

Focusing on what is strong; not what is wrong. Wellness Dreaming—a strength-based approach to community led action

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Overview

Wellness Dreaming is a strength based program focusing on what is strong, not what is wrong, missing or broken. This 'flips' the way wellness and health is often approached by identifying 'needs' and encourages participants, staff and communities to focus on what is strong, present and what can be built upon.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are constantly being told what's wrong with their health, family, behaviour, life-expectancy with everything: this can reinforce negative perceptions and dismiss the importance and potential of community empowerment. cohealth's Koolin Balit initiative, the Wellness Dreaming Project, encourages an alternative approach by community organisations; that focuses on the strengths of individuals, families, groups and the community, to affect achievable, sustainable and self-determining change to improve wellbeing.

A strength based training program was developed in consultation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders and delivered to workers across sectors equipping them with skills and resources to facilitate strength based conversations in community settings. Dreaming Circles re-energises and mobilises members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to determine their own path to health and wellbeing.

This paper outlines the project principles and objectives and demonstrates the way in which strategies were developed and implemented. Achievements and challenges will be discussed and key findings will inform the sustainability and Wellness Dreaming's future directions.

The over-arching goal of Wellness Dreaming is for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be supported to become active in their own health and wellbeing of their communities. The project aims and principles were developed and tested with an Aboriginal project officer and a non-Aboriginal project lead, guided by an Advisory Group consisting of nineteen Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from various Government and non-Government agencies. A productive partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Melbourne's north-west was fostered, enabling the planning, implementation and evaluation of the Wellness Dreaming project.

Aims developed were to:

- build capacity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workforce in the north west of metropolitan Melbourne to work in inter-sectoral partnerships to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- foster the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to enable local, community-led, culturally appropriate action for wellbeing
- develop, train and promote a strengths based approach with all stakeholders

The *principles* that underpinned the development, planning, delivery and evaluation of the project were:

- *maximum community participation and control*; from the input provided in developing content and resources by the Advisory Group to the community voice at the fore-front of all facilitated Dreaming Circles
- *working in partnership* with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from multiple sectors collaborating to learn together and facilitate Dreaming Circles in community settings
- *supporting existing and developing leadership*; fostering strengths and leadership of Wellness Dreaming training participants to become Messengers and also encouraging leadership of community members as Dreaming Circle participants
- *enabling change*; ‘from little things big things grow’: for individuals, families, groups and communities who take part in Dreaming Circles as well as the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers who have been encouraged and supported to ‘flip’ their thinking away from what’s wrong, towards what’s strong in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- *strengths focused*; using an asset based community development framework to promote the individual and collective strengths within the community

Background

Through research of service provision and population data cohealth had an understanding of the service gap for the growing Aboriginal population in Melbourne’s north-west, acknowledging mainstream organisations’ limited exposure to Aboriginal community, despite their readiness to embrace learning opportunities to collaborate with new and existing partners.

Building on the learning and resources from the Health Champions Project, which did not effectively engage with Aboriginal community (‘champions’ was viewed as problematic), the Wellness Dreaming project was developed around asset based community development practices. These practices have a strong evidence base and one that fits well with Aboriginal community; although acknowledged that this would be a new way of working for many engaged in service delivery.

Through consultation with the project team and advisory group, a new name was adopted; ‘Wellness Dreaming’ inspired by the artwork of the artist Ngardab Francine Riches who was commissioned by cohealth to create a piece that depicted ‘wellness’. Permission was granted by the artist and the Wellness Dreaming project was born.

Koolin Balit funding was received to deliver the Wellness Dreaming project for twelve months, commencing in February 2015. Cohealth’s Prevention team offered an additional eighteen months support for the project to enable the project to continue the achievements in building relationships with stakeholders and supporting the delivery of Dreaming Circles across the cohealth catchment area.

A multi-faceted approach was taken to evaluation which involved using qualitative and quantitative methods including surveys, interviews and data collected from the advisory group, the training facilitators, feedback from Messengers delivering Dreaming Circles and coordinators of the groups in which Dreaming Circles took place. Evaluation findings suggest the project has enormous implications

for how health and wellbeing is viewed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and how, by working together, non-Aboriginal people can influence and enable self-determination.

