be recorded?**

If yes, how? Through written notes, a video recording or audio recording, artwork? Do you want everything to be recorded, or should some stories not be recorded? How do you want us to keep recordings safe?

☐ **Are there any community considerations?**

Are there any cultural protocols or restrictions for sharing the stories? Do the stories contain any sensitive/restricted information? Do you have any fears about lateral violence?

☐ **What boundaries should we set?**

What are some potential triggers for you? Do you want to allow questions, or not? Do you want us to tell attendees that recording you is not allowed? Do you find it easy to say "I'm uncomfortable" or is there another way we can identify if we need to have a break or move on?

☐ **How can we prepare together?**

We can describe how the activity will run; walk you through the space in advance; explain our process for addressing any disruptions (like inappropriate behaviour by attendees); tell you how to access support; explain what will happen to your information.

☐ **How would you like to be identified and introduced?**

Safe Processes

Planning together safely is as important as the truth-telling activity itself. Sometimes planning for truth-telling will be the biggest part of your process. Many different people may have to work together to, for example, build the statue, change the place name, or plan the event. Sensitive discussions are likely to come up and can be challenging even for people who know each other well.

Key processes for preparing safely together include being First Nations led, protecting First Nations' knowledge and stories, being clear on why you are doing the truth-telling and what you want it to achieve, and deciding how to manage disagreements. The importance of investing time and energy in relationship building cannot be overstated, particularly between non-Indigenous and First Nations stakeholders.

Centre First Nations voices

Australia has a long history of non-Indigenous people and institutions assuming they know best, failing to listen and making decisions on behalf of First Nations peoples. Environments where these patterns persist are unsafe for First Nations peoples, especially when the subject matter is personally significant.

A First Nations led process puts First Nations peoples in control. Trauma-informed principles emphasise that a sense of control is essential to safety. In addition, First Nations leaders are best placed to identify and respond to safety issues.

This looks like:

- prioritising the needs and aspirations of the First Nations peoples of that place, and
- centring First Nations voices, perspectives and decisions at every step in the process.

When invited, non-Indigenous participants can make valuable contributions to truth-telling processes, while recognising that First Nations leaders hold final decision-making authority.

➤ See our [What does First Nations led truth-telling look like?](#) factsheet for more information.

Protect knowledge and stories

Truth-telling involves collecting, sharing and storing precious and sensitive information.

Supporting First Nations participants to have control over their stories and knowledge is a key safety consideration in truth-telling. It helps to ensure sensitive or confidential stories, and precious cultural and intellectual property, is not shared disrespectfully, misrepresented, or removed from the control of its rightful owners before, during or after truth-telling planning and activities.

The best way to protect information is by reaching a clear understanding with First Nations participants about what is OK, and NOT OK, when it comes to use of their information.

A good way to do this is by seeking their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Free: This means truth-tellers give their consent without any pressure. They only give their consent because they want to. Free means they can say no. And it means they can change their mind.

Prior: This means their consent is sought before any activities begin. And it means all the relevant decision-makers have enough time to decide on what they are being asked to agree to.

Informed: This means they are told all the details of what they are consenting to. They understand everything, including all risks and benefits to sharing their knowledge or stories, because the information is given to them in Plain English or with an interpreter or translation if needed.

Consent: This means they agree.

It's a good idea to put what truth-tellers do and don't consent to in a written agreement, like a consent form, so there are no misunderstandings. It is also the best way to give some legal protection to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

Understanding the principles of ICIP and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) is also important.

- We have helpful guides to ICIP and protecting knowledge on our [Resource Hub](#).
- Read more about Indigenous Data Sovereignty here:
 - <https://www.maiamnayriwingara.org/>
 - <https://lowitja.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Indigenous-Data-Sovereignty-Policy-Brief.pdf>

'People working with truth-tellers need to be upfront with them about how they can and can't protect their information. Don't make promises you cannot keep or without thinking through the practicalities. It's better to be honest about your limitations, so truth-tellers can at least make an informed decision about what they want to do.'

