

Examining the Effectiveness of Culturally Safe Mental Health Interventions on the Wellbeing of First Nations Youth: A Systematic Literature Review.

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine culturally safe mental health interventions that are effective in improving the wellbeing of First Nations youth and to determine their effectiveness through accessibility and how they are delivered. **Methods:** Online search using PubMed database was used to identify evidence about the effectiveness of culturally safe mental health interventions for First Nations youth. A filter was applied to extract publications from the past 5 years. Other inclusion and exclusion criteria included the geographical location, language, age, cultural considerations, types of programs and their effectiveness. **Results:** The review screened 22 publications from across Australia. Following the inclusion/exclusion criteria process 4 articles were selected. Two of these were reviews with more than 40 studies assessed. The other 2 publications were mixed methods studies. Common themes included in the program or service delivery across the publications were: the use of culturally informed methodologies, evidence of cultural knowledge, co-design or participatory approaches and the representation of Aboriginal practitioners or project officers.

Conclusions: Mainstream psychological wellbeing methods, Rules, dos and don'ts continue to operate using colonial ideologies when providing services to First Nations youth. Despite considerations given to the development of cultural frameworks by government organisations, there is inconsistency in the implementation of these frameworks into targeted programs for First Nations youth. Additionally, evidence shows that First Nations youth engage in support for their mental health when programs and services include participatory action, are accessible, incorporate the holistic concept of social and emotional wellbeing and are delivered and evaluated by Aboriginal practitioners and project officers. It is imperative that the "colonial lens" is removed and culturally safe practices are embedded when developing and evaluating programs that target First Nations youth wellbeing. This combined with the empowerment and self-determination of First Nations People at all system levels will support the improvement of First Nations youth mental health outcomes.

Keywords: Aboriginal, youth, mental health, cultural competency

Introduction

Australian mainstream psychological wellbeing facilities are failing to serve the requirements of First Nations youth. Devastatingly, government strategies that have caused the loss of land, linguistic heritage, art, music, literature, family association, spirituality and also caused social disadvantage continue to collectively and intergenerationally impact First Nations peoples in Australia. Psychological wellbeing methods, rules, dos and don'ts continually emphasize colonial philosophies in service provision, and therefore, culturally secure health services are required to recognise Aboriginal cultural practices and worldviews. This will assist in instituting relations that create mutual trust among services, staff and the Aboriginal people, their families and communities [15][8].

Alarming, this is despite First Nations youth of Australia facing an increased risk of experiencing poor mental health, and 80% of those aged between 18 and 24 years having not used psychological wellbeing facilities. Even more disturbing, 32% of First Nations young people didn't connect with health services due to discrimination, language barriers and a lack of cultural appropriateness [4][5]. First Nations young people experience ongoing vulnerability because of the continued impacts of colonisation and may not only experience symptoms of mental illness but may also be impacted by a perceived disconnect across cultures, stressors associated with housing, ill health, trauma, exploitation and loss [1].

It is vital that there is consistent recognition of First Nations' cultural practices, perspectives and cultural continuity. Additionally, there must also be the establishment of trusting relationships between service personnel and First Nations people, their families and communities. It is imperative that these considerations are developed, implemented, and embedded into program planning, delivery and practice so that the wellbeing of First Nations youngsters is improved. [15], [13] [12].

There is incredible value in understanding First Nations perspectives of wellbeing. SEWB is a universal concept that includes different relationships between individuals, family, kin and community. This concept also acknowledges the significance of connections to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry and is the foundation for physical and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. [2][14].

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing, 2017-2023 [2] maintains that prioritising First Nations participation in the governance, formation, distribution, assessment and measurement of services is imperative to increased belief, connectivity, culturally appropriate care and to achieving effective outcomes[10][2].

This literature review aims to examine culturally safe (see definition in Appendix A) mental health interventions that are seeking to improve the wellbeing of First Nations youth and to determine their effectiveness through measuring their accessibility and how they are delivered. Cultural safety is determined and defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, families and communities and their experiences of the care they are provided with, as well as their ability to access services and to express any concerns [3][14].

