



Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Submission to the Department of Health and Aged Care:

Co-design of the new national mental health lived experience consumer peak body.

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.

Summary

The Department of Health and Aged Care seeks submissions to the design of the new National Mental Health Lived Experience Consumer Peak Body. This peak body will work to ensure people with lived and/or living experiences of mental ill-health can share their thoughts on what the consumer peak body could look like.

This project will be conducted in a way that prioritises active collaboration and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and ways of being, knowing and doing.

The Department of Health and Aged Care have outlined their commitment to a do-no-harm and listen-first approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities. They have highlighted their focus on equity principles to ensure to the best of their ability that all voices are heard equally, and that the peak bodies are designed in a way that will be grounded in cultural responsiveness and anti-racism once established.

As the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), mental health, and suicide prevention, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia has a strong interest in the recognition of, and advocacy for, the specific and complex needs related to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the incorporation of lived and/or living experiences of mental-ill health from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective.

Therefore, this submission specifically relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander distinct needs in relation to social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention, and highlights the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived experiences of mental-ill health and cultural needs are captured and adequately represented within the National Mental Health Lived Experience Consumer Peak. The submission further aims to highlight the intention of Gayaa Dhuwi to work closely with the Lived Experience Consumer Peak to provide support to First Nations representatives where appropriate.

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

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

Operating as a peak body, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia advocates for policy development, program implementation, and strategic initiatives to support the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Gayaa Dhuwi is affiliated with key organisations, including Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA), the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (AIDA), the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA), and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (the Declaration) is the foundation of all initiatives at Gayaa Dhuwi. The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across all parts of the Australian mental

health system to achieve the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Drawing on the nine principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing developed

The themes recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, the necessity of health services that are both clinically and culturally considered, and the role and value of social and emotional wellbeing lens in the delivery of healthcare for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures represent some of the world's oldest, having provided sustenance and a source of pride, strength, and well-being for thousands of years. These cultures remain vital today, with a deep connection between mental health, strong Indigenous identities, cultural participation, family and community ties, and a profound relationship with the land, sea, ancestors, and spirituality. This comprehensive approach to well-being, encompassing mental health, is known as social and emotional well-being (SEWB).

The principles and domains of SEWB are rooted in a framework that places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and culture at the core, surrounded by social, cultural, historical, and political factors. These domains include spiritual connection, bodily connection, mental and emotional connection, family and kinship ties, community involvement, cultural roots, and connection to the land.

As noted in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, prior to colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had thousands of years of strong social and emotional well-being and mental health. However, the enduring effects of intergenerational trauma stemming from colonisation have led to higher rates of social and emotional well-being challenges and mental health issues among these communities.

The Australian mental health system delivers a westernised model of care to address social and emotional wellbeing and mental ill-health. With rising rates of people accessing services in this space, there is a need to transform how Indigenous mental health and wellbeing is conceptualised and addressed within the Australian mental health system. Achieving this goal necessitates the establishment of a peak body representing those with lived and/or living experience of mental health. This peak body should encompass representation across the lifespan including consideration from parents and caregivers of children and incorporate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander SEWB framework.

Response

The history of Australia is marked by the colonisation and the profound impacts it had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Ways Forward Report (1995) indicates that the legacy of colonisation includes trauma, loss and grief, separation of families, dispossession of land, loss of culture and identity, as well as the ongoing effects of social inequity, stigma, racism, and ongoing losses.

These historical and social determinants continue to take a toll on the wellbeing and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, leading to significantly higher rates of mental health problems and suicide compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

The Impact on Mental Health

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals experience a disproportionate burden of psychological distress and self-harm. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Summary Report (2023), nearly 1 in 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, or 31%, reported high to very high levels of psychological distress, compared to only 13% of non-Indigenous adults. Moreover, between 2017 and 2019, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were hospitalised at a rate three times higher than non-Indigenous Australians for intentional self-harm, and between 2015 and 2019, suicide accounted for approximately 5.5% of total deaths among Indigenous Australians.

Traditional Healing Methods

For thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have relied on traditional healers to promote social and emotional wellbeing. However, the Australian mental health system has been slow to acknowledge the significance of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) framework and the importance of cultural healers and healing methods. This lack of recognition has often resulted in ineffective mental health care and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals with mental health problems.

The Need for Holistic Approaches

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework (2017) report emphasises the importance of multidimensional policy responses to social and emotional wellbeing. It recommends strategies that build on the strengths, resilience, and endurance within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and recognize the historical and cultural diversity within these communities. It is vital that non-Indigenous mental health providers understand and adopt the holistic SEWB concepts of health and mental health to provide appropriate care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 highlights the importance of the combining traditional cultural healers and treatments with western, clinical approaches, to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of the whole Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person.

Inadequate Representation

Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been excluded from mental health professions, services, and programs. Even today, they remain significantly underrepresented in these sectors. To address this issue, the Gayaa Dhuwi Declaration, particularly theme four, emphasises the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence and leadership across all parts of the Australian mental health system to achieve the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes.

Kinship

Kinship is a cornerstone of the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, playing a vital role in supporting their mental health. It encompasses a complex system of relationships, connections, and responsibilities that extend beyond immediate family, binding individuals to their communities and the broader indigenous society. These relationships provide a profound sense of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity, fostering resilience and emotional support.

The Connection between family, kinship and social and emotional wellbeing 2021 report highlights the positive impact of strong kinship networks on mental health, showing that healthy cultural connections to family and kinship networks enables the transfer of intergenerational resilience, healing, culture, language, spirituality, and Lore.

As noted in the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing, the centrality of family and kinship must be recognised within the Australian mental health system. Kinship is a crucial element in the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, offering essential support, resilience, and cultural connection, all of which are integral to maintaining mental health and fostering a strong sense of identity and community.

A Genuine Partnership

To transform Indigenous mental health and wellbeing, a whole-of-system, 'best-of-both-worlds' approach is needed, grounded in both culture and evidence-based practice, and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia aims to work closely with the National Mental Health Lived Experience Consumer Peak to achieve this goal. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) articulates four Priority Reform Areas. A genuine partnership approach to the development and delivery of the Lived Experience Consumer Peak supports progress towards all four Priority Reform Areas.

The Lived Experience Collaborative Network

The Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia has a Lived Experience Collaborative Network. This network seeks to promote the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, leadership, and advocacy for system-wide changes to Indigenous suicide prevention, social and emotional wellbeing, and mental health. It brings together a diverse group of people to inform Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia and create opportunities for collaboration and networking.

Conclusion

The mental health challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are deeply rooted in the historical trauma of colonisation and ongoing systemic issues. A more holistic, culturally sensitive approach is needed in the Australian mental health system to address the unique needs of these communities. By working together, through initiatives like the Lived Experience Collaborative Network, we can take significant steps toward achieving the highest attainable standard of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is imperative that the voices and experiences of these communities are at the forefront of this transformative process.

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