



addendum

# We Al-li integration

**Communities of Care,  
Yarning Circles &  
the CITIHA Framework**

Author: Dr Caroline (Carlie) Atkinson



**headspace**  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Proudly funded by  
The NSW Government logo, featuring a stylized red lotus flower above the text 'NSW GOVERNMENT'.

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

headspace National acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities and continuing connection to Country, waters, kin, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate, and inclusive.

## **Acknowledgement of lived experience**

We acknowledge the immediate and ongoing impacts that disasters have on an individual and their community. We understand that disasters impact all aspects of life, including physical and emotional wellbeing, social, cultural, economic, and the built and natural environment. We acknowledge that recovery is not a linear process, may take many years, and will take different paths for individuals and communities. We acknowledge that disaster workers are often repeatedly exposed to the impacts of the disaster through helping others and listening to their lived experiences. We respect and value the lived or living experience of those who have been impacted by disasters and value their contribution to the work that we do.

## **Disclaimer**

This publication has been prepared for use by stakeholders to introduce group reflective practice as a simple workplace intervention for organisations supporting their communities through disasters. This publication is not legal or professional advice and should not be taken as a substitute for obtaining proper legal or other professional advice. Before using this publication, you should read it in full, consider its effect and determine whether it is appropriate for your needs.

This publication was created in February 2024. Laws, practices and regulations may have changed since that time. You should make your own inquiries as to the currency of relevant laws, practices and regulations that may have changed since publication of this work.

No warranty is given as to the correctness of the information contained in this publication, or of its suitability for use by you. To the fullest extent permitted by law, headspace and the other contributing parties to the work are not liable for any statement or opinion, or for any error or omission contained in this document and disclaims all warranties with regard to the information contained in it, including, without limitation, all implied warranties of merchantability and fitness for a particular purpose. headspace and the other contributing parties to the work are not liable for any direct, indirect, special or consequential losses or damages of any kind, or loss of profit, loss or corruption of data, business interruption or indirect costs, arising out of or in connection with the use of this publication or the information contained in it, whether such loss or damage arises in contract, negligence, tort, under statute, or otherwise.

## **Self-care statement**

The topic of disasters may bring up a range of emotions, particularly if you have lived or living experience. It is important to take care of yourself as you engage with the content of this resource.

Community and disaster workers operate in emotionally challenging environments, so please take time to consider any impacts on your wellbeing. If you are leading the implementation or facilitation of group reflective practice, it is also important that you monitor your own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of other staff/volunteers and participants. It is also helpful to take time to understand and share how wellbeing supports can be accessed. In addition to local supports, Lifeline is a free, confidential and 24/7 support service: 13 11 14.

## **headspace Schools & Communities**

The evidence, frameworks and content for this guide have been curated and compiled by the headspace Recovery to Resilience team. Author: Daniel Comensoli, headspace Schools & Communities

## **Contact information**

If you have any requests or inquiries concerning reproduction and rights or suggestions or recommendations, you should address those to: [schools&communities@headspace.org.au](mailto:schools&communities@headspace.org.au)

# 1

## Communities of Care in Communities of Practice

At the heart of the We Al-li approach is the understanding that healing, learning, and transformation happen in safe, caring relationships. As facilitators, our intention is to foster micro-communities within our workshops - communities that model care, collaboration, and critical reflection. These temporary Communities of Care ripple outward into longer-term Communities of Practice.

**Communities of Practice**, long present in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, are built on shared responsibilities, knowledge exchange, and interdependence. When facilitated with cultural humility and relational accountability, they become healing in and of themselves.



**Community is where we come together in circle, listening deeply to one another with open hearts. It's in this shared space that I can speak from the depths of my being, knowing I'll be truly heard and through this listening, through this mutual holding, we begin to make sense of ourselves and each other.**

# 2

## Culturally Informed Trauma Integrated Healing Approach (CITIHA)

The CITIHA Framework offers a holistic roadmap for embedding trauma-informed and culturally grounded practices into everyday systems of care. It recognises the cumulative and intergenerational impacts of trauma and affirms the strengths and wisdom held within Indigenous ways of being.

### 2.1 Key Assumptions (The 5 R's)

---

- Realising the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery
- Recognising signs and symptoms of trauma in everyone
- Responding through policy, practice, and presence
- Reducing the risk of re-traumatisation
- Rebuilding connection to culture, Country, kin, and spirit

The 5th R in the Key Assumptions is Rebuilding. This refers to Rebuilding Connection to Self, Community, Family and Kin, Country, Culture, Body-Mind, and Spirit-Spirituality.

