

# staying strong stories



Compiled by Dr Damien Howard

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank many people who shared stories or gave support to developing this booklet.

These people include George King, Charmaine Wall, Alison Wunungmurra, Fiona Leibrick, Lana Miller, Daryl Winter, Valda Gaykumungu, Margaret Cooper, Audrey Tilmouth, Chris Schubert and Harry Sing.

Illustrations and layout are by Kristy Day, except for the illustration on page 7 which is by Valda Gaykamangu and is from 'Look after yourself'.

Any profits from the sale of this booklet will be used to develop further Wellbeing resources for Aboriginal people.

Phoenix Consulting  
PO Box 793 Nightcliff Darwin 0814  
Phone 0889484444  
Email Damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au

Copyright 2012

## Try this meditation

Sit comfortably, and think about the people who have been strong for you in your life.

Imagine them as clearly as you can, one at a time.

Remember how they were strong for you,

how they were a role model for you.

Think about what things you did that made them proud.

Now think about the people who you are strong for,

what you hope for them,

the strengths you see in them,

what they do that makes you proud.

*What you do today grows strengths for tomorrow.*

## Introduction

Aboriginal Australians have some of the longest lasting continuous cultures in the world. Moreover, many of these cultures have developed through continuous contact with traditional lands. Affinity with country is a more important part of the cultural identity of Aboriginal Australians than is the case in most other cultures. While there is a focus on attachment to specific land in many cultures, the deep, multi-layered connections of people to 'country' that occurs in Aboriginal cultures is almost unknown in Western peoples. The 'being in country' story describes the strong spiritual connection that is felt by Aboriginal people when they are in their traditional 'Country'. There is a sense of belonging and connection that affirms identity and cultivates wellbeing. In many Aboriginal cultures it is believed that when people die their spirits 'return to country' and become part of the landscape. So, in 'healing waters', by returning to swim in a sacred place a man introduces his family to the spirits of the ancestors who reside there. The connection with country also involves animals and plants of that country. In the 'it is who I am' story, a man describes how the social affirmation of his connection with his totem, the shark, gives him strength through asserting this part of his identity; an identity that incorporates the qualities of the shark. The 'make a pearl out of that rubbish' story refers to using the survival strategies of an oyster as a metaphor for dealing with the stresses of life.

'I build a fire' speaks of how a woman stands in smoke to "take away" the worries of the day. The leaves of the ironbark tree have traditionally been used in smoking ceremonies. For example, to cleanse premises after someone has died there. This woman has adapted this practice as a personal stress management strategy, to use at the end of her workday.

Even when they no longer have a connection to a specific traditional 'country', Aboriginal people often have a special relationship with the natural world. Involvement with nature through hunting or fishing, or even watering the garden, can cultivate deep and healing mindfulness, as in 'just peace and harmony' and 'its gone down the river, gone'.

The importance of family is another central element in Aboriginal cultures. Just as 'country' is, in a profound way, often part of who Aboriginal people are, family also looms large in their identity. While Western cultures cultivate a more individualistic sense of 'self', collective cultures foster a more 'social self'. This social self is embodied in strong family and kinship networks. In 'one big family together' a

woman describes how she is woven into the larger whole of her past and present family. People are constantly reminded that they are part of a larger 'whole' through the strong symbolism associated with everyday activities. They are deeply fulfilled through participating in the vital cultural priorities of being with, and supporting family, and the growing up of children. Embedded in all of these cultural priorities is the passing on of important stories.

