



## **Best of Both Worlds Approach to Mental Health Care: Importance of Traditional Healers**

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.

### **About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia**

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national leadership 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.

### **Importance of Traditional Healers and Cultural Healing Practices**

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015) highlights a best of both worlds approach, advocating for the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practices within mainstream clinical mental health services. This approach acknowledges the importance of cultural and spiritual aspects of healing alongside evidence-based clinical interventions. It aims to create a holistic mental health care system that respects, values, and utilises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural values, knowledges, and practices; thereby, enhancing outcomes for social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention (NYP, 2013; Swan & Raphael, 1995).

It is the position of Gayaa Dhuwi that by upholding the best of both worlds approach by combining the role of traditional healers and cultural healing practices with clinical approaches, as articulated in the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015), we can achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and social and emotional wellbeing and reduce suicides.

To achieve this best of both worlds approach, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends:

1. Formal recognition of traditional healers within the health care system.
2. Development of integrated care models that combine cultural and clinical approaches.



### 3. Promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in mental health care planning and delivery.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is the oldest living culture in the world and sustained the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for thousands of years (Rasmussen et al., 2011). The ongoing disparity in health and mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples highlights that modern medicine alone has not bridged the gap required for health equity (AIHW, 2022; Productivity Commission, 2024). This health disparity is not linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, it is a direct result of the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma (Sherwood, 2013). Australia is uniquely positioned to combine traditional and cultural healing practices with contemporary bio-medical interventions to benefit the health and wellbeing for all people (Milroy, ND).

Traditional healers are an important component to addressing the diverse cultural practices that promote holistic wellbeing by integrating a range of healing methods that have been passed down through generations. Traditional healers and cultural healing practices play a vital role in the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Cox et al., 2022; Swan & Raphael, 1995). For example, traditional healers, known as Ngangkari, particularly in the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands in the remote western desert of Central Australia, are highly respected individuals skilled in culturally specific healing practices that address physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health. They employ various techniques such as massage, breath work, smoking ceremonies, and the use of bush medicines to realign the spirit and promote healing (NPY, 2013; Rooney, 2023).

Cultural healing practices are deeply rooted in connection to Country, community, and identity, and involve practices like yarning, storytelling, dance, music, spending time on Country and connecting with nature (Dudgeon et al., 2020). Integrating traditional approaches, such as traditional healers and cultural healing practices, into mainstream mental health systems can provide culturally safe and responsive care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; thus, improve social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes (Dudgeon et al., 2020).

## Current Landscape

Recent statistics emphasise the critical state of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As of 2022, suicide accounted for 4.6% of all deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The rate of death by suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men was 2.6 times that of non-Indigenous males, while the suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women was 2.5 times that of non-Indigenous females (AIHW, 2022). This gap highlights the urgent need for a holistic, culturally responsive approach to mental health care, and points to a widening gap in



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health outcomes. This reinforces the importance of 'closing the gap' in a way that respects and incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional healing practices and leadership in mental health care planning and delivery (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

The social and emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are unmet through current models of care, rooted in Western practices (Garvey et al., 2021). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples require a combination of traditional healing practices with contemporary clinical treatment models to create mental health services that are culturally responsive and culturally safe; thus, more effective. This integrated approach acknowledges the valuable healing techniques of traditional healers and contributes to improving social and emotional wellbeing outcomes and addressing the high rates of suicide (Swan & Raphael, 1995).

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015) articulates the need to incorporate traditional healing practices into the health care system. This approach recognises and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices and supports culturally responsive and safe mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through formal recognition, integrated care models, and the promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, we can move towards a more inclusive and effective health care system that truly addresses the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Calma et al., 2017).

### **What is the Role of Traditional Healers?**

Traditional healers play a crucial role in their communities, offering treatments that have been developed and refined over generations. Their knowledge of bush medicines provides natural remedies to health issues, massage techniques offer physical relief and promote healing, and spiritual and cultural practices address the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of individuals (Swan & Raphael, 1995). These practices are not only effective but also offer a culturally safe form of care that compliments clinical interventions (Rooney et al., 2023).

Traditional healers create a culturally safe environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are accepted, respected, and empowered to seek help with their mental health needs. This helps to overcome barriers to mainstream mental health services and lowers the likelihood of cultural misunderstandings or discrimination (Dudgeon et al., 2020; Rooney et al., 2023).