An increased understanding of current evidence, barriers and facilitators to effective culturally safe mental health interventions for First Nations youth has the potential to create systemic change in an area of significant need, as well as in ensuring that the mental health of First Nations youth is improved. The primary question that guided the research process was: What is the effectiveness of culturally safe mental health interventions on the wellbeing of First Nations youth?

Methods

The search strategy that was used involved searching PubMed for literature using the following search algorithm: [(Aboriginal youth/First Nations youth/Indigenous Australian youth) AND (mental health programs/wellbeing programs) AND (culturally competent)]. Synonyms including "programs" and "wellbeing" were used to enhance the search. Further consideration was given to key words and searched in the MeSH browser. For example, the term 'culturally safe' was not listed as a MeSH term and potentially limited the literature search, so 'culturally competent' (see Appendix A for definition) was used instead. Articles that were not about First Nations youth mental health programs in Australia were not considered. Boolean operators AND and OR were applied to make logical sense in the search. [(Aboriginal youth) OR (First Nations youth) OR (Indigenous Australian youth) AND (mental health programs) OR (wellbeing programs) AND (culturally competent)] A filter was applied to limit the search and show literature from the last 5 years.

Grey literature was also searched, focusing on government and organisational websites relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' mental health, youth mental health and cultural competency. Grey literature resources included: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government Department of Health, Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Standing

Committee, The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

Inclusion criteria

Publications were eligible for inclusion if the study was:

1. Published in the last five years
2. Based in Australia
3. About First Nations youth (from the ages of 13 to 25)
4. About mental health or wellbeing programs
5. About cultural competency
6. Provided evidence about the effectiveness of the program
7. Published in English

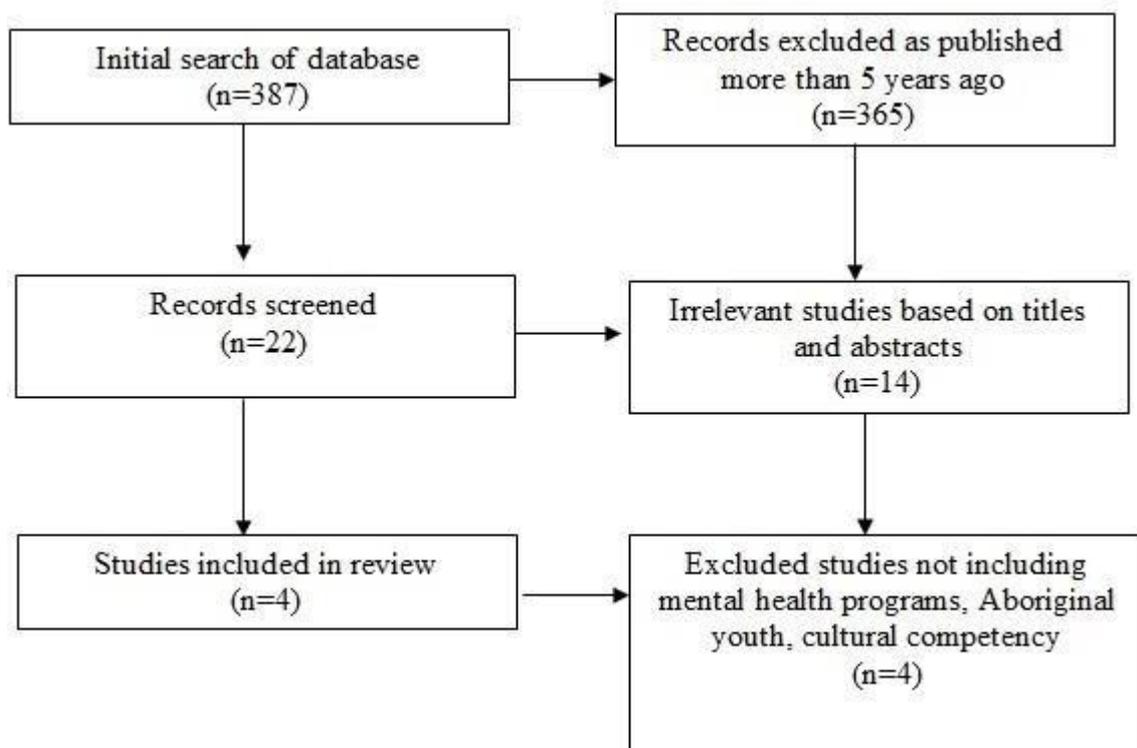
The inclusion of culturally informed methodologies was also valued in the search. Another inclusion criteria of value was cultural paradigm considerations, where cultural methodologies were utilised to develop and evaluate programs and services.