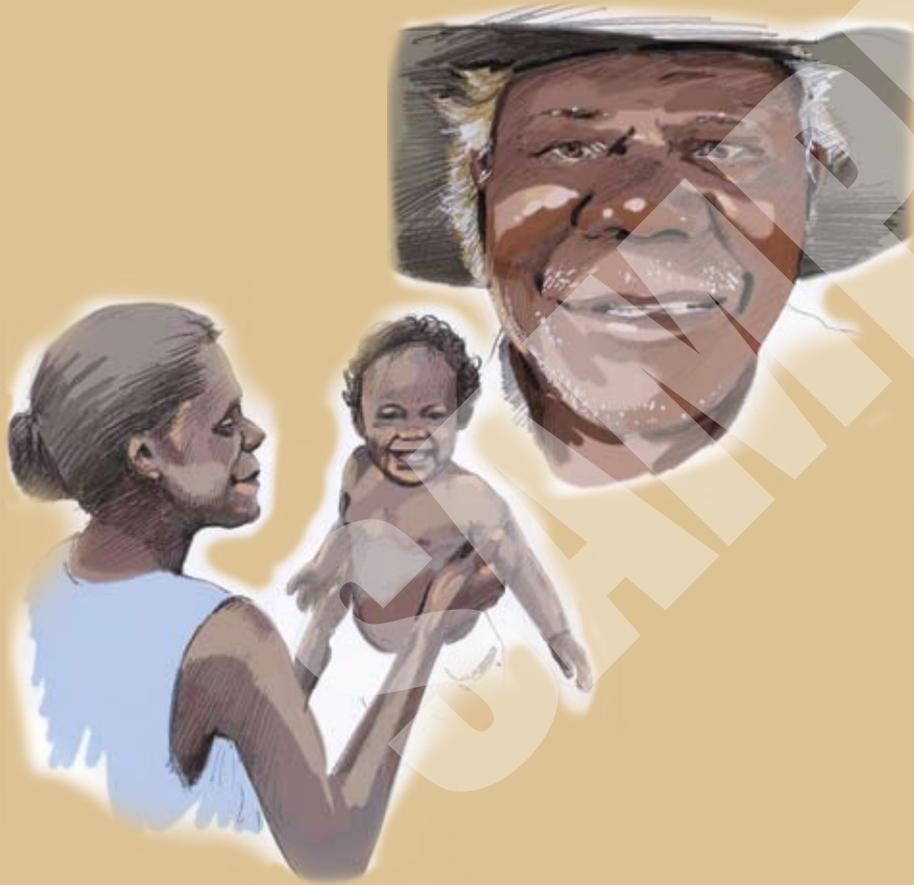
The most comfortable way for Aboriginal people to seek support is often by turning to family. It may feel strange to talk to professional strangers, such as counsellors. When an Aboriginal writer was deciding how to write about someone seeing a counsellor she said, "I will have to explain about why someone would see a counsellor and what it like, because most people will think it is strange to talk about personal things to someone who is not family". Although it is 'less comfortable', talking to people outside family can open up important 'new doors' to the support that is needed when someone is dealing with the complex and challenging events that often punctuate the lives of many Aboriginal families'.

Adult hearing loss that results from endemic childhood ear disease is widespread among Aboriginal people. This hearing loss is just one of the complexities challenging Aboriginal families, as it often creates communication difficulties that undermine people's confidence, as in 'don't be shame, ask again'.

The stories in this booklet come from the experiences of Aboriginal people dealing with the challenges of living. These people stay strong through drawing on, and sometimes adapting, powerful cultural traditions, as well as accessing resources made available through their contact with Western people. When people share stories, they give something important from their experiences in life that can help guide, inspire and support others.

I would like to thank the many Aboriginal people who have shared their stories in this booklet. I would also invite people who would like to share their staying strong stories with others to send them to me at [damiem@phoenixconsulting.com.au](mailto:damiem@phoenixconsulting.com.au). Stories selected will be available online at [www.stayingstrongstories.com.au](http://www.stayingstrongstories.com.au).