Know Your Purpose

Organisers should be clear about why they are undertaking truth-telling, what they want the activity to achieve, and what it will and will not do. A clear scope and purpose helps everyone stay aligned, reduces the risk of conflict or unexpected issues, and ensures truth-tellers can make an informed choice about whether to participate.

For example, is the ultimate aim change, or is it more about creating awareness about a history? Truth tellers should understand the goal and the stakes.

To define the scope and purpose, ask questions like:

- Why are we doing truth-telling?
- What types of truths will we share (and which types we won't)?
- How many truth-tellers can we realistically involve?
- What support can and can't we offer truth-tellers and truth-listeners?

Plan for disagreement

Truth-telling organisers are bound to disagree at times. The subject matter can be sensitive and deeply personal. Normalise difficult conversations being part of the process and have an agreed approach ready for handling disagreements when they arise.

It is particularly important for non-Indigenous co-organisers and supporters to understand their place in disagreements and to resist the urge to 'fix' things. The best approach is to trust the First Nations community to lead the way. It is always more important to preserve relationships than timelines.

For other helpful information:

- See the '[For Truth-listeners](#)' section on p. 21
- Check out our [*What does First Nations led truth-telling look like?*](#) factsheet.

Safe Engagement

Public truth-telling comes with risks. A sign in language might be defaced; a truth-teller might be heckled; a social media post might be shared out of context.

In addition, hearing or viewing truths can be distressing and uncomfortable for the viewer/listener.

Organisers can encourage safe and respectful interactions with their truth-telling activity by mapping risks, incorporating cultural protocols and content warnings, and by having guidelines for online activity and media engagement.

Map risks

It's helpful to identify safety risks ahead of time so that you are ready and prepared should they arise. Risks could be “big picture” things, like local opposition to your activity and lateral violence, or event-related risks, like a truth-listener saying something offensive, or organisers not having culturally appropriate support available when someone gets distressed.

Identify each risk and plan how you will reduce the risk from happening, and how you will address it if it does happen. For example:

Risk	How can we prevent it?	How can we respond if it happens?
Truth-tellers get distressed while sharing at the event, or after sharing	• Have plenty of opportunities for truth-tellers to prepare beforehand with organisers. • Ask truth-tellers if they want to speak to a counsellor before sharing. • Take truth-tellers to the activity space beforehand, to see and get used to the space.	• Pause proceedings – give truth-teller the choice to have a break or continue. • Request a culturally safe counsellor from a local Aboriginal health service to be there before and during the activity. • Check in with truth-tellers and any other at-risk participants in the days and weeks after the activity. • Have a private space available for truth-tellers to withdraw to.
Social media posts about the activity receive harmful comments	• Are there other ways to publicise the work (e.g. flyers, newspaper ads, conversations)? Is it necessary to post on social media?	• Appoint someone suitable to moderate comments.

Cultural protocols

These create mob-friendly spaces, so that everyone can see and feel that First Nations peoples and practices are safe and respected. Some better-known cultural protocols include:

- Welcome to Country
- Smoking ceremony
- Protocols for displaying information or pictures of people who have passed.

Every community is different. Never assume what cultural protocols might apply for that particular community and for truth-telling processes. **Spend time finding out what protocols are respectful to the peoples of that place.**

- Look up local Aboriginal Corporations, Land Councils etc. and see if there are any resources about local cultural protocols.
- Ask First Nations organisers about respectfully incorporating cultural protocols into activities.
- See Reconciliation Australia's [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country guide](#).

Content warnings

In truth-telling, stories of strength and resistance can go hand in hand with deeply traumatic histories and their ongoing legacies. Content or 'trigger' warnings give readers, listeners, or viewers advance notice about sensitive or distressing topics. This way, they can make an informed choice about whether and how to engage with the material.