How it began

An enthusiastic group of nineteen Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff from agencies and the community formed the project's advisory group, overseeing the development of the training program and resources in a series of workshops and meetings held between April and October 2015. The group represented the health, community, education, local and state government sectors and included:

Wellness Dreaming training was delivered to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff from cross-sectoral agencies including; Aboriginal Controlled Organisations, mainstream services, government and non-government sectors. Fostering leadership, trained Messengers utilize Wellness Dreaming facilitation skills to deliver Dreaming Circles which are *strength-based* conversations in safe and supported environments with existing groups.

Recruiting participants

Sixty-six people expressed interest to take part in Wellness Dreaming training, exceeding expectations of a desired maximum of forty training places. A criterion for participants was determined by the advisory group and project team to ensure a broad representation across sectors and that membership was inclusive of:

- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- mainstream agencies
- a fair representation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff
- staff currently working in the north west metropolitan region of Melbourne
- those staff who had attended Aboriginal cultural awareness training, preferably in the past two years.

Of the forty-four participants that were enrolled in the training, 57% identified as being Aboriginal and 43% as non-Aboriginal. Eighty-two percent were female and 18% were male.

The largest number of enrolled participants came from health organisations, followed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. Federal Government, housing and mental health all had one representative.

Challenges

The challenge was to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers to focus on the strengths of the community, enabling a strong community voice understanding that practices in service delivery usually worked from a needs or deficit base, historically considered the 'norm'.

Evaluating outcomes from Dreaming Circles presented a challenge as outcomes were deliberately not pre-determined, rather evolving and community-led. It was important for the Wellness Dreaming Messengers to enter their facilitation with no agenda which was challenging for a range of service providers who were required by their own organization to deliver and target specific areas (ie. service access, quit smoking, improve hearing). This challenge was overcome as Messengers increasingly understood the project aims.

Evaluation methodology

The approach used to evaluate Wellness Dreaming training focused on four key evaluation questions:

1. Where has the program been delivered and to whom?
2. What changes have occurred to participants?
3. What were the outcomes of the program?
4. If the program were to continue, what changes should be made?

Qualitative approaches portrayed the 'subjective point of view, story and personal experience' and quantitative methods included data collected from project team's records which identified the numbers who participated and reach of the project.

Training Program evaluation

The following areas were measured:

- culturally relevant content
- how engaging it was for training participants
- participant understanding a strengths based holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

Dreaming Circle evaluation

Quantitative data was collected from Dreaming Circles demonstrate the number of participants, the reach and settings where Dreaming Circles took place. A reflective questionnaire was completed by the Wellness Dreaming Messengers as well as from the coordinator of the group hosting the Dreaming Circle with evaluation findings ongoing and due for review in August 2017.

Outcomes

Wellness Dreaming training 2015

Forty-four staff across the north-western metropolitan region of Melbourne from 27 cross-sectoral agencies was trained as Wellness Dreaming Messengers.

The most popular approaches delivered in the training were group discussions, networking, Wellness Dreaming activity cards along with other visual and tactile methods of engagement to enhance connection with program content.

Based on the evaluation indicators of cultural relevance, engaging and understanding, the overall rating was higher on day two due to the content weighted towards explaining the background of the project and a greater number of non-Aboriginal presenters on day one. On day two the majority of presenters identified as Aboriginal which heightened the overall cultural relevance, engagement and understanding of content and materials presented.

Sixty-four percent of people recruited for the training reported they were able to take back learnings to their organization and discuss the model with their manager however, support to undertake Wellness Dreaming practices were supported by only 45% of managers. Overall this resulted in 55% of Wellness Dreaming Messengers being without support of their workplace to deliver a Dreaming Circle, which in turn contributed to a decrease in their confidence to apply these skills. Support of workplaces and management is crucial to the sustainability of Wellness Dreaming and an increase of

strategies to incorporate strength-based practices into work plans, program delivery and policy/frameworks would support ongoing what is strong not what is wrong in communities.