# 'it is like really good medicine'



*I feel good when I spend time with my parents.*

*Being with family is a relief from the dramas and hassles of everyday life in a new culture. Always trying to work out how to fit in. When family visit they make you feel good. Just relaxed and laid back.*

*When family visit my body feels happy. It feels relaxed. Its like really good medicine.*

*It just brightens me up being with my grandkids. It makes my day.*

# 'being in country'



*Family and country together heals. Last year we went for bush holiday – family was together and everybody was happy. And you share and you're all together and there is no alcohol and no drugs.*

*It is all the men strong and healthy – no grog. Families close together, sitting around fires, telling dreamtime stories and [other] stories. Make you strong. Then you come back and raring to go to get into work.*

*Going back to the country makes people strong. It takes their problems away and clears their mind. Then it is your duty to pass stories down to younger generation. Coz when you are gone and you have returned to dreamtime, they got to carry that story.*

*Being in 'Country' soothes the soul, soothes the 'being' of that person who comes from that country. All the ties are to that country through the generations – handed down.*

*Being in that country takes all the problems away – you feel happy, you feel safe, you feel good. You have that right, you belong there. You are part of that country through the dreamtime stories.*

# 'after I had been for a walk'

*When two of my family passed away I was feeling down. All my family was feeling down too and were coming to me for support. But I could not help them. I just wanted to stay at home and lie down. I was friends with one of the teachers. She started coming round after work to go for a walk with her. I did not feel like going walking but I always felt good after I had been for a walk.*



# 'opened a new door'



*After big fights with my family I was feeling no good. My cousin took me to see a counsellor. Talking to the counsellor helped me to get feelings out of my chest. I had been holding onto those feelings and putting a lid on them. It was different to talking to family. I could talk about hurts that I was shamed to talk to family about. Going to that counsellor opened a new door for help.*

# 'make a pearl out of that rubbish'

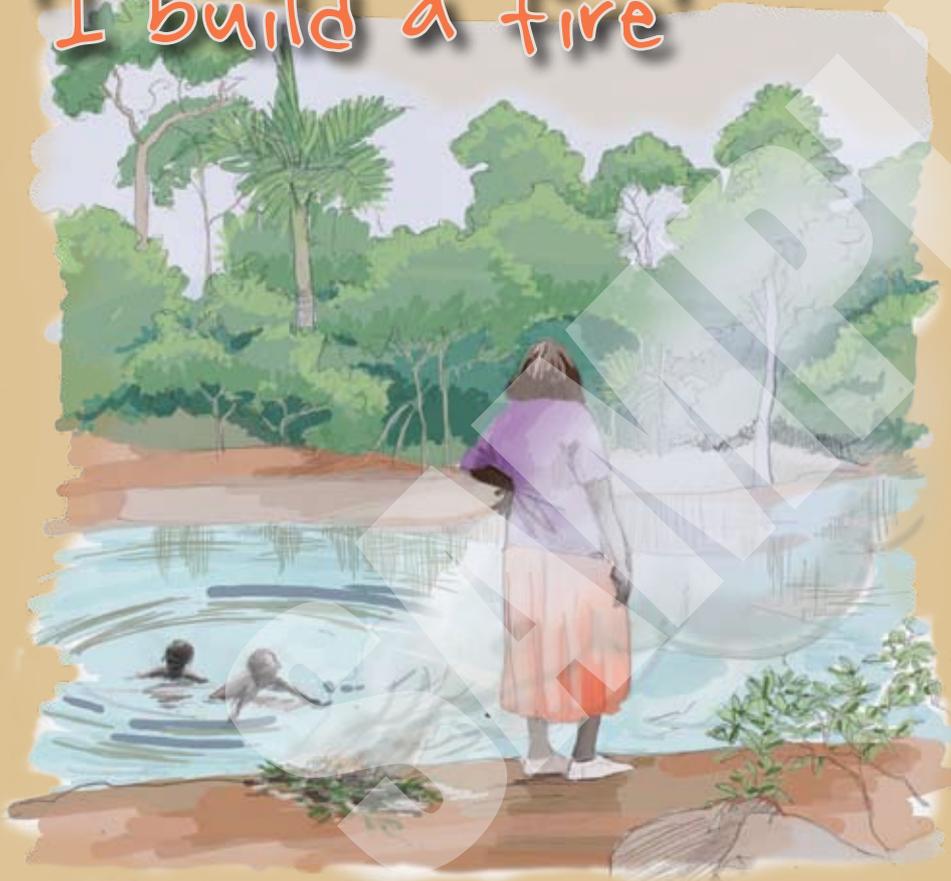


*When he was having big problems at work a man went to see an elder. That elder told him the story of the oyster.*