The Rebuild phase of the CITIHA framework is where healing becomes transformational, not just for the individual, but for the collective. This phase centres the reclamation of cultural identity, the restoration of relational connection, and the renewal of personal and collective agency. Rebuilding is a layered, non-linear process, a restorative weaving of what trauma, colonisation, and disconnection may have fractured.

We rebuild not by forgetting what has happened, but by remembering who we are, deeply, culturally, spiritually and walking together with that remembrance into new ways of being.

We Al-Li offers a 6 phased approach to rebuilding:

### **2.1.1 Phase 1 – Creating Culturally Safe Environments**

Culturally safe spaces are more than physically safe, they honour identity, invite truth-telling, and make room for vulnerability. They are shaped by protocols, grounded in cultural values, and held by people who are relationally accountable. In these environments, there is space to show up fully with our stories, wounds, strengths, and hopes.

Creating culturally safe spaces means:

- Ensuring facilitators and staff are culturally safe/fit and trauma-informed
- Embedding local language, practices, and symbols in the physical and social space
- Using clear, co-developed agreements that define respect, boundaries, and ways of being together
- Protecting sacredness of stories, processes, time, and people

### **2.1.2 Phase 2 - Finding and Telling Our Stories**

Story is medicine. Trauma often silences the voice, fragments the memory, and hides the truth. Rebuilding begins when people are invited to find and tell their stories in their own time, in their own way, through their own language and art forms.

This process may include:

- Yarning Circles and Healing Circles that hold space for sharing lived experience
- Cultural storytelling as a form of teaching, release, and identity restoration
- Creative expression (e.g. painting, dance, music, writing) to hold and share what words can't
- Listening to the stories of others as a pathway to mutual recognition and belonging

### **2.1.3 Phase 3 - Making Sense of the Stories**

Telling the story is only part of the journey, we must also make meaning from it. Making sense of our stories requires reflection, community dialogue, and cultural frameworks that help locate personal experiences within broader systemic and historical contexts.

This can look like:

- Mapping personal experiences against the impacts of colonisation, dispossession, and intergenerational trauma
- Acknowledging the strengths, survival strategies, and wisdom embedded in the story
- Unpacking internalised shame, blame, or fear and replacing it with understanding and compassion
- Using tools like lifeline timelines, art mapping, or reflective journaling to support integration

## 2.1.4 Phase 4 - Feeling the Feelings

Rebuilding requires an openness to feel what has often been too painful to feel. In trauma recovery, emotional numbing, avoidance, or reactivity are protective; but in healing spaces, there is an invitation to be with emotion rather than bypass it.

Feeling the feelings means:

- Honouring emotional expression in safe, culturally appropriate ways
- Normalising grief, anger, fear, and joy as human responses to life and loss
- Facilitating grounding and regulation practices (like deep listening, breathing, movement, Country-based practices)
- Encouraging compassion for self and others as emotions surface

## 2.1.5 Phase 5 - Moving Through the Layers of Loss and Grief to Ownership and Choices

Rebuilding means walking through the grief not around it. Loss is part of every trauma story: loss of land, language, loved ones, culture, identity, agency. But it is through this journey of mourning that people begin to reclaim their right to live, choose, and belong again.

This includes:

- Acknowledging and naming collective and individual losses
- Supporting culturally guided mourning practices and rituals
- Helping people identify what is theirs to carry and what is not
- Reclaiming a sense of choice, agency, and authorship over one's life story

## 2.1.6 Phase 6 - Strengthening Cultural and Spiritual Identities – a Return to Wholeness

At the core of rebuilding is the reawakening of cultural and spiritual identity. It is the remembering of who we are, where we come from, and what we belong to. In the We Al-li way, this is not just a personal remembering, but a community-wide movement of reconnection and empowerment.

