Stawiarski, B. F. (2024). Gudu-Guduwa: Healing disconnection through incorporating bush and animal-assisted therapies into therapeutic practice: A First Nations reflection. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia*. https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.123876

INDIGENOUS HEALING PRACTICES

Gudu-Guduwa: Healing Disconnection Through Incorporating Bush and Animal-Assisted Therapies Into Therapeutic Practice: A First Nations Reflection

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Keywords: Indigenous Healing Practices, First Nations Therapies, Animal Assisted Therapies, Ecotherapy, Country, Aboriginal Healing

https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.123876

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

As mental health therapists, too often we see outward symptoms of lives impacted by complex trauma. Disconnection from self, others (families and community), and Country is at a crisis point. Looking to our First Nations healing knowledges, the author explores her experiences as a First Nations woman and therapist, and how she incorporates bush and animal assisted therapies into her private practice. Areas that the article touches on include healing on your ancestral Country, healing on Country that is not your own, healing when you do not know where your Country is, and incorporating animal assisted therapies into your healing modalities.

As people, at the core of our being, that which makes us who we are, is the fact that we are relational. This can mean different things for people. For me, from the perspective of an Aboriginal woman, relationships are with Country, including all the beings that reside there, and family or community networks. In my observation, as a First Nations practitioner and Allied Health professional, much of the ill health experienced today can be summarised simply by disconnection: from self, from others, and from Country. In support of this observation, I draw on Gee et al. (2014) who recognised the interconnectedness of wellbeing and the impact of disconnection through their research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. As such, this article is aimed at mental health practitioners who are curious about the way that healing with a First Nations practitioner through decolonised approaches in the Allied Health field differs from their own practices.

Building on this, and taking a decolonised approach, how do we as First Nations peoples embrace gudu-guduwa[1] when potentially living far from our own Country? I have been honoured to live most of my life on both Kaurna

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1 Gudu-guduwa means coming together in Badimia.

and Peramangk Countries, or on the Country of the peoples that make up the far west of South Australia. Although these Countries are thousands of kilometres from my own Badimia[2] Country, my connection and internal pull to my ancestors and the energies and special places on my barna[3] continue. For me, the depth of this cellular connection was realised with the first touch of a handful of what many might think seemingly insignificant sand from Badimia Country. Touching, connecting, and searching with every part of me triggered an avalanche of emotions, warmth, tears, and healing from an overwhelming sense of thousands of ancestors welcoming me home. To this day, years later, just reflecting on that moment brings tears to my eyes and moves me in ways that are difficult to describe. We gain meaning through our storytelling, and, as Mehl-Madrona (2010) states, "how people heal is implicit within the unique stories and their illness ... we must discover those stories through our interaction, and we must cocreate a healing future" (p. 10).

Why then is the importance of this connection in the healing process so often discounted by western therapeutic approaches? Bringing Country and, by extension, culture and spirit, into any healing approach is a recognition of the power of this, an acknowledgement, and a belonging. Ray (2008) reflected that while land and other non-human aspects are usually not recognised in relationship or in healing, because they comprise spirit they should be respected as beings (p. 16). Westerman (2010) elaborated on this, stating, "in definitional terms, this means that concepts of mental ill health for Aboriginal people will always need to take into account the entirety of one's experiences, including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and obviously, cultural states of being" (p. 216). Extending this thought, Charmaine Papertalk Green (2018) explored the importance of culture and spirit in healing, describing this rejoicing experience perfectly in her poem "Culture Bath":

> Immerse yourself in your culture
> Let it wash over you
> Bathe in it like you would
> A bath filled with flowers
> Let it flow into every
> Cell of your being
> Your culture will hold you
> Your spirit will rejoice
> Let your culture hold you
> And never be a bystander
> Don't look the other way

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2 Badimia is also written as Badimaya, and it refers to a First Nations people from mid-Western Australia. Badimia is both a First Nations Country and a language from that area. The author is a Badimia and Ukrainian woman.