### **Best of Both Worlds Approach to Mental Health Care**

Implementing the recommendations of: (1) formal recognition of traditional healers within the health care system; (2) development of integrated care models; and (3) promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership will significantly advance efforts to combine



clinical and cultural approaches in mental health care, particularly in terms of traditional healing practices.

Formal recognition of traditional healers within the health care system will validate their expertise and cultural practices. By acknowledging traditional healers as practitioners contributing to mental health care, their knowledge of traditional healing methods, such as bush medicines, massage techniques, and cultural and spiritual practices, can be integrated into the broader framework of clinical interventions (Jones et al., 2022). This recognition paves the way for collaboration between traditional healers and clinical professionals, facilitating the incorporation of culturally responsive and safe approaches into mental health care planning and delivery (Calma et al., 2017).

The development of integrated models of care that combine cultural and clinical approaches will provide a comprehensive framework for mental health care delivery. These models prioritise collaboration between traditional healers, mental health professionals, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop holistic care plans that address the multifaceted needs of individuals (Garvey et al., 2021). By combining traditional healing practices with evidence-based clinical interventions, integrated models of care ensure that mental health services are culturally safe, relevant, and effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Oliver, 2013).

Promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in mental health care planning and delivery is crucial for driving the integration of cultural and clinical approaches. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders bring invaluable insights into the cultural aspects of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing by ensuring that services are grounded in the principles of self-determination and cultural autonomy. By empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead and shape mental health services, the integration of traditional healing practices with clinical interventions becomes more seamless, resulting in a more inclusive and effective mental health system (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

## **A Case Study: The Wungen Kartup Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service**

The Wungen Kartup Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service (SAMHS) in Western Australia (WA) provides a model for integrating traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practices with non-Indigenous (Western) mental health approaches. The service's guiding philosophy centres on upholding cultural integrity through a "whole of family" approach that views wellbeing from a cultural, spiritual, and holistic perspective. A key aspect is the collaborative involvement of traditional healers alongside non-Indigenous mental health practitioners, enabling the provision of traditional healing methods alongside Western therapeutic modalities. Interviews with SAMHS service providers and service users identified three major themes underpinning the model's strengths: cultural safety, implementation of



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the *Mental Health Act 2014* (Western Australia), and positive outcomes (Jones et al., 2022). One service provider highlighted the distinct yet complementary roles of traditional healers and Western clinicians:

*"Traditional Healing is very different from Western medicine, and healers have a different and complementary role to psychiatrists. The Ngangkari healers' work was concerned with Aboriginal spirituality, and it could not be learned through Western psychology. Aboriginal traditional healing involved bush medicine, bush tucker, and it was seen as 'a big medical certificate in itself.' There was a role for male and female healers; they were people who had knowledge in lore and culture. All Aboriginal people should have access to healers who come from and understand their own country and culture. Healers had worked with Aboriginal patients who had a strong cultural background and those who had not – they had made a positive impact regardless" (Jones et al., 2022).*

The Western Australia (WA) *Mental Health Act (2014)* mandates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have access to Elders, traditional healers, and Aboriginal mental health workers during assessment, treatment, and care; reflecting an intent to ensure accessible, effective, and non-discriminatory mental health care. Some hospitals and clinics have already begun collaborating with traditional healers, leading to positive outcomes such as pain relief and a sense of ease for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples accessing support (ANTAC 2017; NPY 2013). Incorporating cultural healing practices like yarning circles and connection to Country can also strengthen cultural identity and overall wellbeing. By embracing traditional knowledge systems, working in partnership with Elders and traditional healers, and integrating cultural healing practices, the mainstream mental health system can increase cultural safety through cultural responsiveness, and contribute to the decolonisation of healthcare (Cox et al., 2022; Rooney et al., 2023).

The SAMHS model demonstrates the value of the best of both worlds approach and integration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Western knowledge systems in mental health service delivery. This approach aims to provide culturally safe, responsive, and person-centred care that resonates with the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The success of SAMHS highlights the need for policies and funding models that enable and support such synergistic collaboration between traditional and clinical approaches. Grounding mental health systems in self-determination can lead to more inclusive and effective services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## Conclusion

Implementing formal recognition of traditional healers, developing integrated care models, and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership will significantly contribute to combining clinical and cultural approaches in mental health care. Moreover, empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership ensures services are grounded in self-determination, enabling seamless integration of traditional and clinical approaches for more



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inclusive and effective mental health systems. This multi-pronged approach combining the strengths of traditional healing and clinical care is vital for providing culturally safe and responsive mental health services that nurture the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



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