Strengthening identity means:

- Revitalising language, story, ceremony, and land-based knowledge
- Affirming identity through roles (e.g. Uncle, Aunt, Elder, knowledge keeper, Carer)
- Supporting cultural mentorship and intergenerational learning
- Rebuilding spiritual connection through practices that honour ancestral wisdom, Country, and collective belonging

Rebuilding is both a return and a reimagining - a return to cultural truths and ancestral connection, and a reimagining of what is possible when healing is community-held and culturally led. It is through this deep relational and spiritual reconnection that true healing, resilience, and transformation emerge



## 2.2 We Al-Li's Core Values/Lores (The 7 R's)

- 1. Respect** – For each person as a unique human being, with unlimited potential.
- 2. Rights** – To be safe, protected, allowed to grow and learn within cultural and spiritual ways of being in the world, at home, and the community.
- 3. Responsibility** – Learning responsibility for life choices and behaviours.
- 4. Reciprocity** – The mutual exchange of caring and sharing.
- 5. Relatedness** – How the person engages in the world in which they live and learn – a world of relationships.
- 6. Resilience** – Flexibility - hardiness.
- 7. Resonance** – Empathy - character - moral fibre – the language of the heart

## 2.3 Eight Core Principles of CITIHA

1. Understand trauma and its impact
2. Promote physical and emotional safety
3. Ensure cultural safety/fitness
4. Support client control and autonomy
5. Share power and governance
6. Integrate care across services
7. Support relationship building
8. Enable recovery through strengths-based practice

The CITIHA Framework isn't something we "apply" to others - it invites our own deep personal engagement and transformation. Our personal healing is bound up with the systems we aim to shift.



## 3

# practical application: connecting and belonging (Uniting Hearts Circle)

We all have a need to feel safe before we can look honestly at who we are... a safe place is where we can find the parts of ourselves that have become lost.

## 3.1 What is a Yarning Circle?

---

Yarning Circles create space for deep listening, shared insight, and respectful dialogue. They are intentional, safe containers where stories can surface, not only the ones we tell, but also the ones we've buried, lost, or been too afraid to speak.

In We Al-li, we use Yarning Circles as:

- Reflective practice tools
- Culturally Informed and Trauma-integrated debriefing mechanisms
- Healing and meaning-making spaces
- Planning and evaluation sessions
- Processes for reconnecting with Country, culture, and community

In We Al-li's structured approach Yarning Circles include four rounds:

1. Talking Circle (Introductions & Framing)
2. Sharing Circle (Deepening the Dialogue)
3. Healing Circle (Transforming Insight into Action)
4. Closure Circle (Grounding and Safety Check-out)

Each round is grounded in We Al-li core values/lores (7R's). The circle invites ancestral presence, personal reflection, collective accountability, and the possibility for shared healing.

At its heart, a Yarning Circle is not simply a method, it is a way of being together. It is a deeply relational, culturally grounded practice rooted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and ways of connecting. They are spaces of truth-telling, reflection, healing, and community building.

The word *Yarn* may sound casual, but in this context, it means far more than a conversation. It carries the energy of relationship, cultural protocol, ancestral presence, and deep listening. Yarning Circles are sacred spaces. When we enter them, we enter with humility, openness, and awareness.

Yarning Circles are used to:

- Build connection and trust
- Invite multiple truths and shared meaning
- Hold space for pain, joy, identity, and growth
- Empower people to be heard, valued, and safe
- Strengthen cultural identity and collective wisdom

## 3.2 Origins and Cultural Significance

---

Yarning as a practice predates colonisation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, sitting in circle is a traditional way of passing knowledge, resolving conflict, strengthening community bonds, and maintaining cultural continuity. Elders would lead Yarning Circles to teach law/lore, share Dreaming stories, and hold space for decision-making. Yarning Circles are often held on Country, around a fire, or in a space imbued with meaning. The shape itself - a circle - symbolises equality, wholeness, and the absence of hierarchy.

Yarning Circles bring forward the concept of deep listening and quiet, still awareness. It is a way of listening that is relational, respectful, and full-bodied, not just hearing with ears, but feeling with the whole self.

### 3.3 How Yarning Circles Work in Practice

In a We Al-li context, Yarning Circles are structured, intentional, and embedded within a trauma-integrated healing framework. They may include participants from many walks of life, community members, professionals, Elders, young people, facilitators, all held together with shared agreements and cultural safety protocols, and can be typically defined by the following:

#### 3.3.1 Shared Values and Agreements

Before any speaking happens, the circle begins with a clear set of principles. These are often co-created with participants and might include:

- One person speaks at a time
- No judgment or blame
- Confidentiality - what is shared in circle stays in circle
- Permission to pass - no one is pressured to speak
- Respectful, open-hearted listening
- Speaking from lived experience, not debate or critique
- Agreeing what each of the 7 R's (Values/Lores/Principles of participation) mean to that circle

#### 3.3.2 Physical Setup and Symbolism

Yarning Circles are always set up in a circle - no tables, no power positions. Everyone is equal. A talking object (a stick, stone, feather, or other sacred item) may be passed to indicate who has the floor. This item is symbolic, it grounds the speaker, connects us to Earth, and reminds all those present of the sacredness of the space.

