

Getting Results

Sustainable outputs from the project include ongoing:

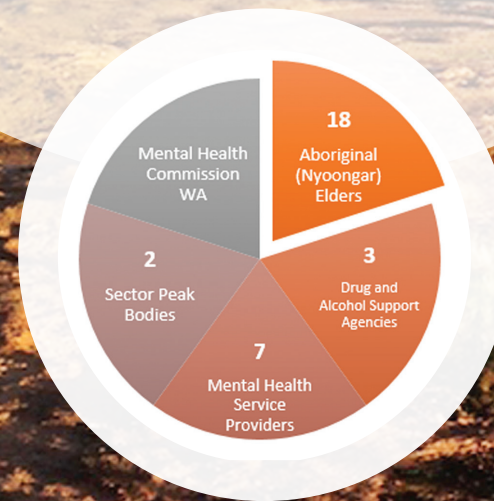
- Policy changes that integrate an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview within service organisations by engaging Elders as cultural consultants to educate and mentor senior management, clinicians, and board members about Nyoongar ways of knowing and doing.
- Comprehensive work practice changes that enable staff to be more flexible and reflexive to the access and responsive needs Aboriginal community.
 - Staff are more proactive in their responses to Aboriginal people, and consequently, the community have greater flexibility in their access to services.
 - Reflexive changes have included regular (monthly) meetings between staff and Elders to discuss cultural considerations across all facets of an organisation's operations. Executive staff are critical as decision makers in these meetings.
- Structural changes, such as organisations flying the Aboriginal flag on their buildings, the purchase and hanging of local Aboriginal (Nyoongar) artwork in common areas and meeting rooms, recruitment and retention strategies for Aboriginal staff, developing cultural mentor/consultant roles and remunerating Elders, embedding Aboriginal ways of working within strategic priorities, establishing local partnerships with Aboriginal-owned and managed organisations, seeking advice from Elders and community on better ways to utilise funding opportunities, funding community events, and conducting smoking ceremonies for new buildings and service sites.
- Governance changes with some organisations recruiting Aboriginal representatives on their Board of Management.
- Evidence of more sustained and robust
- Relationships between senior management and Elders and co-presenting their working together at state and national conferences and interagency sector and cross-sector workshops and events, such as Mental Health Week.

Project background

Dr Michael Wright is a Yuat Nyoongar man. His family is from the Moora and New Norcia area, north of Perth WA. He has worked as a hospital-based social worker and as a mental health service manager. Michael's doctoral research looked at issues of access to services by Aboriginal families whose lives are affected by mental illness. The Looking Forward Project expands on his research. Michael is a Research Fellow based at the Curtin University National Drug Research Institute. He is also a member of the Mental Health Advisory Council to the WA Mental Health Commission and a committee member of the Lowitja Institute's workforce development research program.

Project location and participants

Nyoongar country covers the area just south of Geraldton, east of Merredin and the south east to Esperance on the Western Australian coast. Nyoongar people comprise 14 clans or family groups spread across the south-west region of Western Australia. The Perth city area on which is Wadjuk Nyoongar country. Specifically, the project covered the southeast metropolitan region of Perth WA. It engaged the local Aboriginal community in this region, comprising approximately 2.3% of the region's total population. The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Western Australia is approximately 3.1% of the overall WA population.



Project participants

The Looking Forward Project

The Looking Forward Project (2011 – 2015) has changed the way mental health and drug and alcohol services are delivered to Aboriginal people living in the Perth south-east metropolitan region. Twelve organisations agreed to work in partnership with the research team and 18 Aboriginal Elders to provide culturally accessible and responsive services to the Aboriginal people. Together they designed and implemented an engagement framework to create organisational change, called *Minditj Kaart-Moorditj Kaart*, meaning 'from a sick head to a good head'. This framework was developed through the guidance of local Aboriginal (Nyoongar) Elders and has resulted in profound change across the participating organisations.

