



**WAAMH**

**Western Australian Association  
for Mental Health**

Peak body representing the community-managed mental health sector in WA.

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## **Hand in hand - cultural learning for better mental health: our journey in the Looking Forward Project**

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## SEEING MORE SEASONS

In order to identify and achieve meaningful change, trust and relationships need to be built between Nyoongar Elders and mental health service providers. As part of building this trust, the Western Australian Association for Mental Health (WAAMH) joined the Looking Forward Project in 2013 as a member of the service provider stakeholder group. The Looking Forward Project aims to positively change the way mental health services are delivered to Nyoongar peoples. For WAAMH, the initial part of the project has involved embarking on a journey with two Nyoongar Elders and the Looking Forward Project team to build trust and relationships.

This article focuses on the benefits and challenges of being involved in the project and the key learnings of the WAAMH team. The continual evaluation of these learnings is integral to the success of the Looking Forward Project. It will enable WAAMH to identify and incorporate meaningful changes into its policy and practice, with the aim of improving Aboriginal peoples' experiences of WAAMH and mental health services.

The Looking Forward project is based upon four ethical principles that provide the foundations for working with Nyoongar peoples: securing trust; creating relationships; sustaining commitment; and working partnerships (Wright et al., 2013, pp.29-30). With these principles in mind, this article has been developed via the analysis of the reflections of WAAMH team and Elders on their experiences during the journey so far, and review of the project documentation including meeting minutes. It was found that these principles directly connect with the journey that has been experienced by the WAAMH team and these connections will be highlighted throughout the article.

The process of reflection and self-discovery by participants is a core component of the Looking Forward Project. Throughout the project we have contemplated our involvement in the process and recorded our reflections on the experience. By 'exploring the inner self', "a process of self-reflection and purposeful deliberation to develop patience and mindfulness" (Wright, et al. 2013, p.25), we have been able to explore our feelings, beliefs and knowledge and to increase our confidence and competence in working with the Elders. Reflection has also enabled us to identify the key challenges we have experienced, and our key learnings.

Our participation has involved partnering with Elders; meeting together on a monthly basis to build relationships and learn about Nyoongar culture; and being supported by the Looking Forward team through their participation in these monthly meetings, their active provision of advice, and their role in 'connecting the dots' during and between meetings. We met with the Elders each month, usually sitting in a circle for a yarn. At the meetings the Elders always welcome us to Nyoongar *boodja*. We listen to the Elders and project team tell us stories about who they are, where they are from, what it means to be Nyoongar and reflect on this.

For most of the WAAMH team, the journey has consisted of five stages: (1) the initial excitement of being in the project and a feeling of wanting to 'get things done'; (2)



some frustration that followed at the perceived lack of tangible progress after many months of meeting with the Elders; (3) the letting go of the usual way of doing things and acceptance of the Nyoongar ways of learning; (4) on reflection the realisation that building trust, forming a relationship with the Elders and the development of deeper knowledge about Nyoongar worldview are accomplishments in themselves, and that the process could not proceed further until this had developed; (5) and the emerging current stage of working collaboratively with the Elders to plan specific activities and tangible outcomes.

## **LEAVING OUR COMFORT ZONE**

The first stage in our journey was the beginning of creating trust and forming relationships with the Elders. We began the journey with feelings of excitement and, positivity, and that we were privileged to be involved. We felt it was imperative that this process was more than a token exercise (which some staff felt they had experienced in other contexts), that genuine intent and purpose was needed, and that this process had to be different. There was a strong acknowledgement of the need for change in the provision of and access to mental health services for Aboriginal peoples, and we felt an urgency to determine and bring about these changes.

The Elders were also 'a bit excited' at the beginning of the project. One of the Elders reflected on this beginning, commenting that once everyone sat together and started talking about mental health that they began to feel relaxed and good. Mental health is a big issue in their community and they felt that by coming to these meetings it would enable them to help people within their community.

