



## **Equitable Access to Culturally Safe Mental Health Care**

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.

### **Equitable Access to Culturally Safe Mental Health Care**

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia calls for a transformation of the Australian mental health system to ensure it is culturally safe, holistic, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This requires a fundamental shift towards recognising, valuing, and integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, alongside clinical healing practices.

To achieve recognition and integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing across the Australian mental health system, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends:

1. Legislating formal recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of SEWB, mental health, and healing within the Australian mental health system.
2. Increasing and sustaining funding for culturally safe mental health care programs, including traditional healing practices and integrated care models.
3. Developing standardised measures for cultural safety and collecting data on the effectiveness of cultural healing practices, to inform future decisions.
4. Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination in all aspects of mental health care planning and delivery.
5. Establishing mechanisms to protect the cultural intellectual property of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples regarding traditional healing practices.



## Background

The Australian mental health system is failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite the existence of national frameworks outlining culturally safe and holistic care, such as the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (2017-2023)* and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (2021-2031)*, the reality for many is a lack of access to services that respect their unique social and emotional wellbeing needs and cultural healing practices. This ongoing disparity is reflected in the higher rates of psychological distress and suicide experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities compared to non-Indigenous Australians. A 2023 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlights significant data gaps and a lack of progress in several areas, suggesting a systemic failing that demands immediate and critical attention (AIHW, 2023).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples retain sophisticated and multidimensional systems of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing. While these approaches vary between culturally and linguistically diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, there are common features that differentiate them from the mainstream bio-medical model (Gee et al., 2014). These approaches consider an individual in their community context and include a focus on the cultural determinants of health. The cultural determinants of health acknowledge that stronger connections to culture and Country build resilience, a sense of self-esteem, and stronger individual and collective identities. These, in turn, improve outcomes across the other determinants of health including education, economic stability, and community safety (Dudgeon et al., 2021).

## Key Issues

- **Low social and emotional wellbeing:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience higher rates of psychological distress and suicide compared to non-Indigenous Australians, reflecting the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and social disadvantage (Gee et al., 2014).
- **Lack of cultural safety and understanding:** Services which are not community-controlled often lack understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, healing approaches, and the cultural determinants of health, resulting in culturally inappropriate care (Dudgeon et al., 2016).
- **Lack of self-determination and community control:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have consistently called for greater self-determination and control over the design, delivery, and governance of mental health services. A 2020 Deloitte Access



Economics report, commissioned by the Lowitja Institute, found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) are more effective in addressing the mental health needs of their communities due to their cultural understanding, holistic service delivery, and strong community connections (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020).

## **Holistic Concept of Wellbeing**

The social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples extend far beyond Western biomedical concepts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives recognise the complex interplay between physical, psychological, spiritual, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions of health and wellbeing. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, social and emotional wellbeing is intrinsically tied to deep connections with land, waters, ancestors, spirituality, language, family, kinship, and community. Disruptions to these connections profoundly impact individual, family, and community wellbeing. Healing is viewed as a holistic process of restoring balance, strengthening resilience, and reconnecting with the fundamental sources of wellbeing – culture, community, Country, and spirituality (Gee et al., 2014).

## **Cultural Healers and Healing Methods**

Cultural healers and traditional healing methods offer a range of holistic approaches that support the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of individuals and communities. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional and cultural healing methods alongside mainstream clinical approaches in improving mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Dudgeon et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2022; NPY, 2013). Key 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)* and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (2021-2031)*, recognise culture as a protective factor. They acknowledge the importance of culturally safe services that formally include cultural healers and healing methods, while incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing.

## **Access and Equity**

Ensuring access to culturally safe and responsive mental health care constitutes a fundamental human right (United Nations, 2007). National policies and frameworks articulate



the importance of culturally safe, trauma-informed care that incorporates traditional healing practices and holistic concepts of social and emotional wellbeing. The provision of such services is essential for enhancing access, optimising treatment efficacy, and addressing disparities in mental health outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across the lifespan, without any form of direct or indirect discrimination (Dudgeon et al., 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, 2021).

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services play a pivotal role in delivering holistic social and emotional wellbeing and multidisciplinary services that align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and healing practices. Their expertise and established partnerships with other organisations are critical in building the capability of mainstream service providers to understand and effectively support the delivery of culturally responsive social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020; Dudgeon et al., 2014).

Furthermore, addressing the workforce's capacity to deliver culturally appropriate mental health care is essential. A workforce with knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing practices can deliver more effective services and uphold cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Workforce capacity building should incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and be grounded in the principles of cultural safety (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

By formally recognising, valuing, and integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and healing practices alongside clinical approaches, we can foster a system that is culturally safe, holistic, and responsive to the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The recommendations outlined by Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia represent a clear pathway towards realising this vision. Through legislative recognition, increased funding, mandated cultural safety training, robust data collection, and protection of cultural intellectual property, the Australian government has a critical role to play in establishing a mental health care system that effectively addresses the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



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