



# Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health

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.

## Summary

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recognises the urgent need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership to be fully supported and integrated across all parts of the Australian mental health system. This policy position aligns with the *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015)*, emphasising the importance of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to practice their own culturally informed concepts of leadership. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia calls for comprehensive strategies to ensure the presence, visibility, and influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, while also fostering their self-care, peer support, and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

To increase the visibility and influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders across the Australian mental health system, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends the following:

1. Invest in comprehensive, culturally grounded leadership development programs tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. These programs should provide training in both Western and Indigenous leadership models, fostering a unique and powerful blend of skills and knowledge.



2. Establish formal mentorship programs and create spaces for informal networking to connect emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders with experienced mentors and peers, fostering a strong and supportive community of practice.
3. Mandate comprehensive cultural responsiveness training for all mental health professionals, ensuring they understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership styles, cultural protocols, and decision-making processes.
4. Allocate dedicated funding streams to support the professional development, self-care, community engagement, and cultural leadership activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health leaders. This funding should be sufficient to address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and enable them to thrive in their roles.

### **Addressing the Need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and the Importance of Self-Care**

The Australian mental health system has historically marginalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, failing to recognise the unique strengths and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders bring to the table (Campbell et al., 2018). This has resulted in a system that is often culturally unsafe, unresponsive to community needs, and ineffective in addressing the complex mental health challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gee et al., 2014).

Self-determination is critical to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. This was first identified in the 1989 National Aboriginal Health Strategy, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples stated that their health status is linked “to control over their physical environment, of dignity, of community, of self-esteem, and of justice” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1989). The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015) reinforces the need for self-determination by proposing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders be supported to influence and shape the mental health system from policy making to service delivery. It is critical that the system supports culturally safe and responsive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. Achieving this requires tailored support to current and emerging leaders given the multidimensional features embedded within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership (Sones et al., 2010).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership styles are often rooted in cultural values, kinship systems, and deep connections to Country. These leadership practices are essential for building trust, fostering healing, and creating culturally safe spaces within the mental



health system (Dudgeon et al., 2014). However, these practices are often not recognised or valued by mainstream institutions, leading to frustration, burnout, and disengagement among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders (Upton et al., 2021).

To truly transform the mental health system and improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is embraced and supported at all levels. This requires a fundamental shift in how leadership is defined and practiced within the mental health system, acknowledging the diversity of cultural perspectives and ways of knowing, being, and doing (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

Systemic support is needed to create an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can thrive. This includes providing culturally appropriate training and mentorship, fostering peer networks, and creating opportunities for leadership development that honours Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and healing practices (Upton et al., 2021).

## **Benefits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership has been shown to improve the cultural safety, effectiveness, and accessibility of mental health services and programs (Gee et al., 2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can bridge the gap between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that services are delivered in ways that are relevant, respectful, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can serve as powerful role models and mentors for young people, inspiring future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health professionals and leaders. Their presence in leadership roles can also help to challenge stereotypes and promote a more positive image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the broader community (Campbell et al., 2018).

## **Existing Commitments**

The Australian government has made several commitments to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the mental health sector. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031* emphasises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance in health service delivery (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP)* has also highlighted the crucial role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in suicide prevention efforts (Dudgeon et al., 2016).



However, despite these commitments, there remains a significant gap between policy and practice. The lack of specific targets, timelines, and dedicated resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership development and support hinders progress and limits the potential impact of these initiatives (Sones et al., 2010).

Current policies and frameworks, while acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, fall short in providing the necessary support and resources to fully empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. Specific gaps include:

- **Lack of targeted funding:** There is a lack of dedicated funding for culturally appropriate leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities, and peer support networks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health leaders.
- **Limited cultural safety training:** While cultural safety training is often mandated for mental health professionals, it may not be comprehensive or adequately address the unique needs and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.
- **Inflexible work arrangements:** Rigid work structures can hinder Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders' ability to engage with their communities and fulfill their cultural obligations, leading to burnout and disengagement.
- **Insufficient resources for community engagement:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders often lack the resources and support necessary to effectively engage with their communities and ensure that mental health services and programs are culturally relevant and responsive.

## Conclusion

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia firmly believes that centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge, and self-determination within the mental health sector is paramount to achieving culturally safe, effective, and sustainable mental health outcomes for their communities. The holistic approach outlined in the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence and leadership across all levels of the mental health system, is essential for a system that is truly accountable to, and reflective of, the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.





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