3 Barna means land or Country in Badimia. It is far more than environment.

> Don't be an observer
> Embrace your culture with open arms
> For it is your belonging. (p. 61)

Integrating Western Therapeutic and Indigenous Healing Practices

During my own tertiary training experience as a counsellor, I often found theoretical approaches to be incongruent with my innate cultural knowledge of what was needed to heal. Over the past decade, I have broadly read everything available on First Nations healing practices within Australia and globally, and the processes therapists have used to decolonise approaches. In addition, as part of my current PhD candidature with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, I have continued to explore this subject comprehensively. One of the main issues is the privileging of western worldviews of individual healing which value evidence-based practice defined by the dominant culture to the exclusion of other collective and spiritual approaches that value different forms of evidence-based practice. This problem was encapsulated by Beaulieu and Reeves (2022):

> Research has shown that effective counselling interventions for many Indigenous Peoples infuse Indigenous worldviews, values, and practices into treatment. Research has also shown that the use of only mainstream or western therapeutic interventions has often proved ineffective for Indigenous clients. (p. 255)

Efforts to address the privileging of dominant cultures have led to practices such as hybrid psychotherapy, which recognises the ability to operate respectfully within two different epistemologies or fields of knowledge (Duran & Duran, 2000). Duran and Duran (2000) expressed a need for respectful integration of therapeutic approaches and worldviews, described as a postcolonial paradigm, in which knowledge does not need to exist only within the dominant culture to be legitimate or have efficacy. Research has shown that when respectfully undertaken, the integration of worldviews improves outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Beaulieu & Reeves, 2022; Mpofu et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2021). Therefore, changes to counselling educational approaches and course materials would benefit from an integrative approach.

Country Is More Than Barna

Exploration of an integrative approach leads to realisation of the importance of Country in the healing process. Country is far more than barna; it is trees, seasons, ancestors, and energy. Animals feature significantly in the power of connection to Country too—all animals, those of the land, sea, water, and sky, from the smallest insects to the largest mammals. How, then, can we foster a deeper connection with animals as well as other parts

of Country? Although nguud[4] and dhudhu[5] arrived with colonisation and therefore have only a recent history for Australian First Nations peoples, they now form a strong part of our family relationships and connection. My own Great-Uncle George "Copper Wire" Latham (2001), known widely as a horse whisperer, described this connection to horses through his life as a drover and stockman: "Pride ... he was a good horse–you could shoot an emu off of him, tie the emu's legs with a rope, then tie the rope to the horse's tail and drag the emu home behind the horse" (Latham, 2001, p. 52). A strong connection to animals is also evident through the living history of our renowned Aboriginal stockmen and women, and in the unique First Nations approaches to healing by working in culturally safe spaces and in partnership with horses, dogs, and Country; such practices encourage and facilitate engagement with the healing process. Bennett and Woodman (2019) explained that working with horses through therapeutic interventions "shows promise to meet both the therapeutic and cultural needs of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 1044). In the spirit of Green's (2018) poem, it is the aspects of this equine assisted cultural approach that are First Nations peoples' connection and as such need to be incorporated into healing approaches.

Connection to Country

To explore healing through connection to Country, three main aspects must be reflected upon: our (Aboriginal) peoples' deep connection with ancestral Country; honouring and connecting to Country that is not one's own; and non-Aboriginal people respectfully connecting to land that is not their ancestral land. Reflection, stillness, and deep listening within and outside ourselves support this process.

Connection With Ancestral Country

It is very different when you are connecting with your own ancestral Country, as I have personally experienced.

> Land has recuperative aspects that are essential to Aboriginal well-being. Our land also has an important role to play in healing. The land is a powerful healer, as is the sea. When your ancestors have walked these places for millennia, they hold an energy of timelessness that invokes serenity and the feeling that one is not alone, but in the presence of these ancestors, who are able to communicate via the senses to convey the feelings and thoughts that are most conducive to healing. When we are able to sit on our land in contemplation and hear, feel or see the spirits of our old people, then we have been to a place within ourselves of great depth and connectedness. It is this place that

4 Nguud means horse in the Badimia language.

5 Dhudhu means domesticated dogs in the Badimia language.

> we need to go to in order to truly heal ourselves; and once we have learnt how to do that, then we can move forward. (Clarke & Fewquandie, 1996, p. 3)

As someone moving continually between First Nations and western worlds, at some point I found that I needed to suspend what I was taught through my schooling as factual and rest within my ancestral knowledge. What does this look like? It is my innate knowing beyond all questioning that every part of me recognises and responds to my Country at a deep, at times unexplainable connection, recognition, and sense of belonging. I have found this incredibly powerful. Standing where my ancestors have been for tens of thousands of years, placing my hand near the ancient ochre handprints of my ancestors, reinforces this experience of belonging and connection. In western therapeutic approaches, the importance of this connection and the healing that our people gain from our own traditional Country is quite often discounted. This is likely related to the insufficiency of western scientific quantitative and qualitative outcome measurements to evaluate healing outcomes through ancestral cellular connection to energy sources such as Country. To measure these outcomes outside a western framework, decolonised empirical research approaches need to be more widely utilised, such as recognising and employing ancestral knowledge systems (Sandoval et al., 2016). Despite increasing acceptance that spending time in the environment is therapeutic, the healing benefits of connection with our ancestral Country cannot be explained through a cognitive lens only. If we allow ourselves to listen with our whole being rather than interpret what we hear with just our minds, we have the opportunity to know innately where we may go and where we may not. This innate cellular memory and linkages to our ancestral Country and the places of significance located there can register our gender and our Lore holding, or lack thereof, and create feelings of knowing or of also understanding places where we cannot access because of this.