*That oyster drinks in everything around it. It drinks in food that way but there is also sand and other rubbish things in the water it drinks in. The oyster spits out most of that rubbish with the sea water. But some of that rubbish gets stuck inside it, tickling and hurting it. The oyster covers over that rubbish that get stuck inside it. Covers it over making it part of its own body so it did not hurt anymore. The oyster makes a pearl out of the rubbish that way.*

*The elder told the man that the oyster showed the way when he was feeling no good from too much rubbish things happening at work. He should just let most of those things go, like the way the oyster spat out rubbish with the seawater. But with that rubbish he could not get rid of, he had to think about it and work out how to make it so it did not hurt him. To work out how to make a pearl out of that rubbish.*

# 'I build a fire'



*I go down to river after work with the kids. I build a fire and then collect the right leaves.*

*The kids go swimming and I stand in the smoke and think good thoughts about myself. I let the smoke take those bad things from the day away.*

*The smoke takes those bad things away.*

# '...it is who I am...'



*My totem is the shark. The shark is strong, confident and proud. When I think about my totem I feel strong. It is who I am. It is in my flesh and blood.*

*If someone is feeling lost and down, their family acknowledge their totem. That helps them remember themselves, to remember who they are. That is one step of their healing.*

# What keeps you strong?

**Pick the things that make you feel good**

Bush holiday

Looking after grand children

Talking about worries

Visiting family

Going hunting

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Feeling good**



**Pick the things that make you feel bad**

Keeping to yourself

Jealousy arguments

Drinking too much

Not eating properly

Not sleeping properly

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Example page  
- what to do on the  
next double page**

