



Gudjagang Ngara Li-dhi
Aboriginal Community Centre

The importance of cultural therapy to improve outcomes for Aboriginal communities - Factsheet, August 2022

What is cultural therapy?

Cultural therapy is the [intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories](#). Put simply, it promotes using culture as treatment – using Aboriginal people's cultural and community connections to strengthen wellbeing and foster healing and positive social outcomes for individuals and communities.

The aim of cultural therapy, pioneered by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices with trauma theories to guide an approach that is:

- healing (trauma-informed based on neurological care, attachment and resilience)
- protective (providing safe spaces and safe relationships)
- connective (to culture and community).

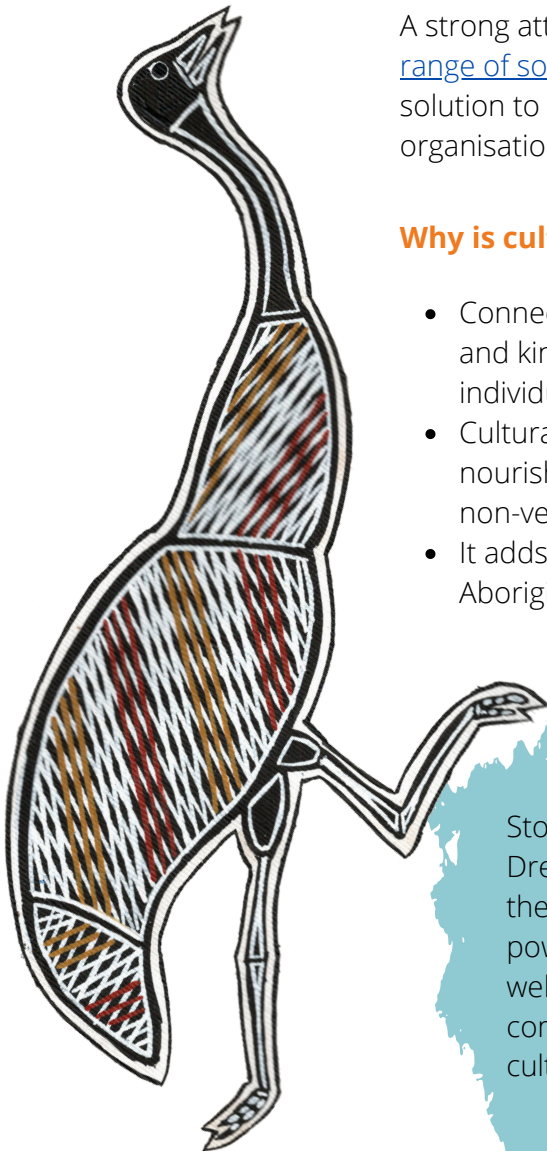
A strong attachment to culture has been found to [enhance outcomes across a range of socioeconomic indicators](#), suggesting that Aboriginal culture is a solution to Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia, and should be embedded in organisational practices to support strength, resilience and healing.

Why is cultural therapy important?

- Connection to culture validates and legitimises connections to land, family and kinship lines, building cultural identity, belonging, hope and resilience for individuals and communities.
- Cultural observances affirm human dignity and provide comfort and spiritual nourishment. Safe spaces are created to interact and learn, to communicate non-verbally, process emotions, and support the healing journey.
- It adds to the evidence base of programs designed by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people.

Storytelling and healing

Storytelling has been at the core of Aboriginal culture since the Dreamtime, connecting people to their mob, their country, and their ancestry. Today, storytelling, narratives and yarning are powerful tools used in cultural therapy to improve social and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people and their communities, addressing trauma, loss of identity, lack of cultural connection and inter-generational disadvantage.



Who can cultural therapy help?

Cultural connection is not static. Rather, it evolves over time and needs to be continuously nurtured and strengthened through inclusiveness and belonging. Cultural therapy supports this process for all Aboriginal people and cuts across boundaries of age, background, and geography.

Cultural therapy is particularly beneficial to children and young people who are disconnected from community, such as children in out-of-home care (OOHC) and young people in youth detention. Given the large numbers of Aboriginal children in OOHC and the fact that an estimated [one third across Australia are not placed according to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle](#), it is important to ensure that children in OOHC maintain contact with their families and cultural community to satisfy their basic human rights and identity formation.

What does the research show?

- A strong [cultural identity is key](#) to many Aboriginal people's identity, acting as both a protective influence and a solid foundation on which wellbeing can be built.
- Sustaining a strong cultural identity is a key component of [Social and Emotional Wellbeing](#), an Indigenous Australian framework of health. Here, an identity can be cultivated and maintained through participating in cultural events and developing a connection to family, community and traditional lands.
- A meta-analysis of [research](#) into the cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal people identified that family and community, country and place, cultural identity, and self-determination were strongly identified as having a positive impact on the health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal people.
- [Possessing a strong cultural identity](#) has been shown to promote resilience, enhance self-esteem, engender pro-social coping styles, protect against mental health symptoms, and buffer distress prompted by discrimination.
- Research has shown a [significant association](#) between cultural engagement and reduced violent recidivism.

Case study

Sidney, or Pop as he is affectionately known among the community, is a proud Kamilaroi man and local Elder. He was born in 1941 on the Walhawow Aboriginal Mission in the North West Slopes region of NSW.

Growing up, Pop felt disconnected from his culture: "We didn't get to learn a lot about culture growing up. We weren't allowed to talk about culture. [Teachers] were very strict with us. The older people, it was hard because they had to go to work a lot." His dad passed when he was 14 and his mum was forced to move away to find work to support the family.

Pop left the mission when he was 18, spending the next four decades working on farms across NSW, largely isolated from his cultural heritage: "I spent 40 years working on farms with white fellas, learning the white fella way. I used to camp in the shearing huts and had to cook my own meals. Some farmers would take me in. They'd have a room there for me. I learned a lot from the farmers and they treated me good and I treated them good by working hard."

Today, Pop lives in the Central Coast and has been able to reconnect with his culture and community thanks to the cultural therapy offered at GNL: "I like coming here. I am welcomed here. They have taken me in. I feel a sense of connection and belonging. I have found my grandkids down here and reconnected with my family."