An experience of mine when visiting a site on my Country with the permission of an Elder is illustrative of such innate cellular memory. On arrival, I felt fine, but as I was walking into the clearing, I started to feel queasy. Listening intently within, I took two more steps and was handed an old grinding stone to look at. Suddenly, a voice screamed in my head to “get out, you’re not safe, you aren’t allowed to be here”, over and over. I felt so sick that I returned the stone and blindly ran back to the scrubland until I stopped feeling sick and the voice was no longer screaming in my head. When I stopped, I was overwhelmed with the deepest flooding tears of grief and was unsettled for quite some time afterwards. Reflecting on this experience still churns my stomach. For me, it is obvious that my cellular memory and recognition of Country were very real and directly affected me. Unfortunately, when discussed in a clinical sense, experiences such as mine are often discounted, or as Westerman’s (2021) research finds, are often misdiagnosed therapeutically. Including innate cellular memory within the

therapeutic process recognises the importance of spirit to First Nations social and emotional wellbeing as per Gee et al. (2014). To counter the potential for misdiagnosis when working with First Nations peoples, therapists must operate through a decolonised mental health framework.

Ngardi Guwanda[6] as a Healing Approach With Country

To deepen the yarn, as therapists we must explore a practice commonly known as deep listening. Being in deep inner stillness and reflection, far more so than mindfulness practices, can enable us to shift out of our logical mind and remove blockages to really see, hear, and feel. This practice can be undertaken while remaining physically still or moving. Ungunmerr (1988) summarised this when she described dadirri[7], which

> recognizes the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us ... when I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening. (p. 1)

In my language, this holistic and spiritual process is called ngardi guwanda.

First Nations peoples who, because of their experiences or upbringing, are less comfortable engaging in deep inner work or listening/feeling with more than their minds, may find upon reflection that when on Country they feel a sense of deep calm, restfulness, and healing. These spiritual, inner experiences cannot be ignored or clinically rationalised through a lens that privileges western knowledge as the only valid approach over First Nations knowledge. Instead, innate cellular memory and healing through connection to ancestral Country needs to be acknowledged, more widely accepted, and embraced.

Severing Connection to Country—The Stolen Generations

What happens to the profound healing connection produced by deep listening when conscious memory of Country has been purposefully severed? It is estimated that “there were 17,150 Stolen Generations survivors alive in 2018 ... with around 33% of adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people descendants of Stolen generation survivors” (Healing Foundation, n.d., para. 15). The Australian Government’s approach to the systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, community, and Country, which resulted in incomplete or since destroyed mission records, or an absence of records of children’s Aboriginality, has led to a large number of our people either not knowing where their Country is or lacking any kind of conscious connection to barna (Human Rights and Equal

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6 Ngardi guwanda means thinking, feeling, and listening in the Badimia language.

7 Dadirri is translated as inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness in the Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngen’giwumirri languages from Daly River, Northern Territory.

Opportunity Commission, 1997). Even if you know who your badiwi[8] are and where your Country is, you may never have received the opportunity to develop a spiritual relationship with, or understand your stories and the Lore associated with, that place. This impact on healing by loss of land experienced by First Nations peoples was highlighted by Wiremu NiaNia et al. (2017) describing the experience of Māori peoples:

> For us as Māori, we lost many things, but I believe the most damaging was the loss of our land. With the dispossession of our ancestral lands, our access to those spiritual ties with Papatuanuku were taken away, cutting us off from our spiritual sustenance. (p. 20)

Unfortunately, this narrative is all too common in Australia as well. In relation to my own situation, although I knew where I was from, for most of my life I did not receive the opportunity to physically step onto Badimia Country, nor could I speak my language. I did not know my creation histories. I still experience grief associated with this disconnection and am trying to learn more of my language and stories and share these with my children. This experience is repeated across many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as noted in the report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997):

> Separation has broken or disrupted not only the links that Aboriginals have with other Aboriginals, but importantly, the spiritual connection we should have had with our Country, our land. It is vital to our healing process that these bonds be re-established or re-affirmed. (p. 178)

Conscious efforts to learn, reconnect, and guwaga[9] where possible and be known by community and Country is part of our healing journey.