**This is an example of what  
to do on the next double page**

On the left side write down the  
**things that make you feel strong**, and

then on the right side write down the  
**things that take your strength away**



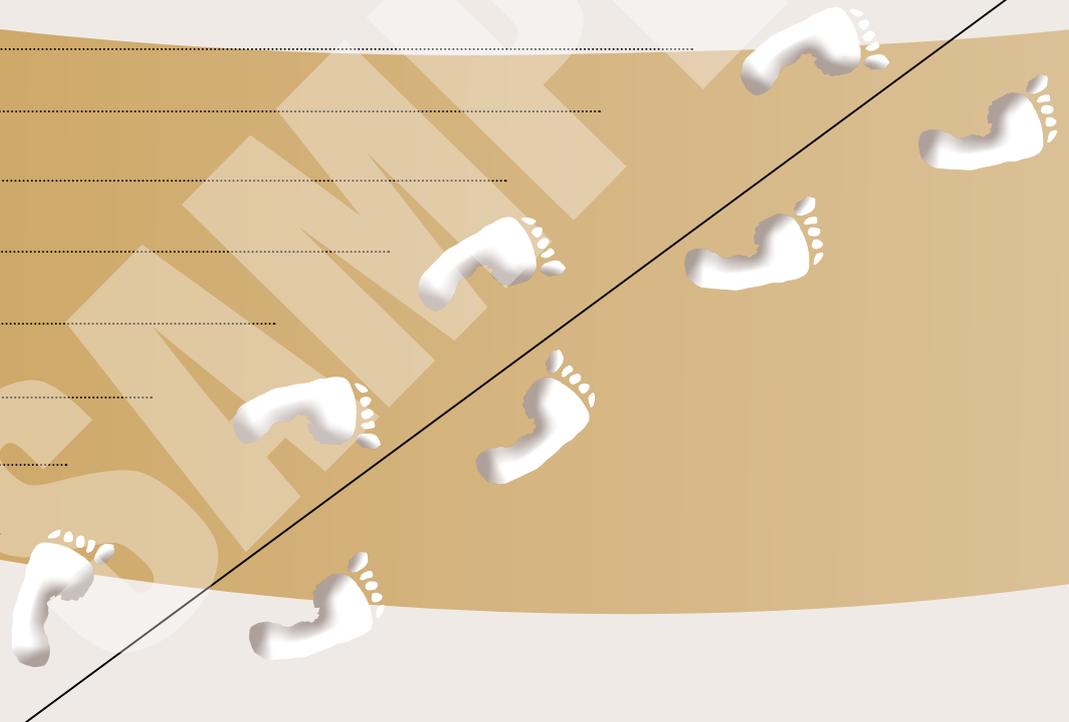
**Feeling bad**

# 'Planning to



**Feeling**

A series of ten horizontal dotted lines for writing, located on the left side of the page. A diagonal line runs from the bottom left towards the top right, separating the writing area from the illustration area.



# Stay Strong!

good



Feeling bad

Write down the things that make you strong that you are going to do more.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Write down the things that take your strength away that you want to do less.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Plan how you will do this**

Think about people you can share your plan with, people you trust and who can support you.

*This process is called 'Wellbeing Planning' and it is adapted from AimHi mental health resources. Google AimHi for more information.*



# 'one big family together'



*I think about happy things with my kids while I make the baskets and string bags. I'm just always think about my kids and my family. The fun we used to have. Go fishing, camping out. When you put the needle over and under and pull it to make it tight. I think about my family coming together.*

*The colours of the grass represent our skin groups. So like my grandmother she's Gumatj skin group and the colour purple means her daughter. The yellow would be my mother's daughter - me. The white represents my daughter's skin group. The orange is like my daughter's daughter, my granddaughter. The same colors next to each other are like a circle, it just goes round and round.*

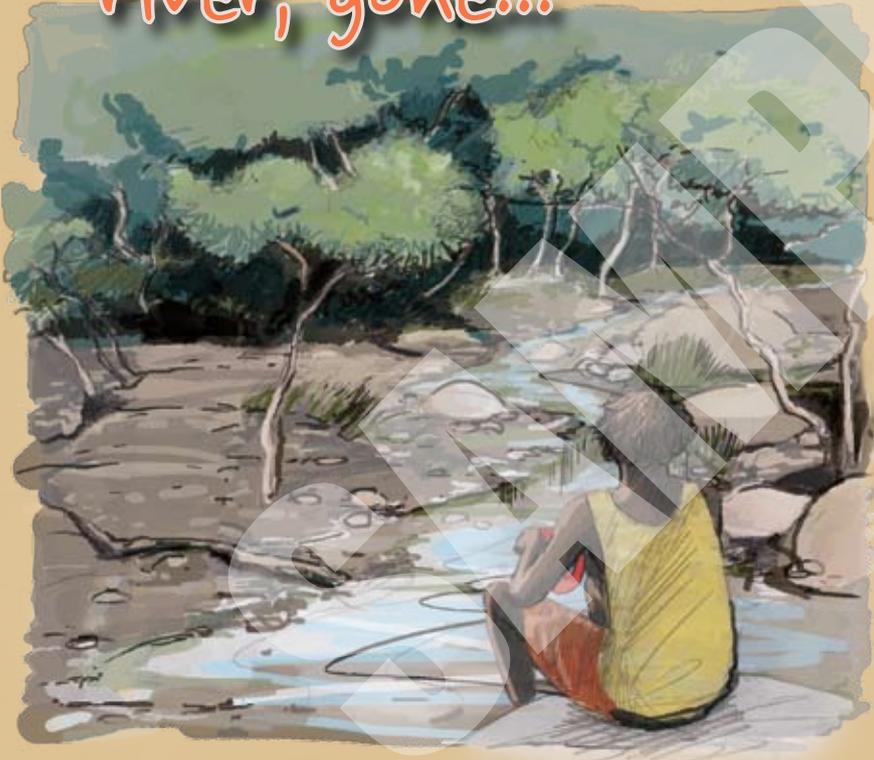
*When I'm making that basket I'm thinking about all those people. When I do my baskets I feel like I've got my grandmother there, my mum, myself, my daughter and granddaughter. So when I do the basket I think of us five women. Once it is finished it is one big family together.*

