



Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (Gayaa Dhuwi) 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.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had many thousands of years of strong social and emotional wellbeing and mental health prior to colonisation. The ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma as a consequence of colonisation has resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing higher rates of social and emotional wellbeing challenges and mental ill-health.

The Australian mental health system delivers a westernised model of care to address social and emotional wellbeing and mental ill-health. With rising rates of people accessing services in this space, there is a need to transform how Indigenous mental health and wellbeing is conceptualised and addressed within the Australian mental health system.

It is the position of Gayaa Dhuwi that transforming Indigenous mental health and wellbeing will require a whole-of-system approach, grounded in both culture and evidence-based practice and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This can be achieved through:

- Development and implementation of a social and emotional wellbeing and mental health model of care that incorporates both cultural and clinical responses to social and emotional wellbeing and ill-mental health.
- Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the transformation of Indigenous mental health and wellbeing.
- Adopting a consumer-driven approach, recognising the unique individual needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers in the Australian mental health system.

Background

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (the Declaration) is the foundation of all initiatives at Gayaa Dhuwi. The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across all parts of the Australian mental health system to achieve the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Drawing on the nine principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing developed in the 1995 Ways Forward Report, the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration focuses on a 'best of both worlds approach' highlighting five themes.

The themes recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, the necessity of health services that are both clinically and culturally considered, and the role and value of social and emotional wellbeing lens in the delivery of healthcare for Aboriginal and



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Torres Strait Islander people. More on the Declaration can be found at the Gayaa Dhuwi websiteⁱ.

Models of Care

Building new and supporting existing models of care that work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be central to achieving a system that can deliver. These models of care must be grounded in culture where cultural and clinical considerations go hand in hand and outcome measures assess both concepts.

Models of care must be delivered through organisations that ensure that models are accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Publicly funded mental health services should be delivered by organisations that can demonstrate how their community is able to access the services, with a track record of engagement and local uptake of services.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 229,968 people accessed social and emotional wellbeing supports through Aboriginal Primary Health Care organisations in 2020-2021ⁱⁱ. Social and emotional wellbeing is a holistic concept intrinsic to the overall wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and specialised models of care must be provided to address this. The 1995 Ways Forward report highlighted the need for mental health models of care to be developed and delivered in terms of need, equity and social justiceⁱⁱⁱ.

Gayaa Dhuwi is a partner of the Transforming Indigenous Mental health and Wellbeing Project led by Professor Pat Dudgeon, Professor Helen Milroy, and Professor Jill Milroy. Based at the University of Western Australia, the project is Aboriginal-led and aims to transform the mental health system to use the social and emotional wellbeing model which incorporates a strengths-based approach as well as cultural healers and healing practices. In addition, it is evidence and outcomes that are developed through a cultural lens. Through the inclusion of cultural practices, the initiative aims to improve mental health and wellbeing services, access, and experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoplesiv.

Conclusion

Transforming mental health and social and emotional wellbeing is a long-term process that requires collaboration, understanding, and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and traditions. It's imperative to recognise the underlying factors that contribute to poor mental health outcomes and embed an approach that is holistically.



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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 Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (2015) Gayaa Dhuwi Declaration. <https://www.gayaadhuwi.org.au/gayaa-dhuwi-proud-spirit-declaration/>

ⁱⁱ 3.10 Access to mental health services. (n.d.). AIHW Indigenous HPF. <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/3-10-access-mental-health-services>

ⁱⁱⁱ Swan, P., & Raphael, B. (1995). Ways forward. National Consultancy Report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health, Part 1 and Part, 2.

^{iv} About Us - Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing. (2023, June 1). Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing. <https://timhwb.org.au/about-us/>