The importance of language and Country is intricately linked to wellbeing. Dodson (1997) further described the impacts on healing resulting from loss of land:

> To understand our law, our culture and our relationship to the physical and spiritual world, you must begin with the land. Everything about Aboriginal society is inextricably woven with, and connected to, the land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of Aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown the land up. We are

8 Badiwi means mob in the Badimia language.

9 Guwaga means talk in the Badimia language.

> dancing, singing, and painting for the land. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves. (p. 41)

Returning Home—A Return to Wholeness

Reflecting on Dodson (1997) and Gee et al. (2014), I suggest that any healing approach for our mob must include barna and connection to Country, and it must recognise decolonised healing aspects of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing. Referring to my own situation, feeling and sensing my body responding to my barna and reaching out with my very being brought me a great sense of comfort, relief, and belonging. In the spirit of Dodson's (1997) sentiments embodied in the quotation presented above, I finally came home to myself and my old people.

This innate sense of belonging was highlighted at the 2018 International Indigenous Allied Health Forum when Professor Tom Calma insightfully suggested that our Aboriginality is within our DNA and that all we need to do is release this (T. Calma, personal communication, November, 2018). It is this that is being alluded to with the phrase conscious memory of Country. The deep healing and sense of wellbeing that we can gain by connecting can still occur on the most subtle of unconscious levels, whether we are aware of this or not—our old people recognise us and barna rejoices when we return. If we are attuned to these energies, we may be able to sense them. If we are not yet attuned or comfortable connecting in a conscious way, this may manifest instead as a sense of calm or quietness. Knowing that our Country recognises us, even if we experience this recognition simply as a feeling of calmness, can bring deep relief, an exhalation, and a strong sense that we belong. The importance of seeing with our felt senses, below the surface of what presents to us visually, helps us to access this unconscious memory of Country and the healing of belonging. Milroy (2009, as cited in Mackean, 2009) reminds us of this return to wholeness:

> Healing gives us back to ourselves. Not to hide or fight anymore. But to sit still, calm our minds, listen to the universe, and allow our spirits to dance on the wind ... [and] drift into our dreamtime. Healing ultimately gives us back to our Country. To stand once again in our rightful place, eternal and generational. Healing is not just about recovering what has been lost or repairing what has been broken. It is about embracing our life force to create a new and vibrant fabric that keeps us grounded and connected. (p. 522)

Honouring and Connecting to Country Not of Your Own

What happens when we live on another's Country? Many of us find ourselves either by choice or circumstance living outside our traditional barna. This does not mean that deep healing cannot be facilitated or occur

by connecting with the Country of another First Nations people. Although the distinction between healing on one's own Country and that of another does need to be acknowledged, the potential to gain deep healing through respectfully connecting to another's Country still exists. On others' Country, our bodies do not have unconscious or conscious innate memory of the ancestor creation histories of barna and our bodies do not recognise the spirits of our old people and beings connected to barna through our ancestral lines. Despite this, we can develop a respectful connection and healing resonation with the energy in that Country and old people of that place if we "look" with our hearts and beyond our logical mind and are welcomed to the Country according to cultural protocols. At all times, acknowledging and understanding that we are visitors to another mob's barna and respectfully honouring their creation histories, their old people, the spiritual beings of the land, and their current Elders is vitally important and correct protocol. Since there is no one unified Aboriginal culture, always seek information from Elders about location specific protocols.

How can you do this? Reach out to current Elders of the Country that you are living on to educate yourself; acknowledge and learn about the publicly known ancestral histories of the land; and seek permission to be there or to practice on the barna. In my situation, even though I was born on Kaurna Country, I reached out to several Kaurna and Peramangk Elders for permission to operate a healing service on their land, and I ensure that smoking and welcoming ceremonies on my property are held by local Elders. Reflecting on the power of healing through respectful connection to Country, how then can this experience be included into an empirically recognised therapeutic approach that is supported in clinical practice?

Bush Therapy or Barna Mabarn[10]

Bush therapy or barna mabarn is known internationally by many names: ecotherapy, forest therapy, forest medicine, *Shinrin-yoku* in Japan, *Sanlimyok* in Korea, *Sēnlín liáofǎ* in China and Taiwan, and *Waldtherapie* in Germany. Internationally, these terms usually describe guided therapeutic walks through forests, and an increasing number of published studies have explored these therapeutic activities (Arisoy, 2023; Matise & Price-Howard, 2020; Williams et al., 2020). For instance, Li (2013) found "forest environments reduce blood pressure and heart rate and have relaxing effects ... [and] ... forest environments act directly on the immune system to promote human [natural killer] activity ... increasing intracellular levels of anti-cancer proteins" (pp. 150–152).

