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Mental health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people take a holistic view of mental health, and prefer to consider mental health within a framework of ‘social and emotional wellbeing’.

For example,

“The social and emotional well being concept is broader...and recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, and how these affect the individual. Social and emotional wellbeing problems can result from unresolved grief and loss, trauma and abuse, domestic violence, removal from family, substance misuse, family breakdown, cultural dislocation, racism and discrimination and social disadvantage”.

In this flipchart the biomedical understanding about mental health problems is presented. Knowledge about what happens in the brain and how that effects feelings and behaviour can be used to understand social and emotional wellbeing frameworks. This information can also be interpreted for local relevance as appropriate by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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1: Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice, 2010, p76.
Objective
This flipchart is designed for use by health professionals, community workers, educators, Aboriginal health workers, Aboriginal mental health workers, drug and alcohol workers, students and community members.

It can be used to accompany a drug treatment program, or as an educational resource.

This resource is part of a series that also includes the following flipcharts:

- The Grog Brain Story
- The Mental Health Brain Story
- Sniffing and the Brain
- When Boys and Men Sniff
- When Girls and Women Sniff

It is designed for use mainly with Indigenous people in urban, rural and remote settings.

It uses plain English language and informative images to provide straightforward and clear information, about:

- how a healthy brain and nervous system work
- how problems with the brain, nervous system and lifestyle can lead to mental health problems
- different types of mental health problems
- how to manage and get help for mental health problems.
Tips for educators

• Read the flipchart a couple of times before you use it with others, to educate yourself or refresh your knowledge.

• Ask a doctor, nurse or mental health worker to explain anything that you do not understand.

• When using the flipchart, the image page faces the client or students and the text page faces the health educator.

• The text is a guide to the images.

• Refer to the images regularly.

• Feel free to elaborate or add familiar examples and stories.

• Encourage comments and questions from the client/students.

• Think of the natural chemicals in the brain and nervous system as similar to water in a river system that needs to be kept in balance (as shown on pages 11 and 12).
Inside your head is your brain.

Each person’s brain is very different.

The brain is like our control centre.

The brain is where our personality, actions and emotions are controlled.

The brain also controls our memory, language and our creativity.

The brain is an important part of who we are.
PART 1

HEALTHY BRAIN

The brain
Each area of the brain has a special job to do. This picture shows where each different job is controlled in the brain.

- The **light green** area is the control centre of the brain. It controls your thinking, your emotions and your actions. This is where you put together your stories.
- At the top of the brain, the **red** area is sent messages FROM the body like how the body is moving or how it is feeling.
- The **purple** area sends messages TO the body telling it how and when to move.
- The **pink** area organises your memory.
- The **blue** area in the middle of the brain is very important for controlling mood, like how happy or sad you feel.
- The **orange** area at the bottom of the brain balances your body both when it is moving and when it is still.
- The **dark green** area at the back of the brain is sent information from the eyes and puts together a picture in the brain of what you see through your eyes.
- The **yellow** area is the ‘fear’ centre of the brain. It is where big worries or feeling scared comes from.
- The small **dark blue** area controls things like how well you sleep or eat and your body temperature.
- The **brown** area is like a ‘housekeeping’ area. It makes sure that all the jobs of the brain are getting done properly.
- These different areas are always working together and talking to each other.
- The brain uses chemicals to send messages to different parts of the body.
PART 1

HEALTHY BRAIN

Jobs of the brain

- Feel body
- Move body
- See (with eyes)
- Balance body
- Memory
- Food
- Sleep
- Body temperature
- Control Centre (stories & thinking)
- Makes sure everything is done
- Fear (worries, scared)

Mental Health
Now let’s look at the chemicals in the brain.

Chemicals are cells in our body that carry information and can change the way we feel and act.

The brain makes its own chemicals.

They help us do everything that we do.

Chemicals can make us:

— feel happy or sad
— feel hungry or tired
— feel angry or worried
— feel stressed or relaxed
— feel strong
— have good moods or bad moods.

It is important for the chemicals in our brain to stay balanced for us to be healthy.
The brain makes its own chemicals
When we live a healthy way, the chemicals in our brain stay balanced and we feel good.