Trigger warnings are things like: "The following story contains stories about abuse" or "The following documentary contains names, images and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have passed" or (for social media posts) "CW: Suicide". They can be warnings about content, or warnings for specific audiences.

Preparing closely with truth-tellers will help you to know what stories and images are likely to need a content warning.

Guidelines for online engagement

Online engagement, such as social media posts promoting truth-telling activities, can attract insensitive comments or reactions intended to cause distress. Posts may also be widely re-shared without proper context or deliberately misrepresented, potentially increasing opposition to the activity.

At the same time, social media is an important space for community organising, connection and communication. Think strategically and develop clear guidelines before any online and social media engagement.

Before posting, ask questions like:

- How wide does our audience need to be? Do we need to promote this activity/event publicly online, or can we promote it directly to trusted people and organisations?
- Have the people involved or pictured given their consent for this appearing online?
- If we post publicly, can we reduce potential harm e.g. by moderating comments?

At events and meetings, establish clear rules about video/image or audio recording with phones. Different truth-tellers may have different feelings about this – check their preferences as part of your planning.

‘We made sure participants really understood that once something is online, you no longer have any control over it. That it could be reshared, edited and commented on in ways that might be completely unrelated or offensive. And that once something is online, it’s online forever.’

Voices in Truth-telling

- You can get e-safety advice and report harmful online interactions at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

Engaging with media

If you are interacting with media, have an agreed spokesperson to lead interviews. **Provide media with guidance** on how to report on your activity respectfully – for example, information they cannot publish, and cultural protocols they should observe.

- See Black Dog Institute’s [Good Yarn Guidelines](#) for media reporting on First Nations issues.

Safe Events

Truth-telling often involves planning for events. Sometimes the truth-telling activity *is* the event, like an annual commemoration or public talk, and in other cases, the truth-telling activity will have an associated event, like a launch of a mural or documentary.

Events come with their own safety considerations. Truths are shared in real time, and the environment is harder to control.

In addition to considering the safety measures outlined above, thinking intentionally about the event location and space, timing, and guidelines for respectful participation can help create safer truth-telling events.

Location

Consult with truth-tellers and listeners to **choose a suitable location** that is free of potential unsafe associations for participants. For example, certain schools, churches, or government buildings might have unsafe associations for mob.

If you can't avoid using a place like this, acknowledge this and discuss it with truth-tellers before the event. Start outside and take some time to check in or offer to sit outside. Work together to co-create a safe space.

First Nations participants should feel the meeting place is **comfortable and culturally appropriate**. Sitting outside, on the floor, and/or in a circle might be better than a boardroom where everyone is sitting around a table. There should also be a suitable place for cultural protocols like smoking ceremonies, if required. There may be other

cultural considerations relating to seating arrangements, items within the space, or the location of bathrooms, for example.

Make sure there are **quiet, private spaces** for truth-tellers to brief and debrief with trusted supports and family, and for other people to go to if they are feeling distressed.

Let everyone know if there are any **accessibility** considerations for the space you are using, such as stairs. Plan ahead to support anyone you know will need it.

Timing

When you're scheduling the event, make sure it is not on a date that might be difficult for truth-tellers, or that might trigger a negative reaction in the broader community.

On the day, make sure the program builds in time to support people's wellbeing. For example, plan for regular short breaks, especially after long sessions or stories you know are likely to be distressing.

Physical wellbeing

Have plenty of tea, coffee, water and snacks available, or food for longer events – as well as supporters to make cups of tea, clear dishes etc.

If your event is outside, consider having sunscreen and insect repellent available, as well as enough shade, mats and chairs.

Respectful participation protocols

Audiences that respond safely and appropriately to truth-telling are key to keeping events safe for everyone. Unsafe audience responses can come from the best of intentions. Clear guidance on what safe and respectful participation looks like can make a big difference and is often appreciated by audience members who want to do the right thing. Think about how you want participants to engage at your event and how to effectively communicate this.