The positive impact of forests on human health has been researched and published throughout Europe and Asia, and numerous studies are publicly available demonstrating improved wellbeing, reduction in symptoms of

10 Barna mabarn means Country/land medicine in Badimia.

anxiety and depression, and enhanced affect regulation (Kamitsis & Simmonds, 2017; Park et al., 2022; Stier-Jarmer et al., 2021). In the Australian context, a growing number of nature-based enterprises, bush adventure therapies, and nature and forest therapy guides focus on wellbeing and health by involving our forests and bushland. Berry (2023) described ecotherapy as “a way of coming home, in the broadest sense, to ourselves as a part of nature” (p. 56). I often explain this as understanding that we are a part of the living, breathing organism of Country, rather than apart from Country. Berry also reflected on the practice of dadirri and called for the recognition of ancient Indigenous wisdoms alongside western scientific evidence.

Wiru[11] in Country

From Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, barna mabarn does more than have a positive impact on wellbeing; it also influences what we access through our five senses—sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound—and must include reciprocity. For First Nations peoples, the importance of including wiru in any therapeutic approach involving connection to Country cannot be overestimated; nor can it be absent from approaches that address wellbeing. In the Canadian context, Goodchild (2020) touched on this aspect of wellbeing:

> for the Anishinaabe, we have the teaching of the Medicine Circle, which is about balance. In that teaching, the human being is made up of four parts. There’s spiritual, mental, physical, emotional. ... and wellness, or wellbeing is defined as balance. So instead of the absence of disease, it is instead the presence of balance and the presence of wellbeing. (p. 18)

It is important not to omit wiru from a holistic bush therapy approach because omission not only reduces the opportunity for a powerful healing approach but also dishonours our old people and the creation beings of barna. Seeing, feeling, and recognising wiru within spaces deepens connection and healing.

If we look deeply, the existence of wiru is evident all around us. For example, growing on our sanctuary is an old grandmother gum tree. She is scarred and hollowed from many years of bushfires, but despite these challenges she continues to thrive. A forest therapy approach may be to look at the tree and touch the trunk, while reflecting on how the impacts of trauma can be positively demonstrated through the tree; for example, the tree is blackened and burnt, but still flourishes. Once you include wiru, you connect with your essence to the essence of the tree—the treeness. You see the old lady living and thriving there still; you see her light and feel the

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11 Wiru means spirit in Badimia.

energy within the tree; you see through her "eyes" and the history that she has observed; and you communicate with the old ones residing on barna still. Looking beneath what you can see and touch allows you to see and feel in a different way, and that in itself is healing. Understanding and connecting with the vastness of the living energy in the barna—the rocks, waterholes, and old trees—can give both our mob and the wider community a supportive non-triggering embrace, and the pain, hurt, and horror of their experiences, and the sadness, fear, and anger they may be feeling can be lessened.

People's Experience of Wiru

People accessing bush therapy sessions regularly comment that they can sense wiru. It is communicated and perceived as safety and connectedness, and by the land and old trees welcoming and resourcing people. During their sessions, people are encouraged to direct their healing—for it is their journey—and they are supported to increase awareness of what resourcing they need. At times this may be the deep and quiet ancient strength and timelessness of the wiru of the rock, where they can breathe and feel safe and less overwhelmed, while all around them life is singing, breathing, and thriving. As mentioned previously in the bush therapy or barna mabarn section, people are supported to embrace being part of, rather than apart from. At other times, they may seemingly wander, but all the while being drawn to the wiru of certain places on the barna that resonate with them. With the support of a mental health First Nations healing practitioner, this connection can help people become consciously aware of their trauma and transform their experiences therapeutically, through safe relationship and connection. The power of this deeply transformative therapeutic process is evidenced through the insight of a person being supported to find meaning and heal their complex trauma experiences:

> It's bigger than us ... we need connection with that sense of deeper and bigger and enduring strength through time for perspective, strength, and hope. There is also the sense that those deep energies actually have the capacity to hold the depth of pain we have stuck in us in a way we can't approach other humans with. Also, the spirit of the rock, land, trees ... it's just calmer and steadier and doesn't fluctuate as us humans do, so we can approach and know what we are going towards with some sense of certainty, which feels safer than we ever feel with people. Through this we can learn to accept our stories when sitting in the presence of the cycles of nature and noticing how things shift and change, and that makes us feel like we can too. (name withheld, personal communication, 2020)

Approaching barna mabarn through the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practices and considering more than just the physical realm contribute to an ongoing powerful holistic healing approach that can occur regardless of the depth of complex trauma experienced.

