



Racism and its impact on the Social & Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. As a community-controlled organisation, it is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies, working in these areas to promote collective excellence in mental health care.

'Gayaa' means happy, pleased, and proud, and 'Dhuwi' means Spirit, in the Yuwaalaray and Gamilaraay languages of north-west New South Wales. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia's vision is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, excellence, and presence across all parts of the Australian mental health system and the achievement of the highest attainable standard of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Summary

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (GDPSA) stands against all forms of racism and racial discrimination. We condemn all forms of racism and recognise the impacts of racism on all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The GDPSA Declaration (the Declaration) focuses on a 'best of both worlds approach' articulated in the Declaration under the following five key themes:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing should be recognised across all parts of the Australian mental health system, and in some circumstances support specialised areas of practice.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing combined with clinical perspectives will make the greatest contribution to the achievement of the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values-based social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcome measures in combination with clinical outcome measures should guide the assessment of mental health and suicide prevention services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence and leadership is required across all parts of the Australian mental health system for it to adapt to, and be accountable to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the achievement of the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes.
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders should be supported and valued to be visible and influential across all parts of the Australian mental health system.



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For centuries Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been subjected to systemic racism, discrimination, and prejudice this has had a profound impact on the Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health of Indigenous people. We recognise the long-term health effects that racism has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as well as adults this may include psychological distress, intergenerational trauma, poor quality of life and substance misuse, increase of cardiovascular disease and suicide which is the most common outcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continuously experience racism.

What is racism?

“Racism takes many forms. In general, it is a belief that a particular race or ethnicity is inferior or superior to others. Racial discrimination involves any act where a person is treated unfairly or vilified because of their race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin.”ⁱ

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience racism in a variety of ways and in different stages across the lifespan, the impact of poor mental health outcomes and intergenerational trauma stems from past and current laws and government policies which resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people removed from country and placed within missions and reserves or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children taken away from their families – who are the Stolen Generation Survives

Evidence

There is a significant amount of evidence-based research and studies which is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that demonstrates the linkages between racism and its impact on negative health outcomes. One of the most widely studied areas is the impact of racism on the Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities the Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Experiences of Racism Survey Yin Paradiesⁱⁱ
- The national Indigenous-led Mayi Kuwayu Study conducted at The Australian National University (ANU) analysed data from more than 8,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, collected between 2018-2020ⁱⁱⁱ.
- Mitigating the impacts of racism on Indigenous wellbeing through human rights, legislative and health policy reform^{iv}
- The Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Families and Communities^v
- The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda^{vi}

National Policy

Racism is recognised in government policy as a driver of ill-health. Many strategic government documents have attempted to highlight and address the negative impacts of racism, some examples of which are listed below. Despite this, racism and discrimination still



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pervades the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The following National Policy aligns with the five key themes of the GDPSA Declaration:

- **Position Statement – Impacts of racism on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians**^{vii} recognises the presence of racism in both institutional structures and personal interactions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The position statement highlights the requirement to promote inclusivity at all levels of workforce including promoting leadership as an essential step to eliminating racism from the health system.
- **The Fifth National Suicide Plan**^{viii} recognises Racism continues to have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's decisions about when and why they seek health services and their acceptance of and adherence to treatment and recognises discrimination and racism as a stressor.
- **The Aboriginal Health Plan 2013 to 2023** recognised racism for the first time in a health policy instrument, calling for a health system free of racism^{ix}
- The vision for the vision for the **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Plan**^x is for "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy long, healthy lives that are centred in culture, with access to services that are prevention-focussed, responsive, culturally safe and free of racism and inequity".
- **The National Agreement on Closing the Gap** (a document that all Australian governments have committed to – Federal, States and Territories, and Local Government) points to the need to address and eliminate racism throughout.^{xi}
- Racism is also recognised in a range of **State Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health** policies.

Recommendations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a right to live a life free of racism. Gayaa Dhuwi advocates the onus of removing racism from government systems and services rests with the Government and not with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Gayaa Dhuwi supports the following actions as measures taken to advance Australia into a position of a racism free system.

- Establish and fund culturally appropriate mental health resources, including preventative and early intervention strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people affected by racism.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices must be heard in relation to all policy development, implementation and delivery of services which impact our lives. This includes working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to promote healing and resilience and to develop community-led solutions to address the impacts of racism on mental health and wellbeing.
- Develop and implement trauma-informed care practices in healthcare settings to better respond to the impacts of racism on mental health and wellbeing.
- Increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health professionals and invest in training programs to support the development of culturally competent healthcare practitioners.
- Increase funding for mental health research that includes the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and addresses the intersections of racism, trauma, and mental health.



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- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander history should be included in primary and secondary school curriculum so that all young Australians understand the impacts of colonisation, and what that means for the lives and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in contemporary Australia.
- Investment to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language teachers and Cultural educators.

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia, and pay respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging.

ⁱ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), National Anti-Racism Partnership and Strategy – Discussion Paper, March 2012. Accessed at http://www.humanrights.gov.au/antiracism/discussion_paper-p3.html#bodytext

ⁱⁱ Ferdinand, A., Paradies, Y. & Kelaher, M. 2012, Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities: The Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Experiences of Racism Survey, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

ⁱⁱⁱ Racism linked to poor health among Indigenous Australians. (2021, September 24). ANU. <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/racism-linked-to-poor-health-among-indigenous-australians>

^{iv} Pat Dudgeon, Abigail Bray and Roz Walker *Med J Aust* 2023; 218 (5): 203-205. doi: 10.5694/mja2.51862
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^v A Contributing Life: the 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Prepared by Chris Holland, with Pat Dudgeon and Helen Milroy for the National Mental Health Commission March 2013, updated May 2013

^{vi} The Impact of Racism on Indigenous Health in Australia and Aotearoa: Towards a Research Agenda. (2008). <https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/resources/Cultural-and-social-determinants/racism/impact-of-racism-on-indigenous-health>

^{vii} Office of the National Rural Health Commissioner, Position Statement – Impacts of Racism on the Health and Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. (2023) Australian Government Department of Health. [position-statement-impacts-of-racism-on-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-indigenous-australians-impacts-of-racism-on-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-indigenous-australians.pdf](https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/resources/Cultural-and-social-determinants/racism/impact-of-racism-on-indigenous-health)

^{viii} Department of Health. (2017). The fifth national mental health and suicide prevention plan.

^{ix} Department of Health (2013) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023, page 7

^x Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. (2022, November 15). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031.

^{xi} Cabinet, D. O. T. P. M. A. (2020). National Agreement on Closing the Gap.