

Strengthening Cultural Safety and Wellbeing: Response to the Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Australia welcomes the announcement of the Senate Inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recognising the significant impacts racism continues to have on social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

The Inquiry was requested by Minister for Indigenous Australians Malarndirri McCarthy, who stated: “First Nations people are feeling scared and angry in the wake of the alleged terrorist attack in Boorloo, Perth and last year’s attack on Camp Sovereignty. I know this has been a difficult time for families and communities. This inquiry ensures they can have their say and their experiences will be heard by the Parliament.”

Racism is not only a matter of social justice – it is a critical and harmful determinant of social and emotional wellbeing and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Its impacts extend beyond individual incidents, affecting social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, safety and community connection. Experiences of racism contribute to trauma, distress and reduced trust in institutions, undermining efforts to improve social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

The announcement of this Inquiry comes at a time when many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are experiencing increased incidents of racism, hate and threats to safety. These experiences carry significant impacts for social and emotional wellbeing and mental health and reflect broader structural inequalities that continue to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Inquiry presents an important opportunity to listen to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and to examine the structural and institutional drivers that allow racism to persist.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, racism is not an isolated experience, but a cumulative and ongoing reality shaped by historical and contemporary structural inequality. Addressing it requires sustained commitment across governments, organisations and communities to ensure that Culture, connection to Country, family and community remain central to wellbeing.

As a health promotion charity, MHFA Australia emphasises two critical areas for consideration through this Inquiry.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership must be central to drive early intervention, prevention and self-determination

We acknowledge the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, including the work of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia. Their leadership through the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration Framework highlights the critical relationship between racism, social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

Addressing racism requires approaches that recognise and support the leadership, knowledge and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Solutions must be informed by the voices and experiences of communities and organisations

whose leadership is essential to strengthening social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Addressing racism is also fundamental to creating Cultural Safety across institutions, services and communities, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel respected, valued and able to access support without fear of discrimination.

We encourage the Inquiry to prioritise the voices and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations, ensuring its findings lead to meaningful and sustained action to address racism and its impacts on social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid training is an effective early intervention response

Racism, hate and violence are recognised risk factors for mental ill-health and suicide, with disproportionate impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Effective responses must include practice, evidence-based, community-led interventions that support people when impacts are felt.

Through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander MHFA Program, MHFA Australia works with

communities and organisations across the country to strengthen understanding of social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, and to support culturally informed responses within communities.

This work is guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and knowledge, recognising the importance of Cultural Authority in shaping approaches to social and emotional wellbeing and mental health across programs and organisational practice.

MHFA Australia remains committed to strengthening Cultural Respect and supporting improved social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through our organisational commitments and alignment with nationally recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership frameworks, including the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration Framework and Implementation Plan 2025–2035.

We recognise the enduring strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the central role of Culture, Country and Community in supporting social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

About MHFA Australia

MHFA Australia is the Australian arm of MHFA International, a global health promotion charity dedicated to the provision of evidence-based and informed programs. Backed by 25 years of evidence and impact, MHFA Australia aims to increase mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and help people develop the skills to encourage people to seek professional help.

About the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander MHFA Program

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander MHFA Program is culturally informed and led, working with communities and organisations across Australia to strengthen understanding of social and emotional wellbeing and mental health and support culturally informed responses. Across almost two decades, the program has trained 70,000 Australians in culturally responsive mental health first aid, equipping communities to recognise, understand, and respond to mental health problems or crises.