Key findings showed services need to be delivered in a way that reflects a deep understanding of an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview (ways of knowing and doing). Service staff, including executives, were introduced to Aboriginal (Nyoongar) culture by the Elders through a range of activities including a unique research method of sharing stories, regular working together meetings, and a series of On Country events. These activities helped to build much needed trust and establish relationships that were meaningful and sustainable. As teachers, the Elders have helped service staff to develop the skills required for working competently and confidently with Aboriginal people. With this knowledge, staff can deliver more relevant and culturally safe services to Aboriginal families. Aboriginal (Nyoongar) Elders are the legitimate holders of cultural knowledge and are central in providing the necessary information required to transforming policy and practices in the mental health and drug and alcohol sector.

and Intention

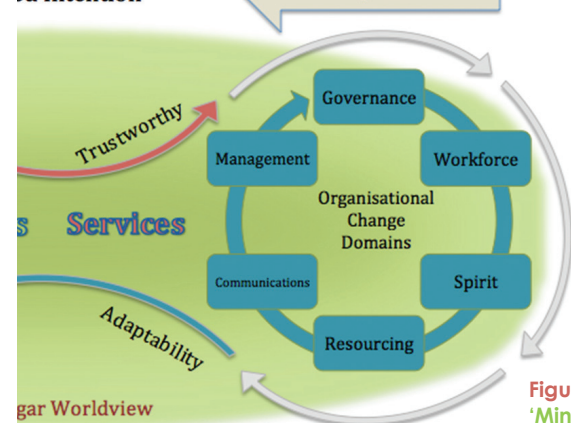


Figure 1. 'Minditj Kaart-Moorditj Kaart' Framework.

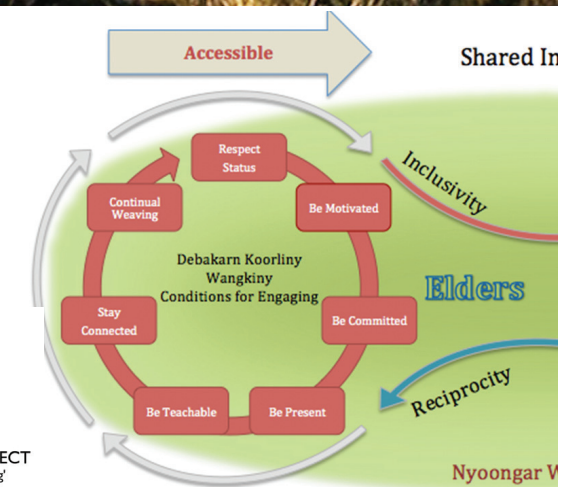
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The Looking Forward Aboriginal Mental Health Project was funded by LotteryWest, the Centre for Research Excellence in Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing (Telethon Kids Institute, UWA), Curtin University and the Mental Health Commission (WA), in partnership with Ruah Community Services.

The Project is located on Wadjuk Nyoongar boodja ('country') and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and future, and thank them for their continuing guidance.



Being Accessible (Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny, 'Steady Walking and Talking')

Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny ('Steady Walking and Talking') [figure 2] is a key component in the Minditj Kaart-Moorditj Kaart Framework. It sets out the conditions for engaging to enable the establishment of trust, and is the starting point for developing meaningful, purposeful relationships between Elders and Services.

Having developed a shared intention, service staff are more mindful of their intrinsic **motivations**. They declare their **commitment** to deepen their engagement over time. They learn to be **present** and open to different ways of seeing the world. They learn to be **teachable** and stay open to all emerging possibilities and let solutions arise naturally through their conversations with Elders. This requires service staff to respect the **status** of the Elders in order to fully commit to learning about Nyoongar culture and community dynamics. As the journey progresses, and the service staff face the internal and external pressures on their organisations, they must practice **staying connected**, as it is in the experience itself that new ideas and solutions unfold and crystallise. Staff are encouraged to challenge 'standard' ways of working, and are supported to tolerate the uncertainty that arises from revealing more of themselves and stepping into the unfamiliar. As staff confidence grows, and people change through a **continual weaving** of shared learning and new knowledge.



Figure 2. Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny

Project outcomes

Design and implementation of the 'Minditj Kaart-Moorditj Kaart' framework for engagement. The framework is founded on an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview and based on the following principles:

- The development and integration of personal and professional skills based on trust, reciprocity, inclusivity and adaptability.
- The recruitment and engagement of Aboriginal (Nyoongar) Elders as cultural consultants to provide both cultural and practical knowledge in connecting with and working more effectively with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) families.
- Elders and service providers develop a shared intention to better understand and integrate an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview.
- The integration of an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview into organisational systems and practices to ensure services can be accessed by Aboriginal people and better respond to their expressed needs and concerns.