# 'just peace and harmony'



*I see the water rushing out of the hose. It's like energy. Bad energy in you flows out of your body as well and goes with the water. And then the tranquillity, peace, harmony, all of that comes back into you, after all the pressure and things that feel bad in you comes out like the tap and it disappears. It goes into the ground. After that you see the plants come to life. They flourish. I take that flourishing back into me and feel so peaceful and calm. Then I got no fight in my bones, you know. No anger in my bone, you know, just peace and harmony.*

'...it's gone down the river, gone...'



All the pressures, stresses just gone, it's gone down the river.

*I sit down and listen to the wind, the birds and the actual trickle of the water.*

*You can feel it, you know, the sound, the trickling, the water flow, the light on the water, the highlights that shines as it is going down. It take it all away, you know, get it out of you, you feel better. You close your mind then and blend in with it and you find the uplifting experience of peace and harmony. It comes into you, you know.*

*All the pressures, stresses just gone, it's gone down the river, gone, yeah. And then you catch fish, turtle.*

# 'don't be shame, ask again'



When I found out I had hearing problems it changed how I thought about myself.

*I always thought that I was dumb. I was no good at school and left early. I always felt left out when there were lots of people talking and I could not follow what they said.*

*When I found out I had hearing problems it changed how I thought about myself. Now I know I am not dumb but have trouble hearing sometimes. Like when it is noisy or on the phone.*

*I feel more confident now. If I know what needs to be done I can do it. Now I don't sit back worried when I don't understand. I ask people to speak up or move where it is quiet so I can understand them.*

*I say to other people with hearing troubles 'don't be shame, ask again!'*

# '...Thinking about her builds my inner strengths...!'



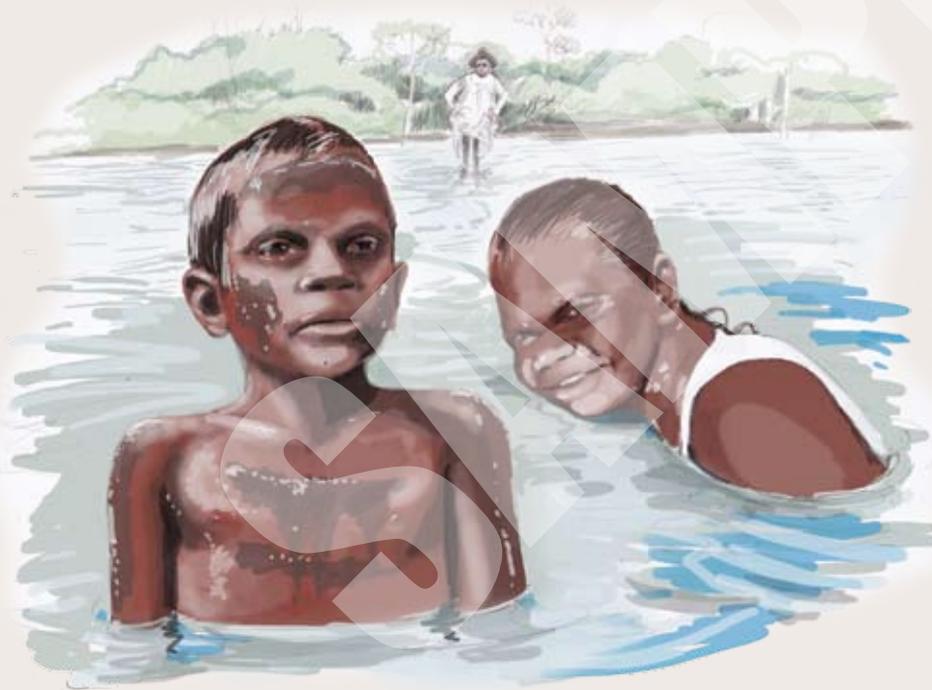
When I look in the mirror and see my hair I think of her.