Animal-Assisted Therapy, Nguud Mabarn,[12] Equine-Assisted Therapy, and Therapeutic Services

Within Australia and internationally there is growing interest in equine-assisted therapy, or what the wider public refers to as equine therapy. This therapeutic approach is being extended to include other animals, such as dogs and farm animals (Berget et al., 2008; Compitus & Bierbower, 2024). Although horses, dogs, and other farming livestock are not native to Australia, since colonialisation Aboriginal peoples have developed an increasingly strong connection with them. Our men and women are renowned throughout history for their stockwork, and research has demonstrated how horses, "at first 'alien' beings, quickly became 'doors to freedom' for generations of skilled and professional Indigenous women pastoral workers ... and ... in the early 20th Century, some of our best riders were Aboriginal women" (Downey, 2019). Although stockwork is for most of us no longer part of our lives, healing is increasingly being facilitated and supported by working in partnership with horses, while dogs are now an integral part of our community and family networks.

Horse Survival Skills Supporting Healing

As a prey animal, horses demonstrate exceptional awareness and emotional regulation processes. Wild herds have been found to have both strong, regulated social groups and adaptive survival techniques, such as the ability to transmit emotional responses like fear quickly (Scopa et al., 2019). In my experience, horses also model good emotional regulation by using their outbreath and somatic processing, for example, movement or body shakes. They also model clear communication of boundaries and exemplify safe relation with another being. Research into positive outcomes for people experiencing anxiety and post-traumatic stress through utilising equine-assisted therapy is extensive (Merkies et al., 2018; Provan et al., 2024; Shelef et al., 2019).

Therapy or Therapeutic?

Since confusion surrounds the meaning of the terms equine-assisted therapy and equine-assisted therapeutic programs, it is important to clarify the difference between the terms *therapeutic program* and *therapy* in this context. As Hallberg (2018) stated, "inconsistent use of terminology and an

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12 Nguud Mabarn means horse medicine in Badimia.

over-abundance of terms has caused challenges in both practice and research for those interested in, or studying, equine assisted activities and therapies" (p. 4). Animal-assisted therapy, which includes equine-assisted therapy,

> broadly refers to including animals in clinical services that are provided by licensed health care professionals. Services are regulated by health care laws and commonly offered by physicians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, certified therapeutic recreation specialists, nurses, or mental health professionals. (Hallberg, 2018, p. 5)

Depending on the approach, in the case of mental health, equine-assisted therapy may sometimes be referred to as equine-assisted psychotherapy or equine-assisted mental health.

In contrast, animal-assisted therapeutic programs, which include equine-assisted activities (equine-assisted learning), while therapeutic in nature and involving social and emotional regulation and resilience, refer to "non-therapy services that include animals and focus on teaching skills and enhancing quality of life" (Hallberg, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, "these services are not regulated by healthcare laws, ethics, competency requirements or standards of practice" (p. 5). Bessel van der Kolk's (2014) example provided later in the article (see Indigenous Approaches to Equine-Assisted Therapy) is of a therapeutic program since evidently a mental health professional did not facilitate the interactions with the horse.

Indigenous Approaches to Equine-Assisted Therapy

Countless stories exist amongst First Nations peoples around the world of the healing aspect of being in respectful relation with horses, and because interest in this therapeutic modality is growing, published empirical research is becoming more easily accessible. Adams et al. (2015), in their equine-assisted study with First Nations and Inuit youth, emphasised the cultural and spiritual outcomes for their participants when they stated, ''... the inter-connectedness of all living things as a community of beings is viewed as essential to an individual's sense of wellbeing" (p. 68). For some youth, a deeper and more meaningful connection with the horses developed, and for others a bond with one special horse was eventually established. Endemic to the youths' experiences was that as their exchanges with the horses grew more meaningful, deeper levels of reciprocal trust were established. Trust is an element of Aboriginal ways of knowing, which in turn leads to the attainment of balance, healing, and harmony in life (Dell et al., 2011).

