



Integrating Cultural and Clinical Perspectives for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Outcomes

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.

Integrating Cultural and Clinical Perspectives for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Outcomes

It is the position of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia that the optimal approach to achieving the highest standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires a ‘best of both worlds’ approach, through the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing with clinical perspectives. The current Australian mental health system, primarily based on Western models, has failed to adequately address the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, resulting in significant disparities in mental health outcomes.

To achieve the highest attainable standard of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention outcomes, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends:

1. Implementation of the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration in all areas of government.
2. Integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing across all areas of service provision, education curriculums, professional bodies, and standards.



3. Establishment and implementation of national standards for culturally safe mental health service delivery, co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Addressing the Need for Culturally Guided Mental Health Systems

The Australian mental health system is primarily based on Western biomedical models, neglecting the holistic and interconnected nature of social and emotional wellbeing as understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Dudgeon et al., 2014). This approach often overlooks the importance of cultural identity, connection to Country, and community in healing and wellbeing.

Research has consistently shown that integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and practices into mental health care can lead to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Wright et al., 2021). This requires a fundamental shift in the way mental health services are designed, delivered, and evaluated, placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices at the centre (Swan & Raphael, 1995). The *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (2017-2023)* recognises the importance of this integration, but its implementation requires a more comprehensive and systematic approach.

The *Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan (2020)* recognises the need for culturally appropriate services and emphasises the importance of building partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, it does not provide a comprehensive framework for integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and practices with clinical service delivery models.

The *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015)* provides a framework for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledges, and practices in the mental health system. Key principles of the declaration include:

- Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing across all parts of the Australian mental health system.
- Incorporation by mental health professionals, professional associations, and educational institutions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their practices and curriculums.



- Prioritisation and integration of traditional healing practices, social and emotional wellbeing, and culturally safe outcome measures alongside clinical perspectives.
- Ensuring mental health care is culturally safe and responsive.
- Building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workforce.
- Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance in mental health care.

The Responsibility of Mental Health Professionals and Institutions

The lack of cultural understanding and responsiveness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples receiving mental health care has resulted in significant underutilisation of services, and disproportionately high rates of mental health issues and suicide compared to non-Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2023).

To address this disparity, mental health professionals, associations, educational institutions, and standard-setting bodies must be held accountable for making their practices and curricula respectful and inclusive of the mental health and suicide prevention needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Mental health professionals must prioritise cultural competency to provide effective care, recognising the impact of historical and ongoing trauma, understanding the cultural determinants of health, and acknowledging the expertise and knowledge held within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (NHMRC, 2018).

This also requires co-designing mental health services and programs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure they are culturally safe, accessible, and relevant (Walker et al., 2014). This includes incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into assessment tools, treatment plans, and evaluation frameworks, as well as ensuring that mental health professionals are equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide culturally responsive care through comprehensive cultural training programs.

To strengthen this approach, establishing and implementing national standards for cultural competency in mental health services is crucial. These standards, developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, should reflect their unique needs and contexts. National standards provide a consistent framework for evaluating and improving cultural responsiveness across Australia, promoting accountability and continuous service improvement (AIHW, 2020). Embedding these standards into accreditation and funding agreements aligns mental health services with cultural safety and equity principles, leading to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Conclusion

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is committed to leading systemic change in the mental health sector. We advocate for a shift away from the Western-centric model towards a holistic approach that integrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and healing practices with clinical perspectives. This transformation involves the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing across all areas of service provision, education curriculums, professional bodies, and standards, the establishment of co-designed national standards for culturally safe service delivery, and mandatory cultural training for all health professionals. Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to lead the design and delivery of mental health services is essential for addressing the historical and ongoing factors that contribute to mental health disparities.



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