*Having red hair is part of who I am. That came from my Irish ancestry. One Irish ancestor was employed to round up and shoot out Aboriginal people. They did that then to get the land. He lived with my great great grandmother and had children with her. He introduced that red hair into my family.*

*My mother had red hair, like I did when I was younger. She is my strongest lifelong role model. What she has taught me will guide me throughout my life. She is a strong role model for me and other Aboriginal women. She showed me that Aboriginal women are strong and can be heard, and thinking about her builds my inner strengths. If things are getting too bad I think about what she did in situations.*

*When my mother was young she lived in a dormitory and her hair was all shaved off. Now I keep that same red hair color she had out of respect for her and to remember the things she faced and overcame. When I look in the mirror and see my hair I think of her.*

# '...healing waters...'



*My mother always said to me – 'you got to come back to these waters'. It's milky white water in that black soil country. They are our healing waters.*

*She said 'you got to walk in these waters. All the past spirits – all the old people are all there.'*

*She said 'You got to bring your family here'. When I bring them here, I introduce my family to them...' this is my wife, this is my daughter.'*

*Its like a lifeline that water. All the ancestors have swam there, fished there and hunted on those waters. It's introducing my kids to what the ancestors did. I tell my kids that if you ever get sick and need to heal, this is where you need to come. Walk in these waters, talk to the spirits and tell them your problems.*

'...you give that from  
your heart...'



*It makes me feel good being a good listener. Being a mentor. Understanding people's problems, knowing how far I can go with them.*

*I feel good when I am speaking using words they can understand. I see in their body language they are taking it all in.*

*When you see how they feel when they leave. Then you open up inside and feel happy. You have helped them understand what life is about. It comes from your heart, you give that from your heart.*

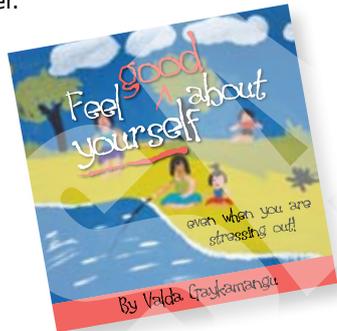


## Other publications by Phoenix Consulting



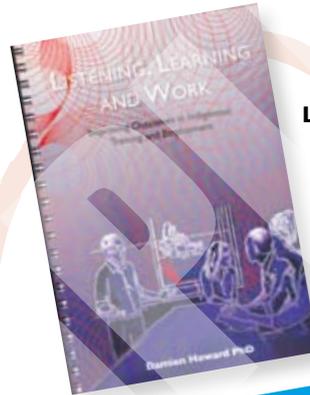
### When Bad Things Happen

This resource tells about how people feel when bad things happen and what they can do to feel better.



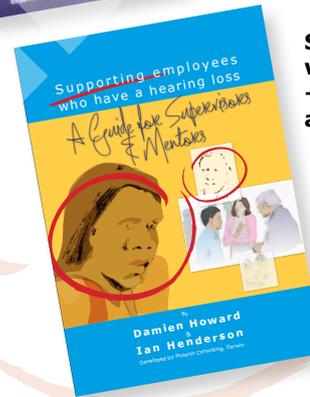
### Feel Good About Yourself

This booklet tells the story of a young woman who experiences depression and how she copes with it.



### Listening Learning, and Work

These resources are designed to help those who supervise, mentor, or work with the many Aboriginal people with listening problems.



### Supporting Employees who Have A Hearing Loss - A Guide for Supervisors and Mentors

Contact [damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au](mailto:damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au) for more information



There are more staying strong stories at:  
**[www.stayingstrongstories.com.au](http://www.stayingstrongstories.com.au)**

# staying strong stories

**Stories from Aboriginal  
people about what helps  
to keep them strong.**



Phoenix  
Consulting

The phoenix was a dreamtime bird. There was only ever one at a time. When it was going to die it built a fire and was burned to ash. From that ash the bird flew up born again to start a new life. This story tells how there can be new beginnings even after bad experiences.