Exclusion criteria

Publications were excluded if they were not in line with the above criteria. In addition, if publications were about a specific mental health condition, they were also excluded.

Results

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection



As shown in Figure 1, following the search of the literature there were 387 articles found and scanned for eligibility. From there, a filter was applied to find relevant publications from the last 5 years. 22 articles were screened. 14 were not in line with the inclusion criteria in their title and abstracts. From the remaining 8 articles, 4 were included in the literature review based on their ability to address the research question and conformity with the inclusion criteria.

Table 1 Study evaluation components

Publications				
	Gupta et al., 2020	English et al., 2021	Sabbioni et al., 2018	Povey et al., 2020
Study/report aims	To identify key practices adopted by services and programs that align with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social & Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 principles	To identify and evaluate existing evidence of the impact of sport and physical activity programs on the mental health and SEWB outcomes within young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people	To describe and document the effectiveness of the culturally sensitive model within a state-wide Western Australian mental health service for young people called YouthLink	To report the formative stage results of a co-design process used to develop a new culturally informed App called AIMhi-Y that involved Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth
Study participants	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander young people with severe, complex mental health needs	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth	Aboriginal young people aged 13-24 from Western Australia	45 Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth aged 10-18 years from Northern Territory
Study type methods	Scoping review	Systematic review	Mixed method design	Mixed methods study
Outcomes of significance	Review conducted of the nine guiding principles and how programs and services for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people align to the social & emotional wellbeing framework	Highlights the existing evidence that exists about sport & physical activity-based programs aimed at Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth, that it increases cultural connections, self-esteem & confidence	The model provides a culturally informed conceptual framework relevant to working with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people, families & communities	Inclusion of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth perspective in the co-design process of the app and ensuring that it is culturally informed
Findings	There is a significant gap in the literature in relation to culturally sensitive programs and services for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth who experience complex mental health needs. Therefore broader search terms were included. Ensure participatory action research & evaluation approaches in the service and program design for young people who experience significant mental health needs.	Further research that uses rigorous, cultural methodologies and tools is required when understanding the effects of these types of programs.	The model has a strong representation of Aboriginal practitioners, relationships with Aboriginal communities and flexibility that embraces cultural meaning and knowledge.	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth were included in the codesign of a culturally informed mental health app and a possible solution to overcoming barriers such as mental health literacy.

Table 1 shows the study evaluation components. Each of the studies were explorative in nature, aiming to examine the effectiveness of culturally safe mental health programs for First Nations youth. Two of the studies were reviews. Gupta et al's (2020) scoping review included 26 publications and aimed to identify the key practices that are used by services and programs and how these practices aligned with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing principles. The other review by English et al (2021) included 17 publications and aimed to identify and evaluate existing evidence that sport and physical activity programs have on the mental health and SEWB outcomes within young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Sabbioni et al's (2018) publication is a mixed methods study about a mental health model called YouthLink and aims to describe and document the effectiveness of the culturally sensitive service for Aboriginal youth. The findings from this study emphasise the model's strong representation of Aboriginal practitioners and the relationships established with Aboriginal communities. These factors underpin the model's flexibility that embraces cultural meaning and knowledge, enhancing its response to the needs of Aboriginal youth. The fourth publication by Povey et al (2020) aims to report the formative stage results of a co-design process that was used to develop a culturally informed app called AIMhi-Y (Aboriginal and Islander Mental Health Initiative for Youth) that involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Through this approach, the article highlights how the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth perspectives help to ensure the app is culturally informed. The article also points out that if apps are designed to understand and cater to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and are supported within existing services, the targeted youth are more likely to use them.

Table 2 Presence of themes

Inclusion of elements in programs/services				
	Culturally informed methodologies	Evidence of cultural knowledge	Co-design or participatory approaches	Aboriginal practitioners or project officers
Gupta et al., 2020	x	x		
English et al., 2021	x	x (partially)		
Sabbioni et al., 2018	x	x	x	x
Povey et al., 2020	x		x	x

There were four main themes that were identified and included in programs or services, as shown in Table 2.

