



## **Culturally Responsive Approach to Assessing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention**

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.

### **Culturally Responsive Approach to Assessing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention**

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 interventions, services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This approach recognises the holistic concept of health that encompasses social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions beyond just clinical factors (Gee et al., 2014). Solely relying on Western clinical measures fails to adequately capture the unique cultural context and worldviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Incorporating culturally informed values-based measures, developed, and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, alongside clinical measures, will build a more comprehensive, culturally relevant evidence base to better evaluate program effectiveness and inform strategies tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (Bourke et al., 2022).

To achieve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the co-design of services and programs and evaluating the impact, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends that:

1. The assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing combined with clinical measures in mental health and suicide prevention programs and services.



2. Community-based social and emotional wellbeing measurement tools, data sets and reporting mechanisms are developed to support the effective evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and social and emotional wellbeing services.

## **Addressing the Need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership**

Current evaluation frameworks for mental health and suicide prevention services and programs predominantly rely on Western clinical outcome measures. These measures fail to adequately capture the holistic, multidimensional concept of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Consequently, there is a significant lack of culturally relevant data and evidence to effectively inform mental health and suicide prevention strategies tailored to the unique contexts and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (AIHW, 2022; Bourke et al., 2022).

The evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples social and emotional wellbeing requires culturally informed tools and approaches (Le Grande et al., 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values-based outcomes measures should lead the evaluation of services and programs that are used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While there are culturally appropriate tools in existence, the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015) highlights the need for the development and uptake of tools to evaluate the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## **Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Values and Knowledges**

To ensure comprehensive and meaningful evaluation, it is crucial that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values-based social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcome measures are incorporated. This approach recognises the importance of cultural identity, connection to Country, community, and spirituality in achieving and maintaining wellbeing. By integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledge systems into evaluation frameworks, a more accurate understanding of the impact of mental health and suicide prevention initiatives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be obtained (Brodie et al., 2021; Le Grande, 2017).

## **Existing Policies and Frameworks**



Existing national policies and frameworks, such as the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report (Dudgeon et al., 2016) highlight the need for culturally safe and responsive evaluation approaches and outcome measures, developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises the importance of leadership, co-design, and culturally responsive services and programs, but falls short in providing clear directives for integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into evaluation processes. Similarly, the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 emphasises the significance of culturally valid outcome measures (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). However, it lacks detailed guidelines on how to effectively develop and implement such measures within existing evaluation frameworks. This policy gap highlights the urgent need for comprehensive guidance that outlines practical and tangible strategies for meaningfully incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and knowledge systems into the assessment and evaluation of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This lack of clear guidance has contributed to the limited availability of culturally relevant data and evidence, hindering the development and implementation of effective mental health and suicide prevention strategies. Without comprehensive, culturally responsive frameworks, the assessment of program effectiveness and the subsequent allocation of resources may be based on incomplete or culturally incongruent data (Le Grande, 2017). This perpetuates a cycle of inadequate service provision and suboptimal outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Addressing these gaps by establishing standardised guidelines and frameworks that mandate the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and values-based measures is crucial to building a robust evidence base that accurately reflects the holistic concept of social and emotional wellbeing and informs culturally safe and responsive mental health and suicide prevention initiatives (Brodie et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values-based social and emotional wellbeing measures within clinical assessments is crucial for developing and evaluating effective, culturally safe mental health and suicide prevention services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These values-based measures, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait



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Islander peoples, should be implemented throughout the entire Australian mental health system.





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