

Caring for diverse populations

A resource for GPs supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples



Executive Summary

This resource provides practical guidance for GPs to deliver culturally safe, trauma-informed mental health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It addresses the unique challenges faced by these communities, including intergenerational trauma, systemic disadvantage and barriers to accessing care. The document emphasises the GP's role in fostering trust, respecting cultural protocols and supporting holistic wellbeing.

Resources and Referrals

Includes links to:

- National guidelines and culturally specific mental health tools
- Suicide prevention resources
- Housing and social support services

Key objectives of this guide

- Equip GPs with tangible strategies to provide inclusive, respectful and culturally responsive care.
- Support development of Social and Emotional Wellbeing templates tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients.
- Promote trauma-informed principles to avoid re-traumatisation and enhance healing.

Core principles

- **Trauma-informed care:** Focus on safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration and peer support.
- **Cultural safety:** Recognise and respect Aboriginal worldviews, kinship systems and holistic concepts of health.
- **Communication:** Use culturally resonant language (eg "social and emotional wellbeing") and allow silence.
- **Confidentiality:** Reinforce privacy in small communities.
- **Worldview and open-mindedness:** Listen with humility and respect cultural perspectives.

Practical guidance

- **Building trust:** Begin with introductions that acknowledge family and Country; reassure confidentiality.
- **Kinship awareness:** Understand extended family roles, avoidance relationships and decision-making protocols.
- **Strengths-based care:** Explore cultural practices and personal strategies that keep patients strong and connected.

Yarning approach

- **Body, mind, spirit:** Frame questions in culturally appropriate ways.
- **Staying strong:** Discuss strengths, cultural practices and support networks.
- **Safety:** Address self-harm, suicidal thoughts and family violence sensitively.
- **Past hurts and sorry business:** Provide space for discussing trauma and grief.

Administration considerations

- Start with a 715 Health Assessment, then develop holistic care plans.
- Address comorbidities shaped by trauma, racism and systemic disadvantage.

Clinical considerations

- Avoid assumptions and bias, particularly regarding substance use and cultural beliefs.
- Address comorbidities shaped by social determinants and intergenerational trauma.
- Use Medicare item numbers appropriately for health assessments and social and emotional wellbeing plans.

Statistical summary

- **General population:** 42.9% of Australians have experienced a mental disorder; 21.5% had a 12-month disorder (ABS 2023)
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:**
 - 29% reported mental/behavioural conditions (2022–23)
 - 30% experienced high psychological distress in the past month
 - Suicide is the **fifth leading cause of death** among this population
 - Mental health is one of the leading contributors to disease burden