However, for all involved there was also some initial trepidation. No one really knew what to expect in this early phase and some were worried about saying or doing the wrong thing. There were two different ways of working – the Nyoongar way and the *wadjella* way – and this would take time to navigate. At the organisational level WAAMH acknowledged that this project was going to be a long-term commitment.

During this early stage of our involvement in the project we talked a lot about the practical things that WAAMH could do to make a difference, about 'action plans' and 'getting things done'. Within WAAMH there were feelings of urgency and we had extra meetings to reflect and discuss the many changes we needed to make to our organisation. We brought draft action plans and tight agendas to the meetings. However, the Elders and Looking Forward team members did not at this early stage seem particularly responsive to our talk of action plans and timeframes. Instead they encouraged us to stay with the relationship and reflection process, and sought to teach us about Nyoongar culture, experiences and worldview in an oral storytelling and experiential way. The Looking Forward team supported us to make connections to the project's principles and to how learning in Nyoongar culture occurs. "A Nyoongar worldview is meant to be experienced, it cannot be learned in the conventional didactic way" (Wright, et al. 2013, p.22).

Non-linear conversations were a feature of the process at this time. The Elders often returned to the same topics, with new stories. One of the Elders is known as a



storyteller. He said he used stories to get his message across, and would take us back to a story to emphasise his point. The Looking Forward team also often contributed in this space, offering their own reflections about their personal learnings or those of others involved in the project, and helping us to connect the dots. The WAAMH team also returned time and again to key themes. Welcome to Country was one of the most ongoing and significant conversations that we had over a period of many months in our own team and together with the Elders. Stories about Nyoongar *boodja* and listening to learn were also common.

The Elders taught us that in order to work together, Nyoongar people and *wadjellas* need to learn about each other's cultures to build greater understanding of each other. This cultural learning has been a significant part of the journey for WAAMH team members and our greater understanding of Nyoongar culture and worldview has been central to the securing of trust and building of relationships and to our increased confidence in interacting with other Nyoongar people.

Cultural learning has been an ongoing process involving the sharing of stories by the Elders, some of which have been deeply personal and very moving. In order for us to hear the messages within these stories we had to be ready to slow down and really listen to the Elders. As one of the Elders has taught every member of WAAMH: "God blessed us with two ears and one mouth....Listen twice as much as we speak. Listening is learning, talking is teaching".

One member of the WAAMH team described this cultural learning as like being in a goldfish bowl: "Being immersed in something. A lot of the time for Aboriginal people they are immersed in white culture. What seems to work [about this project] is that we are immersing in Nyoongar culture." This has felt strange - the WAAMH team recognised this as being both challenging and an important experience. One of the Elders described how he had to learn from a young age to 'code switch' from Nyoongar ways at home to *wadjella* ways when interacting with people outside of the Nyoongar community. It was only by being immersed in Nyoongar culture during the meetings with the Elders that we could begin to have even the most simplistic level of understanding of what can be incredibly challenging: having to continually switch from the mores of one culture to another.

The Nyoongar process of learning and working together is participatory, non-linear and based upon the forming of and coming together in relationships. One of the Elders commented, "I think I feel more comfortable with working with mental health people the way we work with them instead of the way *wadjella* people work. They just tick the box and this is not the way we work." Although the WAAMH project team's intentions were positive and sincere, in retrospect we understand that in the early stages of the project we wanted to move too quickly, which could be interpreted as an attempt to 'tick the boxes'. Being accustomed to timeframes, deadlines, actions and achievements, the non-linear and circular meetings with the Elders were challenging as well as fun and stimulating, and we were at times out of our comfort zone.

After some months many of the WAAMH team began to feel some frustration, thereby entering the second stage of our journey. One team member commented there was "a dynamic which was difficult to manage about being in a *wadjella* culture and expecting that there would be some action and didactic change". We believed



we were listening, we were hearing the messages of the Elders, we had reflected on our learnings and felt that we had developed a good relationship. We were keen to move into a more active phase where we able to develop and implement more concrete activities and changes to our usual *modus operandi*.