The healing nature of this safe relationship is being recognised as a clinically valid therapeutic modality by trauma experts such as van der Kolk (2014). In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk describes the therapeutic experience of a client despite a mental health practitioner not being present:

> when I asked her what had helped her most, she answered, "the horse I took care of". She told me that she first started to feel safe with her horse; he was there every day, patiently waiting for her, seemingly glad upon her approach. She started to feel a visceral connection with another creature and began to talk to him like a friend. Gradually she started talking with the other kids in the program and, eventually, with her counsellor. (p. 153)

Decolonising Equine-Assisted Therapy Training Programs

Across Australia, therapeutic programs involving horses as well as equine-assisted therapy services are available. These programs may be facilitated by our mob on or off Country, or by non-Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, the various comprehensive training approaches that underpin therapeutic programs available within Australia are less likely to include First Nations perspectives on relationship with Country, including wiru. It is usually left to individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners or Aboriginal organisations offering equine or animal-assisted therapy or learning services, such as in my situation, to "Indigenise" the modality. Yawardani Jan-ga's[13] work with the Equine Psychotherapy Institute is one exception to this because it integrates an Aboriginal framework with the Institute's model of equine-assisted learning. Professor Juli Coffin (personal communication, December 28, 2020) from Yawardani Jan-ga summed up the importance of using our expertise as First Nations practitioners:

> We have to be allowed to do things differently if we are ever going to see a difference in outcomes for our Aboriginal young people. We have the knowledge and means to do things in our own way and apply our own medicine to our wounds. Yawardani Jan-ga provides the connection that creates the foundation for change.

Yawardani Jan-ga has so far undertaken equine-assisted learning with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing on Country for over 900 participants, centring on family, community, culture, and Country (Yawardani Jan-ga, 2024). In my experience and through discussion with Coffin above, our First Nations unique ways of healing, although different, are valid therapeutically and must have recognition in the wider community.

Chalmers and Dell (2011) acknowledged this lack of recognition of First Nations knowledges gap through the "prioritising of Western ways of knowledge building to the exclusion of Aboriginal epistemology in the developing Equine Assisted Therapy field" (p. 59). Despite this prioritising of western knowledges impacting research methodologies, there is a growing

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13 Yawardani Jan-ga means horses helping in the Yawuru language of Broome, Western Australia.

body of empirical research on the positive outcomes linked to equine-assisted therapy (Hallberg, 2018) and equine assisted learning (Coffin, 2019). Approaching equine-assisted therapy through Aboriginal epistemologies, Chalmers and Dell (2011) found that "youths' healing was aided through the availability of a culturally relevant space within the Equine Assisted Therapy program" (p. 74). In an unrelated study, Worms (2009) observed that "equine-facilitated therapy helps to decrease the fear and intimidation of trauma treatment, decrease physical symptoms of traumatic stress response, helps clients increase motivation and aid in the development of a positive internalized sense of self" (p. 3).

Indigenous Programs

While they vary in their theoretical approaches, activities, and certification processes, two examples of Aboriginal-facilitated equine-assisted therapy and one example of equine-assisted learning services across Australia are Warida Wholistic Wellness (equine-assisted psychotherapy service in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia), Equine Spirit Healing (equine-assisted therapy service in the New South Wales South Coast), and Yawardani Jan-ga (equine-assisted learning service in Broome, Western Australia).

Even among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners variations are apparent in how equine-assisted therapy or equine-assisted learning programs are delivered. Whatever therapeutic model or theoretical framework underpins the service, First Nations healing practitioners will include connection to barna and wiru in some form throughout their service. This may be obvious in their approach to delivering the service, the guided emotional regulation and resourcing activities they offer, or the physical location of the session. Alternatively, involving connection to barna and wiru in sessions can be more subtle but just as powerful.

Horses and Therapy Sessions

Horses have an innately strong, consistent connection to the earth. Their example can help our mob explore the possibility of healing by navigating overwhelming emotions, energetically placing this emotion deep into barna to be distributed and processed. At the same time, people are supported by the practitioner, horses, barna, and wiru. I have found some of the most powerful transformative healing sessions can be achieved through the simplest of approaches: sitting in the dirt with the therapist, with the living energy of barna all around, and the horses free to choose to participate in the session or not. Our mob are supported throughout the process, barna assists to support and regulate, the wind reminds us that we are not in our memories, the birds and sunshine (or rain) place us firmly in the present, and the horses exemplify good emotional regulation and safe relationship with another being. If we implement an ongoing practice of ethical choice, in which all beings involved are free to give consent (or not) to participate, this empowers the person accessing the service (as well as the horses) to decide whether they want to engage.

Because of our mob's experiences, often they have experienced a lifetime of being coerced to participate in therapy, and their views are often discounted because of their situation, age, or disability. Horses experience this too. Ethical consent enhances and values the healing process and can lead to deeper inner understanding, especially if, because of trauma experiences, connection to a person's inner world has been shut down. In my professional experience, how horses relate to us can help us understand when we are dysregulated and encourage us to access a toolkit of regulation skills—horses see what is below the surface, drawing attention to subtle changes in us, even if we are not able to feel them at the time. Through this ability, horses engage and encourage the development of reciprocal and mutually respectful relationships.