Themes 1 and 2: Culturally informed methodologies and evidence of cultural knowledge

Each of the studies utilised their own unique culturally informed methodologies. However, some of the publications included in the scoping and systematic reviews did not consistently include this theme. For instance, of the 17 studies that were reviewed by English et al (2021) that show how sport and physical activity-based programs aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth increase cultural connections, self-esteem, and confidence, it was noted that only 11 were found to increase connections to culture. Furthermore, 6 studies adopted culturally sensitive methods and theories, including participatory research. It was noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance were lacking in the research base, and this would have ensured community protocols were adhered to. Furthermore, relevant cultural and contextual knowledge that informs culturally appropriate research design would be enabled. (English et al., 2021) Gupta et al's (2020) review found that where evaluations had been conducted, there was a lack of culturally appropriate outcome measures. However, services and programs that were found to be most effective were those that recognised a person's right to self-determination and those which were culturally responsive. For example, programs that highlighted the negative effects stemming from intergenerational trauma, grief and loss as well as understanding rights and needs. Additionally, a focus placed on the positive impacts of kinship and communities and utilising a

strengths-based approach were also vital. Of the various elements that were considered as critical for improved service delivery in Aboriginal mental health and wellbeing contexts, environments that are culturally safe was one. (Gupta et al., 2020)

Theme 3: Co-design or participatory approaches

Povey et al's (2018) mixed methods study highlights the positive effects that a co-design approach has. However, it was noted that selection bias is a challenge when aiming for an effective co-design process, as the youth who are selected tend to be those who are engaged and functioning well in their school and community. This may misrepresent those youth who have the potential to benefit from a mental health app, and their involvement in the design process could perhaps be considered more vital. (Povey et al., 2018)

Theme 4: Aboriginal practitioners or project officers

The involvement of Aboriginal health practitioners or project officers in the program delivery and research processes is crucial to enhancing responses that come across the needs of Aboriginal youth. (Sabbioni et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2020)

Discussion

The intention of this literature review was to examine the effectiveness of culturally safe mental health interventions for First Nations youth, to determine whether these services are accessible and to examine the ways that they are delivered. The programs that were analysed in each of the studies targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged between 13 and 24 years with different approaches. Common themes were identified and included the evaluation of a cultural framework used in different mental health programs, the evaluation of different sport and physical activity programs and how these impact the mental health and SEWB outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, the description of how effective a culturally sensitive mental health model is and how a co-design process was utilised to produce a culturally informed mental health app.

In each type of program, culturally informed methodologies through co-design or participatory approaches were critical to their effectiveness. This is strongly supported by the Lowitja Institute and a recent publication by Dudgeon et al (2020) that presents information about Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) and how this type of Indigenous Research Methodology is critical to decolonisation. This methodology focuses on enabling the inclusion of First Nations people voices through storytelling and yarning strategies. In addition, there are opportunities to co-construct meanings about issues, solutions and strengths that are experienced by individuals, families and communities. This together with the facilitation of a strengths based SEWB framework contributes to the improvement of mental health outcomes and is distinctive in its purpose. [6] It is strongly recommended that future participatory approaches aimed at First Nations people take this approach.

There were a limited number of publications that met the inclusion criteria: two were reviews which provided a broader insight about programs aimed at improving First Nations youth mental health. Importantly, the use of culturally informed methodologies to evaluate programs through youth who access the program or service is most valuable in finding out about their experiences and about the factors that they would like to be considered for improvement. This can be achieved through decolonising the research space and how services are delivered, which could lead to more improved approaches that are targeted to First Nations people health and wellbeing. [10] Furthermore, the monitoring and review of programs needs to be prioritised and this can be achieved through improving the quality of evidence, such as the use of longitudinal studies of program outcomes that will inform future mental health and SEWB initiatives. Mixed method and experimental studies that use culturally appropriate methodologies will support in strengthening available evidence [7].

