

Fact sheet:

Professional competencies for psychologists

Understanding Competency 8: Demonstrates a health equity and human rights approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities

Background

The *Professional competencies for psychologists* have been updated to provide more detail about the Psychology Board of Australia's (the Board) expectations that all psychologists need to actively work towards ensuring client safety and positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's health system.

This is in line with the changes to the [National Law](#) including paramountcy of public protection and the importance of providing culturally safe care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities.

In addition, we have strengthened the competencies, so they are better aligned with the expectations of international regulators and international best practice for working with Indigenous Peoples.

While Competency 8 specifically addresses working with First Nations Peoples, we have embedded culturally safe care into all eight competencies.

The Professional competencies for psychologists are in effect from 1 December 2025.

What are the key features of safe, effective and competent practice?

Competency 8.1

Works with knowledge and understanding of the historical, political, social and cultural context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities, including the ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism.

Competency 8.2

Demonstrates culturally responsive healthcare that considers the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities (e.g. there are different Nations, language groups, clans, culture) and that there are intersecting forms of diversity (e.g. See C8.1 for a list of diverse social identity groups).

Competency 8.3

Applies the principles of culturally safe care to psychological practice.

Competency 8.4

Applies the principles of trauma-aware and culturally informed care.

Competency 8.5

Demonstrates the ability to reflect on and learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Aboriginal knowledges.

Competency 8.6

Understands the importance of self-determined decision-making for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families, and communities, and works in partnership to achieve health outcomes within an Aboriginal Health frame of reference.

Competency 8.7

Consults appropriately with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families, communities and organisations to support collaboration in achieving health outcomes.

Other competencies that are relevant to providing culturally safe care include:

Competency 1.4

Applies a scientific, culturally informed and evidence-based approach to psychological practice and evaluating outcomes.

Competency 1.5

Possesses the understanding and ability to design and conduct ethical research relevant to cultural and professional contexts.

Competency 3.4

Engages in reflection and reflexivity on the impact of one's own culture, values, beliefs and biases, and acts upon such reflection and ensures practice is responsive and adaptive to client, context and culture.

Competency 4.1

Has knowledge of the relative strengths and limitations of the different methods of assessment and modes of delivery relevant to practice across the lifespan and in different contexts, including cultural contexts.

Competency 4.4

Administers a range of culturally safe assessment methods.

Competency 5.1

Has knowledge of the efficacy and effectiveness of a range of interventions and modes of delivery relevant to practice across the lifespan and in different contexts, including cultural contexts.

Competency 5.5

Conducts a range of culturally safe interventions that maximise optimal outcomes with clients.

Competency 7.3

Understands the impact of cultural identity, values, beliefs and experiences on psychological wellbeing or behaviour – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, migrant and refugee experiences.

Competency 7.4

Recognises the impact of one's own values, beliefs, experiences, positionality and cultural identity on practice and demonstrates an ongoing commitment to culturally responsive practice.

Competency 7.7

Applies the principles of trauma-aware and culturally informed care.

What does this mean for practitioners?

Psychologists practising in Australia have always been required to be adequately trained to work with sensitivity and respect with people with diverse individual and cultural backgrounds.

The knowledge and skills needed to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients has been a requirement since the publication of the current competencies in 2010 and have been embedded into the [Australian Psychology Accreditation Council Standards for psychology qualifications](#) since 2019. This means that many psychologists will have already completed training relevant to Competency 8.

Since the updated competencies enhance and provide clarity about our expectations, psychologists will need to review the updated competencies and either confirm that your knowledge and skills are contemporary, or identify areas where learning is needed.

Psychologists should understand the complex circumstances that influence the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and know how to deliver equitable, accessible, sustainable, timely and culturally safe care within their scope of practice.

Practitioners should use their professional judgement when applying these standards.

You are required to meet the *Professional competencies for psychologists as relevant to your scope of practice*.

What does cultural safety mean?

Cultural safety is determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Culturally safe practice is the ongoing critical reflection of health practitioner knowledge, skills, attitudes, practising behaviours and power differentials in delivering safe, accessible and responsive healthcare free of racism. The [National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and cultural safety strategy 2020–2025](#) explains the role we all share in ensuring client safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia's health system.

What does a health equity and human rights approach mean?

Health equity means ensuring that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. Achieving this requires ongoing societal efforts to address historical and contemporary injustices; and to work towards overcoming the economic,

social, and other obstacles to health and healthcare (the social determinants of health). This requires psychologists to provide high quality healthcare and to adopt practices that respect diversity, and avoid bias, discrimination and racism

The National Scheme's [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health strategy statement of intent](#) (the Statement of Intent) highlights our commitment to achieve equity in health outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians and to [close the gap](#) by 2031.

A **human rights approach** provides a foundational frame of reference to help psychologists understand and tackle inequities and to do our part to improve the health and wellbeing of the Australian community. In a human rights approach to health, for example, all clients have the right to receive safe and high-quality healthcare, to be shown respect, dignity and consideration, to be informed about their treatment, to be included in decisions about their care, and to have the right to privacy and confidentiality.

A human rights approach is applicable across all sectors where psychologists work, for example, for providing direct client care, for developing practical approaches for public health, for addressing health inequity, for promoting mental health, for developing health system actions, for writing health policy and conducting research.

Case study

Carl trained as a psychologist 25 years ago, and is currently working in an urban private practice. After reading the *Professional competencies for psychologists*, he reflected that his university training included limited information about providing culturally safe psychological services.