For example:

- Are there cultural protocols audiences should be aware of?
- Are questions and comments welcome?
- Is filming and photography permitted?
- Are there times when it is not OK to leave or arrive?
- Is it OK to approach truth-tellers at the event?
- Is impromptu personal truth-telling by audience members encouraged?

‘We had signs on the door saying that truth-tellers are in control of the event. The signs said that participants are there only to listen. Sometimes people were really inspired to tell their own truth after hearing someone else. So, we had people on hand who could take them into another room so they could share it with them privately or record it if they wanted to. It was important to make sure we made space for others to share their stories safely without taking time away from the scheduled truth-tellers or risking anyone’s safety in sharing on the spot.’

Voices in Truth-telling

Disruption management

Public truth-telling events reach more people and can be a powerful way to bring communities together, but they are also at increased risk of disruption.

Have a plan for how you will resolve interruptions or conflict. Consider engaging:

- trusted, experienced, and independent facilitators who can guide the process and call people in if they are not following the respectful participation protocols
- SEWB supports who can monitor for people who appear restless or agitated and take them into a quiet place to air their grievances privately and safely
- security/crowd control who can ask someone to leave if their behaviour is inappropriate, as a last resort.

For Truth-listeners

Research shows that key barriers for non-Indigenous peoples wishing to support truth-telling are fear of doing or saying the wrong thing, fear of distress, and uncertainty about how to get involved.

Unsafe audiences are one of the biggest barriers to participation in truth-telling for First Nations peoples.

This section outlines some considerations for truth-listeners to keep both themselves and others safe.

Well-informed, self-aware and proactive listeners are central to realising truth-telling's potential for change. They can be the difference between truth-telling that is re-traumatising and truth-telling that advances healing, a shared commitment to real change, and a greater sense of community.

➤ In addition to the guidance below, check out [*Truth-telling: Ways for Everyone to Participate*](#) guide for more information.

Getting Truth Ready

- Explore sources of truth-telling
- Learn how to be culturally safe

Participating in Truth-telling

- Safe truth-listening
- Truth-acting
- Non-Indigenous truth tellers

Getting Truth Ready

Explore sources of truth-telling

Despite the work that has been done to document and explain First Nations perspectives and experiences, many Australians have significant gaps in their knowledge of those histories. Exploring First Nations histories that have already been documented is an important step in getting ready to be a safe truth-listener.

Well informed listeners are less likely to add to the colonial load of First Nations truth-tellers. These listeners are more likely to understand the full context and recognise the significance of what they are being told, and to ask appropriate and respectful questions. They are less likely to cause distress by questioning established facts.

First Nations histories are easy to find in a wide variety of formats.

- Start by visiting our [Truth-telling Resources Hub](#) for a range of helpful introductory resources freely available online.
- Read eMHprac's brief [overview of colonial load](#), or Phoebe McIlwraith's [guide to easing pressure off mob and sharing the load](#).

Learn how to be culturally safe

Learning about and training in cultural safety is excellent preparation for being a safe truth-telling participant. It means creating spaces where First Nations identities, voices, knowledge and experiences are respected, valued and validated.

The concept of cultural safety was developed by Māori nurses in Aotearoa. In truth-telling, it asks non-Indigenous people and organisations to reflect on their assumptions, ways of knowing and ways of working, and to adapt these so that spaces are safer and power is shared more equally with First Nations peoples.

- Read [Taking action for cultural safety](#).
- Many First Nations organisations offer training in culturally safe practice.

Participating in Truth-telling

When you are invited to participate in a truth-telling activity, your ability to be a safe audience will help shape how safe the activity is for all participants. Part of this is being a safe listener by active listening and sitting with discomfort. It also requires responding to new understandings by taking action for change.

Safe truth-listening

‘When someone shares, you have to treat it as if you are the first person they have ever shared it with. There is a reverence that is required. Be careful with your questions, perhaps do not ask questions at all. They will share what they want to share. Having someone choose to share with you is precious and should be treated as such.’