Sustaining engagement with Wellness Dreaming Messengers

A community of practice met five times throughout 2016 with the aim of providing collegial support, strengthening relationships, sharing experiences and ideas for collaboration and settings for Dreaming Circles. While the attendance was low, the levels of engagement were extremely high, resulting in the delivery of more Dreaming Circles and increase in collaborations. It became evident in this setting the desire to showcase the successes and challenges of the Wellness Dreaming. A showcase event took place in December 2016 attracting managers of current Wellness Dreaming Messengers as well as managers of potential recruits. Three Messengers took part in a panel to share their experiences before an audience of twenty from several organisations.

Learnings to inform the delivery of the next Wellness Dreaming training include:

- increased number of Aboriginal presenters
- increase content which relates to the delivery of Dreaming Circles and utilise the activity cards
- clarify communications throughout the promotion and registration phase to recruit training participants and provide an outline so expectations are understood before attending the training
- stronger engagement with workplaces to increase support of Wellness Dreaming Messengers to incorporate strength-based facilitation in their work plans.

Key outcomes as a result of the first project phase included:

1. *Communication*—a series of Community of Practice workshops to share experiences, reflections and contributions were led by Wellness Dreaming Messengers, fortnightly email updates 'The Loop', establishment of a Facebook page and the supported coordination of Dreaming Circles. Thirty-five Messengers out of the original forty-four chose to remain engaged and informed about the Wellness Dreaming project by opting in to 'The Loop'. The ones who did opt out did so because they had relocated to another area or agency.
2. *Fostering cross-sectoral partnerships*, one of the project aims was moderately achieved when there was capacity and willingness from individual Wellness Dreaming Messengers.
3. Due to the success in relationship-building, networking and reach of Wellness Dreaming, cohealth's Prevention Team took on the project towards the end of the initial funding period. This was the first time an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing project was specifically addressed in the Integrated Health Promotion Plan.

The Aboriginal project officer had a main focus to enhance collegial relationships between Messengers and to foster the inter-sectoral partnerships. Strategies to encourage this included forming cluster groups of Messengers whose work targeted particular sub-population groups within the Aboriginal community such as;

- Elders
- Men
- Women

- Youth
- Northern region
- Western region

While initially a good engagement strategy, the self-directed cross-communication between the Messengers was not forthcoming, largely due to lapse of time since the training occurred in September 2015 and the commencement of the new project officer in February 2016.

Dreaming Circles 2016

One hundred and seventy-eight people have participated in Dreaming Circles across the Melbourne's north-west region to date, including women's, Elders and youth groups and community networks. Outcomes of Dreaming Circles were not predetermined, allowing the community to lead and articulate wellness from their strengths. Examples of some of the linkages and connections to health and wellbeing as led by community members are articulated in the stories below:

Outcomes within the Dreaming Circle setting varied and were completely dependent upon the people within the group. After exploring and expressing the things already in their lives which mean the most, one group of Elders pictured themselves going on a long weekend camp together where their pets, ie dogs would be welcome. An enthusiastic response resulted in an inspiring conversation full of many ideas until someone said... 'we need funding for this'. The room fell silent and everyone looked at the Wellness Dreaming Messenger. This example illustrates how problems are often normalised as needing fixing by others. This idea was 'flipped' by the Messenger to encourage the group to think how they themselves could work through this problem. The Messenger put it back to the group, encouraging them to think about all of the things they could do before they asked for funding, to build confidence and capacity in self-determination using small but tangible steps. There were phone calls to make, places to research, facilities to identify and ways in which people could contribute to the planning as well as costs. In this way the group was able to see themselves as drivers of their own ideas and bringing them to fruition.

Another example was a planned activity group which took part in a Dreaming Circle where they explored through images the things that were important in their lives. A woman who had recently been reunited with her children expressed her desire to do something special for her kids, like 'bake them a cake, like other mums do'. She told the group she'd never baked a cake before and wouldn't know where to start. Immediately there were offers and suggestions for the group to make cakes at their next gathering, something new for the group and an unexpected idea which came from a lone voice. The group was mobilized to meet the challenge.