Carl had some experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in his early career when he worked in a regional health department that had an outreach program to the local school district. He believes that he doesn't really see Indigenous clients now.

Carl decided to do some reading to better understand the competencies. He discovered that there is considerable national data outlining the social and emotional wellbeing needs of First Nations Peoples where referral to a psychologist would be appropriate. For example the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Health Survey \(2019\)](#) found that around one-third of First Nations Peoples over 18 years of age experience high or very high levels of distress.

To his surprise, Carl discovered that the 2021 [Australian Census](#) showed that most First Nations people live in capital cities, not in regional areas as he had thought, with only 7.5 per cent of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population living in the Northern Territory. Carl realised it was likely for him to see First Nations clients in his practice, so he

reviewed his client case load. Carl discovered that more of his clients identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander than he had realised.

From his reading, Carl decided that his knowledge and skills are not contemporary, and he started to identify areas where learning was needed to meet the competencies in his scope of practice. He assessed himself as needing foundational knowledge, and decided to enrol in a cultural competency training course. Since his practice focuses on delivering therapy and assessment, he decided to focus his continuing professional development (CPD) for the year on better understanding trauma-informed care and delivering culturally appropriate psychological assessments. Carl spoke with his supervisor about his reflections and learning goals for the year, committing to allow time in each supervision session to integrate his learning into his practice.

CPD guidance

Psychologists have an ongoing commitment to learning, education and training as outlined in the Board's [Continuing professional development \(CPD\) registration standard](#).

Practitioners who identify learning needs for Competency 8 should consider the level or depth of

professional development required based on your scope of practice and work context.

The following table provides some examples of foundational, intermediate and advanced CPD relevant to Competency 8.

We expect that all psychologists will have a foundational level of understanding so they can meet the minimum threshold professional competency.

We know that some psychologists will choose to deepen their training due to their scope of practice, or personal or professional interest in working with First Nations clients.

When determining your CPD for Competency 8 we ask you to be mindful of engaging in culturally safe practice by prioritising collaborative approaches to learning and engagement and recognising the potential for cultural burden within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

CPD includes a variety of learning modes such as: reading, workshops, seminars, conferences, professional podcasts or DVDs, active CPD, master classes, supervision, and includes reflective and reflexive professional practice.

Level/depth of training recommended	Examples of CPD
Foundational training for: all psychologists	<p>Indigenous-led seminars and workshop training on relevant topics, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural competency and cultural responsiveness • Culturally appropriate psychological assessments with First Nations clients • Trauma-informed care. <p>Reading on relevant topics, for example:</p> <p>Universities Australia (2011) National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous cultural competency in Australian universities at: www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/policy-submissions/diversity-equity/indigenous-higher-education/indigenous-cultural-competency-framework/</p> <p>The following are recommended texts for the national psychology exam:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP) https://indigenopsyched.org.au/ • Dudgeon, P., Milroy, H. & Walker, R. (2014). <i>Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice</i> (2nd ed.). Australia: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/early-environment/developmental-origins-of-child-health/expired-projects/working-together-second-edition/ <p>Purposeful and deliberate practice, for example:</p> <p>Engage in reflective and reflexive practice in your supervision about what you are learning.</p> <p>Complete the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework: Cultural safety continuum reflective tool by the Victorian Government at: www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-cultural-safety-framework-part-1</p>

Intermediate training for:

Psychologists who wish to deepen their knowledge, understanding and sensitivity.

Psychologists who regularly see First Nations clients, or who employ or supervise psychologists who do.

Seminars and workshop training on relevant topics, for example:

- Social and emotional wellbeing
- First Nations women and mental health
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention
- Inter-generational trauma
- Indigenous climate change studies
- Research ethics for conducting Indigenous research
- Indigenous research methodologies.

Reading on relevant topics, for example:

- Edwige, V & Gray, P (2021) Significance of culture to wellbeing, healing and rehabilitation at: www.publicdefenders.nsw.gov.au/Pages/public_defenders_research/bar-book/culture-report.aspx
- Selkirk et. al. (2024) Listening more: Embedding cultural safety in supervision: A guide for psychology supervisors at: <https://indigenouslypsych.org.au/supervisors/>
- Transforming Indigenous mental health and wellbeing at: <https://timhwb.org.au/>
- Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025 at: www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UA-Indigenous-Strategy-2022-25.pdf

Purposeful and deliberate practice, for example:

Consider engaging a cultural mentor to extend your learning.

Complete the Cultural Safety Audit Tool for individuals and organisations by Lowitja Institute at: www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/tools/cultural-safety-audit-tool-for-individuals

Advanced training for:

Psychologists who work primarily with First Nations clients.

Psychologists who wish to further deepen their knowledge, understanding and sensitivity.

Seminars and workshop training on relevant topics, for example:

- Providing best-practice psychological services within an Aboriginal community-controlled health service
- Designing, monitoring and evaluating programs designed to improve the health of First Nations Peoples.

Reading on relevant topics, for example:

- Racism
- Decolonising the psychology profession
- Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers
- Policy context for achieving change in First Nations Peoples' social and emotional wellbeing
- Developing partnerships and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities or organisations for two-way learning and mutual benefit
- Developing and integrating cultural safety practices into the workplace.

Purposeful and deliberate practice, for example:

Consider engaging in cultural supervision to reflect on your own practice and build cultural responsiveness.

Complete the Workplace Cultural Diversity Tool by Australian Human Rights Commission at: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/projects/workplace-cultural-diversity-tool>.

The *Professional competencies for psychologists* were made after wide-ranging public consultation, to ensure they are contemporary and relevant to safe and effective psychology practice.