Living in a healthy way means:

- eating healthy food
- being active (playing sport, hunting)
- going out bush or visiting country
- staying away from bad food, drugs and grog
- having strong, healthy relationships
- studying and working or staying at school
- treating ourselves, family, community and people around us with love and respect
- respecting Elders and Traditional Lore.

These things will keep the chemicals in our brain balanced, and then our bodies and relationships will be healthy.

It is important to keep the balance!
Living in a healthy way keeps the chemicals in the brain balanced.
The nervous system is the name for the brain and all the nerves that join the brain with the body.

Nerves in the nervous system are like the branches in a tree or the creeks in a river system.

The nervous system carries messages from the brain to the body and the body to the brain.

The nervous system controls everything we do.

The nervous system is like our body’s ‘knowledge system’.
PART 1

HEALTHY BRAIN

The nervous system

Carries messages around the body.
Our body makes lots of different chemicals that keep our nervous system working properly.

Keeping these chemicals balanced makes sure our nervous system is balanced.

When we are healthy, the chemicals in our nervous system are balanced like water in a healthy river system (water that is clean, flowing and full of life).

That way food can get to all parts of our body and waste can get taken away.

This is like a healthy river system that takes clean water to feed all of the plants and animals along the river, keeping them all healthy.
PART 1

HEALTHY BRAIN

Healthy nervous system
Some things we do can change the chemicals in our brain.

These things can cause **balance problems** in the brain:

- drinking grog, sniffing petrol, using gunja or other drugs
- too much worry or stress
- family troubles
- bad sleep
- bad food
- getting sick.

These things can cause **balance problems** in everyone, but in some people it happens much easier than in others.

Sometimes it runs in the family.

Let’s see what happens when we have **balance problems** in the brain.
Some things can make the balance no good:

Drugs and alcohol
Bad food
Stress
Bad sleep
Sniffing petrol
Family history
Smoking gunja
Getting sick
When there are balance problems, the nervous system is like a river system with dirty water or water that doesn’t flow.

The wrong messages are sent around the brain and nervous system.

When this happens, the person can have problems with their mental health.

With mental health problems, the balance is no good and confused messages are sent around the brain and nervous system.

These confused messages mean that a person can feel sad when they should feel happy, or they can see or hear things that aren’t really there.

It is like the brain is sick, just like the body can get sick.

There are different types of mental health problems.

Some people have worse mental health problems than others. Some people get a few different types of mental health problems at the same time.

Let’s look at some of the things that can happen to a person when they have problems with their mental health.
Balance problems and mental health

The person’s balance is no good, just like a river system with water that is dirty or doesn’t flow properly.
Some people with mental health problems think that everybody is against them or talking about them.

They might think other people don’t like them or are trying to hurt them.

This is called paranoia or being paranoid.

Somebody who is paranoid may feel like they are getting really sick when they are not.

They may think that something bad is going to happen when there is no reason to think that.

Sometimes people get more paranoid when they smoke gunja (marijuana, cannabis).
Paranoia

Think other people are talking about them or laughing at them.
One type of mental health problem can happen when a person has too many worries or stress that don’t go away.

They may not be big worries but the person makes them big worries.

This is called **anxiety**.

A person with anxiety may talk really fast or talk a lot.

They might feel restless and nervous.

They might also feel sweaty, shaky and feel their heart beating fast.

People can have anxiety because too much of a chemical called adrenaline is in the brain and body.

Some people need medicine to help get the right balance of adrenaline in the brain.

Other people may just need to talk with a professional like an Aboriginal mental health worker or a counsellor to help them deal with their feelings and worries. Some people call this ‘talking therapy’.
PART 3
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Anxiety (big worries)

Nervous, shaky, always worrying
One type of mental health problem is called psychosis.

A person with psychosis might see things that other people can’t see. Sometimes these things scare them.

They might hear things that other people can’t hear, like somebody talking to them.

Sometimes the voices tell them they are a bad person or tell them to do bad things.

They can’t think clearly.

They might have mixed up thoughts or silly thinking.

People with psychosis can act really strange or confused.

They can become angry for no good reason, and might get violent and try to hurt their friends or family.

Psychosis or psychotic experiences can be different to spiritual experiences, that may be part of cultural practice. It may be hard to tell the difference.

A person experiencing psychosis will have problems with their family and friends, and may have trouble in their daily life unless they get help.
PART 3
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Psychosis

Silly thinking
Seeing things

Hearing voices
Mixed up thoughts
Another type of mental health problem is called depression.