There was also frustration for some WAAMH project team members that the meeting agendas did not particularly seem to guide meetings, and that meetings sometimes ran significantly over time, adding pressure to already busy workloads. One of the Elders reflected that one of the key differences between Nyoongar and *wadjella* ways of working is about time;

“[Time] is not important to us. Time is different. We do not worry about time we worry about getting the job done. And it does not matter if it takes five minutes or takes an hour or takes a week. As long as we get the job done we are satisfied.”

The exception to these feelings of frustration was felt by the only non-*wadjella* member of the WAAMH project team: an indigenous Maori woman for whom this process felt completely natural:

“At times I witness the frustration of my peers and colleagues about ‘time’, ‘slow progress’ or the purpose of meeting ... This is often a challenge to them, but I don’t find it a challenge because this is natural to me. Things take time. Relationships are built upon layers of trust not through the meeting, but through being present in the meeting and sharing portions of self.”

In contrast to the learnings of the *wadjella* members of WAAMH, one of this person’s key learnings has been that *whitefellas* have a long way to go to understand the depths and realms of *blackfella* lore and culture.

On reflection, we came to appreciate that we had not sufficiently slowed down and embraced the need to build a deep relationship to work effectively with Nyoongar people. These types of relationships are not required in the *wadjella* business world, and we had perhaps not realised the depth of learning being offered from the stories being told. When attempts were made to make decisions about the WAAMH action plan the comment from the Looking Forward Project team was ‘you’re not ready yet’. This was confusing to us as we felt we were responding to the project expectation, outlined in the handbook, that we develop some actions.

In hindsight, perhaps we were keen to grab hold of something tangible and had not absorbed the centrality of staged cultural learning and relationship development that is key to working effectively with Nyoongar peoples. Nor had we let go of our *wadjella* way which is focused on shaking hands and then getting on with tangible business, such as producing a policy or an event. Within a Nyoongar worldview, the reality was that we did not know and understand each other well enough yet, and we were yet to develop a deep enough understanding of Nyoongar history, culture and worldview. One of the Elders commented that getting to know *wadjellas*, thereby involving them in the process of cultural learning, was:



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“...like breaking down a wall of ignorance, breaking down a wall of lack of knowledge. Once that wall comes down I am able to do things, when you do not know each other too well sometimes you do not know what to say... Until you get to know each other then there will always be some obstacles. So this is one of the reasons why we take the time to know each other. When we know each other the road becomes smooth.”

However, the Elders were very patient with us and over time we did slow down, thereby entering the third stage of our journey. We began to accept and embrace the meetings with Elders as important spaces for learning and reflection; to more deeply appreciate the contribution of the Elders to our organisation; to ‘just sit and be’ more in accordance with Nyoongar ways of respecting Elders as our teachers and guides on our journey; and to place more trust in the project process itself. For many WAAMH team members this has been evident in our expressing a greater acceptance and enjoyment of the project process and pace, and a deep honouring of the Elders and their knowledge.

## **BEING PRESENT AND STILL**

### **Nyoongar culture, history and worldview**

A significant learning for all of us involved in this journey has been a deeper understanding of Nyoongar culture, history and a Nyoongar worldview. Part of this has been a recognition that we needed to immerse ourselves in a more experiential process for a Nyoongar worldview to become more meaningful. In keeping with Nyoongar ways of learning and teaching this involved listening to the oral stories of the Elders as the custodians and keepers of Nyoongar stories, directly sharing cultural experiences with them, and relating both *to* them and *with* their experiences. We have also learned that in order to be able to listen to and learn from the Elders that we needed to slow down, set aside time to build relationships, and be present and in the moment.

Experiential learning about the experiences of Nyoongar peoples after colonisation has also been significant. One of the Elders has shared deeply personal stories of his and his family’s experience of the stolen generation, including what it meant to him to watch his father see him being stolen. Both Elders have spoken about their community’s mental health challenges and the deep impacts of suicide across their community. The Elders taught us through stories how Aboriginal people were targeted and scapegoated by police, mental health institutions, and the government, or ignored in shops.