Furthermore, the understanding of and adherence to consistently applying and implementing “The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023” is imperative. This will provide meaningful opportunities for the guiding principles of the framework to be aligned to mental health programs and services for First Nations youth. Gupta et al’s (2020) review highlights the finding that there exists a lack of culturally appropriate outcome measures. This is a limitation. It is therefore critical that more effort is put in to improving Aboriginal evaluation processes so that the amount of outcome data available for analysis is increased. It is recommended that advanced and culturally informed approaches are adopted when designing SEWB services and programs aimed at First Nations youth. This combined with APAR and developmental evaluation approaches will assist in the improvement of wellbeing outcomes of First Nations youth. [8]

Cultural safety and cultural responsiveness (see definition in Appendix A) were also expressed as essential, along with the inclusion of Aboriginal health practitioners and project officers in the service delivery and research processes. To be culturally safe and responsive is to demonstrate an understanding of how the history of trauma experienced by First Nations people has led to social, emotional and financial disadvantage. [14] The need for building respect and trust with individuals and communities is critical to relationships that support the success of programs. Additionally, it also includes acknowledging the past and present contexts of colonisation, practices of racism at individual and institutional levels and the impacts that they have on First Nations people’s living and wellbeing. Furthermore, the visible presence of First Nations staff has shown an increase in service accessibility as they contribute to a sense of cultural safety and provide insightful cultural knowledge to the service. [2] These types of approaches are required to be consistent and meaningful as the engagement of First Nations youth with psychological wellbeing facilities is often deterred when this is not the case. [10] [3]

Psychological wellbeing facilities and programs need to ensure that their delivery is approached holistically to address the needs of First Nations youth. [1] There is a fundamental need for continued recognition of First Nations cultural practices, perspectives and cultural continuity so that the wellbeing of First Nations youth is improved. Moreover, there is a critical need to consistently promote and provide opportunities for self-determination and self-governance of First Nations people at intervention and policy levels. [15],[13],[12].

This is supported by The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023, where the guiding principles incorporate these elements. [2] Despite the failure of governments to address significant inequities in the mental health and wellbeing outcomes of First Nations youth, there is capacity to make changes to existing and emerging mental health and wellbeing systems, rules and guidelines. These changes will provide vital evidence that will inform future strategies and help to ensure that existing, effective frameworks are used consistently within the organisations that provide services. [10][15].

The critical significance of understanding and recognising First Nations mental health through the eyes of First Nations youth themselves, as opposed to through a colonised lens, is ultimately to understand what is required to ensure that their mental health outcomes are improved. Adopting cultural safety further contributes to this idea and promotes an understanding that there are no power relations between individuals. Furthermore, it promotes the right that First Nations people deserve to be part of non-discriminative environments, with connections to their cultural heritage perceived as strengths and with everyone feeling culturally secure, safe and respected. This will ensure that First Nations youth are empowered to continue their connection with culture and continue with the strengthening of their identity as the services and programs that they choose to access will be culturally prepared. [9]

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Appendix A

Table 3 Definitions of terms

Term	Meaning
Culturally competent	“A set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and strategies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals to enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.”
Culturally responsive	“Refers to health care services that are respectful of, and relevant to, the health beliefs, health practices, cultures and linguistic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumer/patient populations and communities. Cultural responsiveness describes the capacity to respond to the health care issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is a cyclical and ongoing process, requiring regular self-reflection and proactive responses to the person, family or community interacted with. It thus requires knowledge and capacity at different levels of intervention: systemic, organisational, professional and individual.”
Cultural safety	“Identifies that health consumers are safest when health professionals have considered power relations, cultural differences and patients’ rights. Part of this process requires health professionals to examine their own realities, beliefs and attitudes. Cultural safety is not defined by the health professional, but is defined by the health consumer’s experience—the individual’s experience of care they are given, ability to access services and to raise concerns. ⁴¹ The essential features of cultural safety are: a) An understanding of one’s culture b) An acknowledgment of difference, and a requirement that caregivers are actively mindful and respectful of difference(s) c) It is informed by the theory of power relations; any attempt to depoliticise cultural safety is to miss the point d) An appreciation of the historical context of colonisation, the practices of racism at individual and institutional levels, and their impact on First Nations <u>Publics’s</u> living and wellbeing, both in the present and past e) Its presence or absence is determined by the experience of the recipient of care and not defined by the caregiver.”

(Source: Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, 2016)