

Healing through connection and storytelling: insights from an Aboriginal-led evaluation of an alcohol and other drug program

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Introduction: Ngalla Wirrin Wungening (Our Spirit Healing) is an Aboriginal-led alcohol and other drug program delivered by Wungening Aboriginal Corporation. The program provides healing-focused support centred around culture and connection. An Aboriginal-led developmental evaluation was undertaken between 2023 and 2025 alongside implementation of the reimagined service model.

Method / Approach: The evaluation was based on Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing, and guided by Aboriginal community priorities. We used impact yarning that centred the voices, experiences, and world views of Aboriginal people. The collection of these stories was based on self-determination - people telling their story of change in their own way. This approach captured the nuanced and interconnected holistic impacts of the program, including the significance of relationships and Aboriginal ways of working.

Key Findings: Findings indicate that relational practices are central to engagement and outcomes. Participants consistently described safety and connection as key enablers of healing. Flexible, non-linear service delivery supported sustained engagement for individuals with complex needs. The evaluation process itself also contributed to reflective practice and continuous service improvement.

Discussions and Conclusions: The evaluation demonstrates that self-determined relational approaches are critical to understanding outcomes when working with Aboriginal communities. When this approach is taken, the method itself contributes to healing. Traditional evaluation frameworks often overlook key drivers of change when relational and cultural dimensions are not explicitly captured.

Implications on communities, practice, policy: This project highlights the importance of culturally responsive approaches in both AOD programs and the evaluation of those programs. Embedding lived experience and narrative methods strengthens the evidence base to more meaningfully inform policy, funding and service design.

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