WAAMH staff felt honoured to hear these stories, which resulted in a deeper learning about the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples and the knowledge that “the suffering of the Aboriginal people through colonisation continues today through the penetration of ignorance”. Experiencing them in relationship with the Elders, rather than for example reading them in a book, has meant this feels a rare and deeply meaningful experience, one that most *wadjell*as will not experience. These are important learnings for us to assist WAAMH to decolonise our organisation.





We also needed to allow ourselves to let go of our *wadjella* need for tangible plans and timeframes. One example of doing this was when we decided to make some small changes to the expectations of WAAMH team members so that not all members would be expected to attend every project meeting. We were able to make this change as we had begun to feel more comfortable with the relationships and recognised that we would still be showing respect to the Elders even though we could not all be at every meeting. We had therefore begun to let go of the timeframes we had initially set, and this allowed us to be mindful and present when we were able to attend meetings.

In addition, we needed to trust the Elders to hold us on our journey. 'To hold and be held' is the second part of the process of 'exploring the inner self' described in the project handbook. Wright et al (2013, p.26) note that reflectiveness and 'an inner quietness' is required when working with Nyoongar peoples. This learning seems to have been accepted. One of the WAAMH project team commented that:

"The project has involved sitting and listening with our two ears, our minds, our bodies and our hearts. Reading about what it means to be Nyoongar can provide us with only a limited understanding, it is through sitting and listening that we can experience what a Nyoongar world view means, and begin to experience a deeper connection to Nyoongar people and *boodja*."

### **Cultural protocols and connection to country**

Significant cultural learning has been especially evident regarding some important cultural protocols, with a deeper appreciation of the significance and importance of men's and women's business, Welcome to Country and connection to *boodja* in particular. WAAMH staff members have reflected that they now get a lot more out of Welcomes when attending community and organisational events, often reflecting further on the Welcome's meaning and how this is related to the topic at hand. For some staff this has included a deep emotional and/or spiritual response to Welcome to Country, reflective of a deeper appreciation of Nyoongar protocol. Emerging changes within WAAMH reflect this cultural learning. For example, the WAAMH Board now acknowledges country at the beginning of board meetings in a real and heartfelt way.

Several of the WAAMH project team offered reflections on their increased connection to country as a result of this project. One team member reflected that when the Elders talk about their culture and country it makes them feel more connected to the 'country' where they grew up and continue to spend time with their family. These feelings about their country help them to connect with the Elders. Another team member reflected that connection to country was a very important element of the project: "I live, breathe, earn, eat and sleep on Nyoongar country. My family and I are nurtured by this land."

This stronger connection to country is an experience that was an anticipated result of being involved in the project journey (Wright et al., 2013, p.22). This has borne out in practice - the importance of place and its recognition through cultural practice and



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protocol as fundamental to all of our work with Aboriginal peoples has been established as a key finding by the Looking Forward Project.

### **Learnings of the Elders**

It is important to note that the project has not just been a learning experience for the WAAMH team. The Elders have also learned in this process. One of the Elders acknowledged this in a recent meeting:

“Coming here has been a big help to me, in my life....I thought if I come to these meetings it would help me to be out in the community and help someone out in our community. Since we have been coming we have done this a few times....It has helped me a lot even with my own family.”

It was also reflected by one of the Elders that by being involved with WAAMH and in this project they have also had significant learnings that makes their own work in mental health more effective:

“... 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.”

### **Deepening relationships**

Another of the many positives to come out of the project so far has been a shift in the way WAAMH team members are relating to each other when reflecting on the project. For a time we held regular project reflection meetings, in which we began speaking much more than we normally would in a meeting environment about our personal histories and experiences of growing up, and what involvement with or knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and culture we had:

“We are also sharing more of our personal selves during meetings when we would normally be more businesslike. It seems that the project process and its principles - which focus on trust and relationships - has shifted us into this gear more often in our team.”