Voices in Truth-telling

Dadirri refers to a First Nations practice of deep listening to understand rather than to respond, brought forward by Ngangikurungkurr educator Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann AM. Practicing *Dadirri* creates an environment in which truth-tellers are safe to share their

knowledge and in which truth-listeners sit with the implications of those truths and allow themselves to be changed.

First Nations peoples report that their knowledge of Australian history is regularly met with disbelief, denial, and/or refusal to engage. For truth-tellers, this is at best tiresome but can also be distressing and re-traumatising. Concerns about listener responses is a key reason First Nations peoples do not participate in truth-telling activities.

It is important to normalise discomfort as a rich and important part of the listening process. The dispelling of myths and reshaping of power relations is an inherently uncomfortable process. Even committed allies can respond to First Nations accounts of history with a range of unexpected emotions, like shock, guilt, confusion, hesitation, cynicism and defensiveness, as heroes are toppled and established “facts” are overturned.

Safe truth-listeners are prepared to deal with these unsettling feelings and put truth-tellers first by:

- doing the work before being in the truth-telling space so they know how to care for themselves and others
- sitting with their own emotional discomfort
- not burdening truth-tellers with their own distress, and
- supporting other non-Indigenous listeners to manage their discomfort.

To prepare, you can:

- [Read](#) and [watch](#) about Dadirri.
- [Learn](#) about active listening.
- Watch [Truth-listening: Ready to Reconcil Australia for Truth](#) with Blake Alan Cansdale.

Truth-acting

‘What are you going to do with the information I’ve given you?’

Voices in Truth-telling

Truth-tellers undertake truth-telling for a range of reasons but hope for a better future is usually a key driver. Understanding the past is key to understanding the present and making better decisions for our collective future. Truth-telling can be a potent tool for the transformation of individuals, institutions and Australian society broadly, but this depends on listeners turning knowledge into action.

It is easy to understand that negative responses to truth-telling are unsafe. Apathy is also a safety issue. Truth-telling is hard emotional work. It takes courage and often takes a toll on the teller. When personal stories of deep injustice are followed by apathy and inaction it can be devastating.

Accountability to the truth-teller can mean:

- responding to calls to action by truth-tellers and First Nations leaders
- amplifying the truths you have been told
- having conversations with your family, friends, colleagues and workplaces
- calling out racism
- building relationships with the First Nations community whose truths you’ve heard (where welcome).

Dive deeper into truth-acting:

- Read more about truth-acting in our [*Truth-telling: Ways for Everyone to Participate*](#) guide.
- Access resources about [allyship](#) on WellMob.
- Read [Amnesty International’s guide to First Nations allyship](#)
- Read The Australian Centre for Social Innovation’s [Many Threads](#) prompt book for First Nations Allyship
- Read [Living on Stolen Land](#) by Palyku author
- Some organisations also offer allyship training.
- Consider following and joining local community and Reconciliation Action Groups.

Non-Indigenous truth-tellers

Descendants of the perpetrators of colonial violence also have truths to tell. For non-Indigenous truth-tellers, it is important to be guided by the voices and perspectives of First Nations peoples to avoid causing further harm and distress.

- Check out these examples of non-Indigenous truth-telling:
 - The Guardian's *The Descendents* series.
 - Sam Carmody, ABC journalist
 - Peter Sharp, descendant of Sir Alfred Deakin
 - The Wyatt Trust

Reconciliation Australia's Community Truth-telling Pathways (CTTP) program provides information and practical resources to support communities undertaking truth-telling and to enable non-Indigenous Australians to better understand how to participate.

To stay updated on new resources and developments from Community Truth-telling Pathways, go to reconciliation.org.au/truth-telling and subscribe for updates. If you have any questions about the program or resources, [contact us](#).

If you read or use this Keeping Truth-telling Safe: Guide, we would love to hear what you think. Share your feedback or reflections by [completing this five-minute survey](#).



reconciliation.org.au/truth-telling

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