Imagine a person who, through traumatic experiences, has shut down their awareness of their inner world but wants to connect to the horses. Because of the horses' connection to us and their heightened awareness, the horses recognise this energy and choose not to interact with the person. There are a few options in this situation, one of the most powerful being removing the pressure from the horses to interact. Instead, the therapist and client sit in the dirt together and connect to barna. We breathe in the grounding and ancient energy all around us. We take time to look at and feel Country with every part of us. We yarn and connect relationally, as two whole people, not as therapist and client. Then, the magic happens. The horses express their curiosity and recognition of the energy change and approach, exploring us, being to being, free to choose. The horses encourage curiosity in us—a powerful recognition of wiru and safe relationship that is so moving to be a part of. It is this safe reciprocal relationship that is so healing.

The Samoan people of the Pacific Islands describe reciprocal relationships as "Va" or the "space between". Hopkins and Dumnot (2010, as cited in Dell et al., 2011) described how

> with regards to health, Va captures the holistic Pacific worldview of the important relationships between our physical, spiritual, psychological, social, economic, and cultural dimensions that underpin a healthy community. Relationships are not unidirectional, but mutually linked and reciprocal, and the space between, is not space that separates but space that relates. (p. 5)

For Aboriginal peoples, positive reciprocal relationships that can develop between horses and others are culturally familiar and honouring, and they may assist facilitation of a safe healing space.

Non-Aboriginal People Benefitting From Our Unique Healing Practices

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners have an opportunity to share diverse worldviews, public knowledge, and healing approaches, and to provide space for non-Aboriginal people to heal their

disconnection. Healing practices, delivered by First Nations peoples in our unique and culturally informed ways, are on the cusp of wider recognition as valid alternatives to strictly western clinical therapeutic approaches. Not only can we support people on their individual healing journey, but through working with us, non-Indigenous people may gain a greater appreciation of our way of being, the importance of reciprocal relationships, and our connection with Country. The benefits of barna mabarn and nguud mabarn in supporting healing following complex trauma was summed up perfectly by a client:

> We haven't ever experienced anything like what you've worked to intentionally create for the therapeutic space. It is just that actually ... space ... safe space ... our body hasn't ever experienced being in a space where it's so supported to be calm and connected to deep energies and then to share this with you ... another person. ... There has never been a safe space in relationship for us to explore who we might be ... you hold space in such a large way including the earth and elements and nature and the animal beings help because they haven't ever been so disconnected from it all. (name withheld, personal communication, 2020)

Healing as an Individual and Community Restoration Journey

Healing can be both an individual and a community restoration journey, unique to each person. Throughout this paper, I have explored two therapeutic approaches from Aboriginal perspectives, facilitated in unique and culturally safe ways as First Nations therapists. The Indigenised modalities of barna mabarn or bush therapy and nguud mabarn or equine-assisted therapy honour our family and community networks, reciprocal ways of being, and relationship, and at all times include some form of connection to Country and wiru.

To remove Country and wiru from any therapeutic modality is to discount their importance in the healing process for First Nations peoples and how our unique approaches can facilitate healing and gudu-guduwa in the wider non-Aboriginal community. Among First Nations healing approaches around the world, the importance of connection to Country or land and spirit is echoed—from Canada to the Pacific Islands, to Aotearoa, to the many Countries across Australia. In the same way, to support our healing fully, equine-assisted therapy must include connection to barna and wiru in the therapeutic approach rather than proceed in isolation from them. If these aspects are not included, there is a risk of ignoring a huge part of the healing process, which includes regulation and resourcing, and safe reciprocal relationships that can be developed through ethical partnerships with horses and other animals. It is important and timely that we begin to recognise and accept that healing does not only occur within four walls to be valid.

I encourage all mental health therapists to learn from our diverse, culturally safe, and relational Aboriginal approaches to healing. Connect to the Elders of the Country that you live on or work in. Reach out to First Nations practitioners, listen in ngardi guwanda. Honour and acknowledge wiru in Country; this is far more than environment or nature. Connect being to being rather than therapist to client. Remember humanity and relational connection in the process.

A few years ago, a person accessing my services highlighted the importance of safe relationship within therapeutic approaches as a result of the incongruence between their current and earlier experiences in therapy. I leave you with their words as a call to action:

> Our brain can't learn to be less fearful if we aren't actually having better relationships, and environments and experiences. Yet [prior to this], no therapy has ever considered this, [so] our "failure" to think ourselves "better" got us rejected and shamed by the very people who were supposed to be helping us. (name withheld, personal communication, 2020)

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