A person with depression can feel sad all the time for no reason.

A person with depression might:
- cry a lot
- feel lazy all the time and not want to go out of the house
- sit alone all the time and not want to talk to other people
- feel so bad, they feel like hurting themselves
- think about dying all the time, or talk about dying all the time.

A person with depression may even want to kill themselves. It is called suicide when someone does kill themself.

People can get depression because there is not enough of a chemical called serotonin in the brain.

To get better, they may need to take medicine to help them get enough serotonin in their brain.

People who are depressed can also be psychotic (see page 21).
PART 3
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Depression

Sad all the time
No energy
Sitting alone, crying a lot
One type of mental health problem is called mania.

A person with mania can have too much energy and may not feel the need to sleep much at all.

When a person has mania or a ‘high’ mood, they might walk and talk and think very fast.

Mania can be part of another mental health problem called bipolar disorder.

Bipolar disorder means that the person’s mood can swing from high to low and back again.

Mania is the high point of bipolar disorder and depression is the low point. Some people have just mania or just depression but when they have both at different times, it’s called bipolar disorder.

People who are depressed or manic can also be psychotic (see page 21).
PART 3
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
Mania and bipolar disorder

Too much energy, racing around
High mood, not much sleep
When the balance in the brain and nervous system is not good, people can also have eating problems or sleeping problems.

People with eating problems may eat too much bad food and get fat.

Or they might not eat enough food and get too skinny.

A person with sleeping problems may sleep too much, or not sleep enough, or not sleep very well.

Both eating and sleeping problems can be signs of mental health problems.
PART 3

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Eating and sleeping problems

Eat too much  or  Don’t eat enough

Getting fat  or  Too skinny
If you or someone you know is having mental health problems, it is important to get the balance back, before the problems get worse.

There are many things you can do to help get the balance back, and live a happy and healthy life.

If the mental health problems don’t go away easily, you may need medical help, and you may need to take medicine.

Now let’s see what you can do to help.
How can you help?
The chemicals in the brain need to get balanced again.

There are many ways to do this, some of them are:

- eat good food
- sleep well
- talk with someone you trust about how you are feeling
- use less drugs and alcohol, or use none
- find family and friends to support you
- respect culture
- see an Aboriginal healer
- go to work or school.

You can also do healthy things that make you feel good, like:

- play sport
- dance
- listen to music
- play music
- paint
- join in Ceremony
- go hunting
- spend time on country.

It is also important to talk to someone about your problems early when they are small, rather than wait until they get out of control. For example, small problems like feeling a bit sad can become bigger and bigger and may even lead to suicide if they are not fixed early.
PART 4

GETTING BETTER

Get the balance back

Listen to Elders
Eat good food
Play sport
Respect culture
Stop smoking and drinking
Go to work
Get enough sleep
Join in Ceremony
Go hunting
If the problems are more serious and don’t go away easily, you may need medical help.

An Aboriginal mental health worker can help, and you can also get medical advice at the health clinic from a nurse or doctor.

A psychologist or psychiatrist can also help, if they are available.

It may help to have a family member or someone you trust with you for support.

You may need to take medicine to get the chemicals in the brain balanced again.

It is important to listen to the medical advice about how to take the medicine (how much and when). It may not work properly if you don’t take it the right way.

Family and friends can help you remember to take the medicine and to do things that help keep the balance (page 31).

There are some phone numbers on the next page that can also help.
How to get help

- Get help from family
- See the Aboriginal mental health worker or doctor
- May need to take medication
You can get lots of useful information if you call the numbers below. These places can offer you counselling anytime or can refer you to appropriate treatment services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your area.

You can call all of these numbers, from anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Calls to all of these numbers are free from public telephones, but charges may apply when you call from a mobile phone.

**Lifeline:**
13 11 14
A free telephone counselling service
www.lifeline.org.au

**Beyond Blue:**
1300 22 4636
An information line for general inquiries
www.beyondblue.org.au

**Kids Helpline:**
1800 551 800
A free telephone counselling service
www.kidshelp.com.au

**Headspace:**
A national youth mental health foundation helping young people aged 12 to 25 years.
www.headspace.org.au

**National Suicide callback service:** 1300 659 467
A free telephone counselling service