A similar outcome occurred at a Dreaming Circle run at a women's group where one of the participants made herself a commitment to learn to knit. Another participant responded 'I can show you how to knit', and plans fell into place for the two of them to meet the following week and start knitting. Soon a couple of other women wanted to join in so they could knit together.

Dreaming Circles have enabled the following activities:

- community connectedness bringing people together to learn about and share culture
- developing a community arts festival which is led and curated by young people to showcase their passion and their skills

- open day at the Elders group to meet more community members and invite families to showcase what the elders group do
- planning for a Local Aboriginal Network, Health Promotion team and a Youth Centre

Sustaining the Wellness Dreaming model of what's strong, not what's wrong

To build and sustain the Wellness Dreaming project the following actions are suggested:

- *Commitment* to the original project principles will guide future steps for this project
- Wellness Dreaming Messengers will continue to be part of the Community of Practice to inform the evolution of content and delivery for future Wellness Dreaming training to ensure the focus on what's strong, not what's wrong can continue to impact and influence the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal service providers
- Effective engagement with managers to recruit participants in forthcoming iteration of Wellness Dreaming training with the aim for Messengers to sustain their practice throughout their work
- *Advocating* for cultural awareness training across sectors as six applicants from 2015 were not approved as they had not undertaken this pre-requisite training
- New Wellness Dreaming training will target workers and/or volunteers already engaged with existing groups using a fee for service model
- Next cohort of Wellness Dreaming Messengers will be encouraged to look at their own agency for support to deliver and facilitate Dreaming Circles rather than rely upon the Wellness Dreaming Project Team at cohealth
- *Develop* the model to increase accessibility, inclusive of audiences beyond north-west metropolitan Melbourne using a variety of delivery methods, based on fee for service to decrease costs
- *Harnessing* the current and future partnerships and enthusiasm to build capacity and reach
- Wellness Dreaming promoted as a strength-based model for diverse communities in regional, remote and metropolitan areas

Conclusion

Wellness Dreaming encourages both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health and community workers to collaborate with community to recognize and utilize strengths of individuals and community. The project has engaged cross-sectoral organisations by encouraging collaboration with staff from housing, employment, health, education, local Government, non-Government and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. The story of the Wellness Dreaming approach is best described in our six minute film: [Wellness dreaming video click here](#)

Wellness Dreaming is a strength-based approach that is adaptable to various settings to enable community voices to be at the forefront of change in wellness in health and community services. This model is a new way that harks from an old way, to lead the way in how mainstream services understand social and emotional wellbeing. Continued training and workforce development to extend Wellness Dreaming messengers in the community requires managerial and agency support,

encouraging the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to articulate wellness through community led action. Intellectual, physical and capital investment from Government and NGO sectors will strengthen Aboriginal voices and community led wellness.

“Wellness dreaming is a step in the right direction”—Melissa Brickell

Presenter

Nichole Bloomfield is a passionate and active member of the community and a proud Wiradjuri woman with over 21 years' experience in project management, quality assurance and management in Indigenous affairs in Victoria. Through sustaining stakeholder engagement across the community, government and private sectors Nichole has become well-known to many members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community across Melbourne's north-west. She hopes to see improved and culturally appropriate access and services for Aboriginal Elders, women and men and people living with a disability and for our society to ensure there is greater support and wellbeing now and in the future for our community. Let the strengths of our communities shine and lead the way to self-determination.

Karen Ingram has been active in the field of health promotion and community development for fifteen years. Contributing to an environment which advocates and supports social justice and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through participation, empowerment and the arts inspires her to do her best. She has been proactive in the development and implementation of three Reconciliation Action Plans and remains committed in her solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Wellness Dreaming project has provided an important platform to promote and enhance strength-based practices within the Prevention and Population Health team at cohealth and more broadly across sectors in the north-west metropolitan region of Victoria. In her spare time Karen is a civil celebrant, writer and performer.