

Listening Deeply: embedding cultural safety in mental-health services for young people



By PROFESSOR HELEN MILROY



There is no quick fix when it comes to improving cultural safety for Aboriginal young people accessing mental-health services.

Reflecting on early findings from a joint project between the Cultural Safety team at The Kids Research Institute Australia (The Kids) and Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing at the University of Western Australia has, so far, been difficult. The project focuses on improving cultural safety in mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Entrenched racism, historical fears stemming from the Stolen Generations and colonisation are still preventing Aboriginal young peoples from seeking mental-health support. Feelings of shame and stigma have created strong barriers, preventing our youth from asking for, and receiving, help.

There are some simple and immediate ways we can start addressing these barriers. Visual demonstrations of allyship in

mental-health spaces can create a more open and culturally safe environment for Aboriginal young people. This could be as simple as having an Aboriginal staff presence in the workforce, or visual cues like artwork and the Aboriginal flag.

But creating profound and lasting change requires much more. In mental-health services, the fostering of a relationship over time requires attentive listening and connecting over the Aboriginal young person's interests, such as sport or music. Additionally, there should always be an expectation for non-Indigenous staff in mental-health settings to have an awareness of culture and to consult with their Aboriginal staff.

In our project's initial stages, Aboriginal Project Officers, Lisa Kickett and Thomas Betts, yarned with young people, carers, and organisations, including Langford Aboriginal Association, Wadjak Northside, Champion Centre, and the Statewide Specialised Aboriginal Mental-Health team at Child and Adolescent Mental-Health Services.

Young people who participated in the first phase of the study said cultural safety meant providing a

sense of belonging, a sense of connection and a sense of trust. Mental-health services must provide this cultural safety for Aboriginal young people to begin to redress the current barriers to accessibility. Participants in the study recognised the importance of nurturing relationships with mental-health professionals to overcome obstacles, including a distrust of clinical spaces.

Aboriginal mental-health staff who took part in the yarns made several recommendations. These included strengthening cultural safety within mental-health workplaces, embedding cultural factors like kinship and Country into mental-health assessments, providing greater flexibility to engage with young people in settings where they feel more comfortable (such as community centres, sports clubs and creative facilities), and recognising the value of dadirri, or 'deep listening' (a concept originating from the Ngan'gikurungurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Daly River region).

The relationships fostered with the organisations taking part in this project will continue, following the end of the study. "It's important we maintain those relationships

and keep the people we are working with in the loop on our work. If we aren't doing that, we'll lose trust and have to start from scratch." Thomas said.

These recommendations provide a base for addressing cultural safety in mental-health services for young people, but they are by no means exhaustive. In the second stage of the project, due to wrap up in October this year, we will consult further with young people and families who have accessed mental health services in Western Australia. Guidelines will then be developed to share with child and adolescent mental-health services, offering advice on what they can do to make their service more culturally safe.

Lisa said the young participants involved throughout the project are just getting started. With the help of cultural strength cards, which Lisa opens each session with, they are finding their voice.

"It's important for us to draw on the strength we have inside, and we want [mental-health] services to match that energy," Lisa said. "The cultural strength cards remind us that we have that strength."



Thomas Betts joins other staff from The Kids at the Deadly Sista Girlz basketball carnival.



Members of the Cultural Safety Team at The Kids, from left to right (back row): Lisa Kickett and Louise Delane; (front row): Kahlil Regan, Gracie Cayley, and Thomas Betts.



DABAKAN KOOLINY
(*'Go Slowly/Walk slowly'*)
Valerie Ah Chee

"This artwork represents a holistic journey through youth mental health from an Aboriginal perspective. A journey that must be done at a slow and steady pace so we can take into consideration all the elements that impact on our

wellbeing when deciding on what we need to heal and be healthy. At the centre is a tree embedded in Country, roots extending into the earth, to connect to ancestors, culture, and community. In the branches there are children sitting and climbing and just being. There are seven connected shapes surrounding

everything in the inner circles, representing elements of Aboriginal health: physical, social, emotional, mental, family, cultural, and spiritual. A holistic balance between these elements brings healing and good health. The last layer shows hope for the future, with all children being healthy and strong."