Where possible, the circle is held on Country, under trees, near water, or in culturally significant places. This enhances spiritual connection and the presence of Ancestors. Country is seen as the Lead Facilitator!

#### 3.3.3 The Four Rounds (Structure and Flow)

In We Al-li's structured Yarning approach, circles flow through four intentional stages:

- Talking Circle (Round 1): A topic is introduced, and everyone has a turn to respond. This sets the tone and builds a shared container. Themes like "Who am I?" or "What do I bring?" often emerge.
- Sharing Circle (Round 2): Participants reflect more deeply. Vulnerability and insights often arise here about power, woundedness, contribution, identity.
- Healing Circle (Round 3): A deeper conversation about what is needed for change, connection, or restoration. This may lead to action, follow-up, or the planning of future circles or healing work.
- Closure Circle (Round 4): Everyone is invited to offer a closing word or feeling. These re-ground the group and ensures no one leaves feeling raw or unfinished. Sometimes the closing words or feelings are more than a few words.



### 3.4 Elder's Circle

This Circle provides a powerful closing tool. Two concentric circles are formed. The inner circle speaks while the outer listens.

- There is no “leader,” only a Facilitator who holds time and flow.
- People rotate into the inner circle to share reflections, insights, and meaning.
- The power of listening becomes palpable.

This is not a debate or discussion - rather a distillation of collective wisdom.

### 3.5 Role of the Facilitator

Facilitators are not “leaders” in a hierarchical sense. Their role is to *hold the space*, guide the process, and respond to what arises — not to direct or dominate. Facilitators are trained in trauma-integrated practice and carry cultural awareness, humility, and care. They are responsible for:

- Ensuring safety in the circle
- Naming what’s in the field if it is impacting the group
- Supporting those who become activated or emotional
- Modelling reflection, honesty, and cultural respect

In some circles, Elders co-facilitate or are invited to speak at key moments. Their presence brings cultural authority, grounding, and wisdom.

### 3.6 Why Yarning Circles Are Healing

Many western therapeutic spaces focus on the individual often through a clinical lens. Yarning Circles create a *collective* space, where healing happens in relationship, in story, in witnessing, and in shared presence. People are not “treated”, they are listened to, seen, and empowered.

Yarning Circles support trauma healing by:

- Creating safety - through consistency, agreements, and cultural grounding
- Restoring voice - helping people speak their truth without fear
- Building connection - to others, to culture, to self
- Normalising feelings - showing that pain, shame, and grief are human and can be shared
- Fostering agency - people are not passive recipients but active participants in healing



## 4

# distinctions from Western Reflective Group Work

Reflective group work in Western cultures sometimes overemphasizes a clinical lens with a focus on hierarchies and solutions. Yarning circles are distinguished from this:

- By being egalitarian – everyone equal
- Driven by process, presence, connection
- Focuses on truth-telling, story, and meaning
- Emotions are welcomed and held respectfully
- Deeply cultural, grounded in lore and Country (land)
- Time follows flow and what is needed

Yarning Circles are not a “tool” to be applied; they are a relational practice to be lived. They require cultural humility, deep listening, presence, and care. When held with integrity, they can become sacred containers for restoration, cultural revival, and collective healing. As you invite people into the circle, you are inviting them home, to themselves, to one another, and to a way of being that holds the wisdom of thousands of years.

In the We Al-li way, reflective practice is not just a method – it’s a ceremony of learning. We honour our stories, ancestors, and one another in the process of becoming whole. This work is slow, relational, and deeply sacred. As you guide others through it, may you also be held in the circle, in care, in truth, in community.

We Al-li is founded by Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson, a Jiman (central west Queensland) and Bundjalung (northern NSW) woman, with Anglo-Celtic and German heritage. Her book ‘Trauma Trails – Recreating Song Lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia’, has informed We Al-li’s approach.





headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities. headspace National Mental Health Foundation is a child safe organisation.



headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.

© 2025 headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd ABN 26 137 533 843 (headspace).

*This document is protected by copyright.*

*Other than for the purposes for which headspace has provided or made available this work to you, and subject to the conditions prescribed under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth), no part of this work may be used, reproduced, adapted, published, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, modified, adapted or communicated in whole or in part by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of headspace. The ownership of copyright by headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd ABN 26 137 533 843 must be attributed at all times. All rights reserved.*

Proudly funded by