We have been reflecting on our feelings and experiences of this journey from the beginning, but stage four of the journey became really apparent when we were asked to offer reflections for this article. We realised that although we were yet to achieve any of the tangible outcomes we'd initially set, for example determining and implementing an action plan, what we had achieved linked directly to the four ethical principles. We had built strong relationships with the Elders, and as well as securing trust with them, we had begun to trust in the process.

These deeper and strengthened relationships are now evident in the project meetings: one staff member wrote a poem titled, ‘We’re Not Strangers Anymore’ to share with the Elders, and another noted ‘connection’ was central to what’s most important about this project. Staff have reflected on the process of deepening their relationships, with part of this being about telling our own stories. People present have begun to share more deeply. One of the Elders, who had often been quiet in the





meetings, spoke at length for the first time about many of her own personal life experiences, and about her role in helping young people. This sharing of her life experiences was a very significant moment for everyone involved. We felt honoured that she now trusted us enough to share her story.

We have also shown our sustained commitment to the project, the third ethical principle. We have been meeting with the Elders now for over a year and are committed at an organisational level to this being a long-term project.

As we have developed this article it has become clear that we are entering a fifth stage of our journey and are shifting into working partnerships, the fourth ethical principle. We have worked collaboratively with the Elders in the development of this article, and other specific activities are being planned in partnership with the Elders. These activities include the Elders' involvement in our training program, planning a joint event during Mental Health Week and developing mental health resources for the Nyoongar community together. It would appear that the road became smooth - WAAMH staff are feeling more confident and are beginning to plan specific and tangible activities. The Elders have commented they are looking forward to seeing the outcomes:

"We have been walking side by side coming down this road. I would even go to the point of saying hand in hand. We have been doing a pretty good job. I am really happy from where we have come from and where we are at. And I reckon we can do some amazing stuff."

## **HAND IN HAND MOVING FORWARD**

In order for the Looking Forward project to be successful, and for WAAMH to make a meaningful contribution, it is imperative we reflect on our experiences of being involved in the project, and identify key challenges and learnings. We have come to understand that during this journey, which has felt very slow at times, a lot has been accomplished so far. We have realised that what we are really doing when we are with the Elders is immersing ourselves in the Nyoongar worldview: we have a much fuller understanding of how deep listening and learning is fundamental to Nyoongar engagement. We have developed a deeper understanding of Nyoongar culture, history, and worldview, including the significance of Welcome to Country; we have a greater acceptance and enjoyment of non-linear concepts of time and circular discussions; we are sharing our own personal experiences and feelings more readily; and we are questioning and reflecting. As a result, trust has been secured and a relationship has been created with the Elders. This is the most important outcome of the process to date and represents a significant step towards the cultural change required within our organisation to both be responsive to Nyoongar peoples and communities and to conciliation with Nyoongar peoples.

Similarly, the Elders have reflected that this journey has been a positive experience for them. Their involvement in the project so far has given them more tools to help people in their own family and community. They have also learned more about working with *wadjellas*, and are looking forward to seeing the results of working together at a higher level rather than just at grass roots.



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As a deeper trust and relationship has developed, and the WAAMH team's cultural and historical knowledge has strengthened, we have begun to shift into a more change-oriented process in partnership with the Elders. This has involved the identification and working through of specific changes to our policies and practices, and the planning of specific activities.

When the Elders were asked about their feelings towards the relationship with WAMMH and whether the process could move towards discussing specific actions, one responded, "I think we've been walking down that road (of looking forward), hand-in-hand, very happy with where we're at...We are in a good position now."

It is our hope and determination that together with the Elders during the next stages of our journey we will be able to move beyond tokenistic good intentions to our shared desire for real and lasting change that will have a positive impact on Nyoongar peoples' access to and experiences with mental health services.

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