Elders as cultural consultants

Aboriginal (Nyoongar) Elders have guided service executives and staff in:

- developing a better understanding of an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview and the enduring impact of colonisation,
- working more effectively with the needs and aspirations of the community, and
- building service capacity so staff can more confidently, competently work in a more culturally safe and secure way with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) families.

The Elders describe their work with the service providers:

Our work becomes more effective. That is the good thing about it. This changes us for the good. The little things we pick up and learn from each other helps us (Elder, 2015).

I think it can't be just a one way of dealing with it. It can't just be the [wider] way of dealing with mental health issues. There has to be an input from our own teachings, our own culture, our own growth (Elder, 2015).

Minditj Kaart-Moorditj Kaart ('Sick Head to Good Head') **Framework for Engagement** [figure 1] is founded on a **Nyoongar Worldview**. It comprises three parts, 1) A Shared Intention, (between Elders and Service Providers), 2) Being Accessible (Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny: Conditions for Engaging), and 3) Being Responsive (Organisational Change Domains). The Nyoongar worldview is a reminder to non-Aboriginal people of the need to support Nyoongar families to be included and respected as partners in change efforts made 'in their name'. Working together in this way acknowledges the wholeness of a Nyoongar worldview to people's health and wellbeing and the wholeness of the change required across the mental health and drug and alcohol sectors to better meet the needs of Aboriginal families.

Developing a shared intention through relationships

Trust and confidence remain key issues for Aboriginal people in their engagement with mainstream services. The community are deeply sceptical of the motives and genuineness of mainstream services and their apparent lack of cultural sensitivity, respect and indifference.

One Aboriginal participant said:

There's the wadjella [non-Aboriginal person of Anglo-Saxon descent] world where ... they change their environment based upon their religion and what they believe, and our world, the Aboriginal world where our environment shapes our culture and our beliefs (Community forum participant, 2011).

Based on themes and issues recorded at the forums, a local community steering group was formed to develop the Framework to include four main attributes, (a) inclusivity, (b) trustworthy, (c) reciprocity and (d) adaptability essential for establishing meaningful relationships with Aboriginal people [figure 3]. The participating organisations have had to demonstrate their willingness to show respect for and integrate the four attributes. The shared intention to work together is eloquently captured in these words from a participating Elder and in the shift experienced by service staff: *See us as your cultural carpenters; we'll help shape you for this work. By the end, you won't know yourselves!* (Elder 2014).

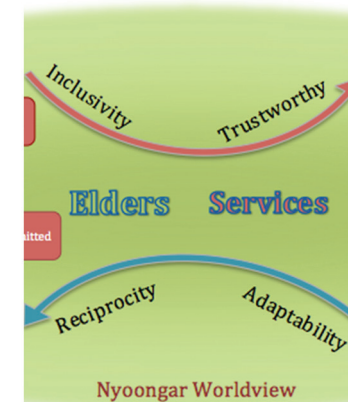


Figure 3. Four main attributes for meaningful relationships

Being Responsive (Organisational Change)

This new experience of working together has resulted in increased knowledge and skills of service staff and transformed the way they respond to people and the world around them. In most cases service staff do this by relying equally on their heartfelt knowing as on their rational thinking.

These are the conditions required to do work of this nature, that is, to acknowledge a Nyoongar way of being and doing and incorporate different worldviews into ways of working, valuing diversity and its creative possibilities. Through these changes staff are more capable, confident and competent to work with Aboriginal people, who are some of society's most marginalised and disenfranchised people.

Services sustain these new ways of working throughout all domains of their organisation [figure 4], ensuring long term change, leading to more effective health outcomes for Aboriginal families experiencing mental illness and drug and alcohol concerns.

I feel that I have developed personally and professionally for having worked closely with the Nyoongar Elders. I have developed better management and people skills from hearing more about a Nyoongar worldview

Executive manager, 2015



Figure 4. Organisational change domains