

A GUIDE TO CULTURALLY SAFE PRACTICE IN MENTAL HEALTH

Working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Mental health support services are best delivered by people from the same cultural background as those they support.

In the absence of these ideal conditions, this Guide supports workers from non-Aboriginal backgrounds to foster a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing their service.

It aims to equip workers with the confidence to engage sensitively with Aboriginal people, by suggesting key areas of awareness to guide practice.

This Guide aligns with objectives on cultural safety listed in the box below from the [National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020 - 2025](#) (Ahpra & National Boards 2020).

The following topics to consider as guidance are informed by MHCC's literature scoping project *Working Collaboratively with Australia's First Nations People: A guide to providing culturally safe and sensitive practice*. They are also informed by interviews with Aboriginal workers and lived experience experts working in mental health.

GUIDELINES FOR CULTURALLY SAFE PRACTICE

Acknowledge history

- Appreciate how a practice that respects culture can deeply affect outcomes
- Acknowledge that people don't want to repeat their stories or explain themselves
- Know that people are the experts in their own lives
- Consider current and ongoing impacts upon Stolen Generations - to be removed from family and country can significantly affect a person's sense of identity
- Understand that people are at different stages of healing, so as not to retrigger trauma
- Be aware that support services in the past may have been a source of trauma
- Be aware of the physical health impacts of intergenerational trauma and systemic racism evidenced by disproportionate representation in the justice system

CULTURAL SAFETY is defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, families and communities.

CULTURALLY SAFE PRACTICE is the ongoing critical reflection of health practitioner knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and power differentials in delivering safe, accessible and responsive healthcare free of racism.

To ensure culturally safe and respectful practice, practitioners must:

- Acknowledge colonisation and systemic racism, social, cultural, behavioural and economic factors which impact individual and community health
- Acknowledge and address individual racism, their own biases, assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices and provide care that is holistic, free of bias and racism
- Recognise the importance of self-determined decision-making, partnership and collaboration in healthcare which is driven by the individual, family and community
- Foster a safe working environment through leadership to support the rights and dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and colleagues.

Listen first – community outreach

- Approach the community and establish relationships with Elders and community leaders, collaborate and partner with Indigenous organisations in the area, and engage with Aboriginal interagency groups and outreach teams across different regions
- Build a service that listens to what locals want - be prepared to not know – consult, share power, codesign services and evaluation processes
- Meet the community in the community - volunteer and contribute

Create a welcoming environment

- Ask the community what the service should look and feel like, where they should be situated, what areas have significance to the community
- Be flexible – meet people where they are and ask how they want to be supported
- Meet people at the door rather than asking people to fill in forms alone
- Make spaces shared and equitable, such as kitchens, instead of clinical environments
- Display and acknowledge artworks and objects of cultural significance with approval

Connect with communities

- Don't turn people away - provide warm referrals
- Share spaces and resources
- Explain what the service can do to support the community

Aim for a representative workforce

- Employ First Nations community members across the service
- Share knowledge, be transparent, inform and include the community, model diversity and invite First Nations staff to all meetings.
- Work to learn from others, experiment to find out what works, and co-design and develop services and programs with people and their families

Remove barriers to service

- Racism and discrimination – call it out
- Address practical barriers – distance, phones, money, housing, language and literacy
- Ensure the service is safe for people, their families as well as staff

Provide a culturally safe service

- Acknowledge lack of trust, generational trauma, grief and the history of disempowerment
- Use language of social and emotional wellbeing, and adopt a strengths-based, trauma-informed lens – a “what happened to”, rather than “what is wrong with” perspective
- Provide training about racism and discrimination and its roots, and ensure staff orientation and ongoing education includes an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Inclusiveness as central to organisational culture
- Understand cultural connections between family, community, ancestry, culture and land

Engage effectively

- Embrace flexible pathways for care and support, and alternative ways of engaging
- Use interpreters and create safe yarning environment
- Ask what works, be prepared to learn - be attentive to body language, pauses, what is said and not said, respect silence – give space for the narrative and don't expect direct answers to standard questions

Communicate sensitively

- Take time to build relationships with individuals and community
- Validate experience and injustice – acknowledge resilience and build hope
- Check that you have understood what was communicated and be sensitive to agreement out of politeness
- Understand that sharing something of yourself and your community connection is important in building a relationship, rather than leading in your “practitioner role”.

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