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Strong Spirit Strong Mind Model – Informing Policy and Practice

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OVERVIEW

This chapter explores the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* model specifically in terms of its application for practitioners and policy makers, and those seeking to use a highly regarded, culturally appropriate and holistic way of working with Aboriginal clients to deal with emotional, spiritual and social problems. *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* articulates the importance of strengthening the Inner Spirit to enhance good decision making and support behavioural change, not only at an individual level, but also with family and community.

This chapter is based on the Ngarlu model outlined in detail in Chapter 17 in the first edition of *Working Together*; and the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Framework for Western Australia 2011–2015*¹ and the *Strong Spirit Strong Future: Promoting Healthy Women and Pregnancies*² resources, which both advocate the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* approach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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BACKGROUND

Strong Spirit Strong Mind is based on, and inspired by, the Aboriginal Inner Spirit (Ngarlu) Assessment Model developed by the late Joseph 'Nipper' Roe, who belonged to the Karajarri and Yawuru people. The Ngarlu model is based on cultural beliefs and customs and concepts of emotional, spiritual and social wellbeing that have sustained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for centuries. Ngarlu is the Karajarri word for defining the place of the Inner Spirit. This place is understood to be in one's stomach which is the centre of people's emotions and wellbeing. When a group makes a decision, there is a sense of group Ngarlu; their feeling and thinking is the same. This is known as Waraja Ngarlu, which is to agree to be of one stomach and to be of one mind. Roe's work advocates how our Inner Spirit is linked to our mind and the way this influences one's thinking, feelings, behaviour and decision making. Figure 26.1 highlights the links between Inner Spirit, cultural beliefs, connection to country and social and emotional wellbeing.

The concept of *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* is one that recognises the importance of a sense of connectedness to the Inner Spirit to Aboriginal peoples' health. The Inner Spirit is the centre of Aboriginal peoples' being and emotions and when it is strong, the mind feels strong. When Aboriginal peoples' spirit is strong their mind feels strong and they make good decisions. Strong Inner Spirit is what keeps people healthy and connects them together. Strong Inner Spirit keeps the community strong and our country alive. Strengthening the Inner Spirit is a step towards a healed future.

Figure 26.1: Aboriginal Inner Spirit Model



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STRONG SPIRIT STRONG MIND STORY

The concept of working with spirit is not a new one. For example, the 'Brain Story' and 'Story Telling Board' developed by Petrol Link Up and Living with Alcohol Program in the Northern Territory (NT) during the early 1990s were innovative and culturally secure initiatives.³ These resources emphasised the importance of maintaining connection to culture, family and country to keep the spirit strong.

To extend the usefulness of these resources, it was important to further develop them to include a comprehensive theoretical explanation of how spirit is defined and the different contexts and multiple dimensions of spirit in Aboriginal culture. The development of the *Aboriginal Inner Spirit Assessment* model by Joseph Nipper Roe⁴ inspired and strongly shaped the development of the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD)⁵ resources developed in WA.

The theory of Inner Spirit being linked to the mind and influencing people's feelings, behaviour and decision making has enabled working with Inner Spirit to be applied in a therapeutic context and incorporates culturally secure Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approaches, a key skill required when counselling in the AOD field. This approach has been recognised as the way forward in addressing AOD-related harm for Aboriginal people and has been formally adopted by the Government of Western Australia's DAO and underpins all their programs and resources.¹

Previously, mainstream models of practice in the AOD field have overwhelmingly been developed within western systems of knowledge and may ignore an Aboriginal worldview. As a consequence, application of these models can have disadvantages and limitations when working with Aboriginal people. Even worse, some mainstream approaches directly cut across and sever Aboriginal cultural ways of working. These result in Aboriginal people feeling disempowered, as their cultural beliefs/values and family systems are ignored, misunderstood or disrespected. As a result, Aboriginal people disengage from seeking support and treatment. Furthermore, in the past, there has been a push to impose other Indigenous people's cultural approaches from other countries on Aboriginal Australians. This can have devastating outcomes as it weakens our culture (Australian Aboriginal culture) and often these approaches are embedded in western disease ideology which is very different to an Aboriginal concept of holistic health and wellbeing. Therefore it has been essential to develop AOD evidence-based approaches that are central to Aboriginal ways of working.

PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING *STRONG SPIRIT STRONG MIND*

Cultural Security

Cultural security is the guiding principle of *Strong Spirit Strong Mind*. It aims to respect the cultural rights, values, beliefs and expectations of Aboriginal people. This approach is central in the development of programs, services, policies and strategies that impact Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal leadership, community consultation, direction, negotiation and involvement form an essential part of this process, as does working in partnership with Aboriginal communities.

A Culturally Secure Approach

This involves:

- Identifying the cultural needs of Aboriginal people in the design and delivery of programs and services;
- Reviewing programs and services to ensure they meet the needs of Aboriginal people;
- Utilising and supporting culturally secure ways of working with community, such as outreach;
- Enhancing and modifying program design and service delivery processes where necessary;
- Monitoring and evaluating services to ensure they are culturally safe;
- Ensuring services work from a family sensitive approach and respect Aboriginal family values and systems.

Holistic Concept of Health and Wellbeing

A holistic view of health is one that focuses on the physical, spiritual, cultural, emotional and social wellbeing of the individual, family and community. A holistic approach emphasises the importance of strengthening cultural systems of care, control and responsibility.

Aboriginal ways of being healthy are to look after ourselves by making good choices, and to care for our family, community and culture. Alcohol and other drugs can tangle and weaken our spirit and mind. This can affect our emotional, social, spiritual and physical wellbeing and weaken our connection to family, community, culture and country.

People who don't use alcohol and other drugs or use a little bit, generally maintain a strong Inner Spirit. Their connections to family, community and country remain strong.

Impact of Alcohol Use

People who use a lot of alcohol and other drugs on a regular basis start to weaken their Inner Spirit. This starts to weaken their connections and their responsibilities towards their family, community and country.

An important part of healing is understanding how using alcohol and other drugs at harmful levels impact on our spirit, our people, our culture and our country. We need to understand this and use this knowledge to make better choices. As Joe Roe explained:

When people's emotional, spiritual, physical and social needs are met, then their Inner Spirit feels strong because they are in a good state of health. When one or more of these needs are not met, people's health deteriorates. This will affect your Inner Spirit and make you feel weak or no good (Roe, 2000).

STRONG SPIRIT STRONG MIND MODEL – INFLUENCING POLICY

Strong Spirit Strong Mind—Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Framework for Western Australia 2011–2015

Strong Spirit Strong Mind underpins the Drug and Alcohol Interagency Strategic Framework for Western Australia 2011–2015 and its supporting documents.¹ The framework was developed to provide guidance to key stakeholders in the alcohol and other drug sector and other government and non-government agencies, for delivering culturally secure programs that address many of the social determinants of Aboriginal health, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing—see also Chapter 4 (Gee and colleagues). This is reflected in the key action areas of the framework¹.

Key Action Areas

There are four key action areas to address alcohol and other drugs:

Key Action Areas to Address Alcohol and Other Drugs	
1. Capacity Building	Building the skills and capabilities of individuals, families, communities, employers and the non-government and government sectors to better tackle alcohol and other drug issues and make positive changes.
2. Working Together	Working in partnership, making the best use of resources and knowledge.
3. Access to Services and Information	Providing accessible, culturally secure information and services to Aboriginal people and communities.
4. Workforce Development	Developing and maintaining a skilled and supported workforce.

Key Aims

A key aim of the framework is to support Aboriginal ways of working to manage and reduce alcohol and other drug-related harm in Aboriginal communities. The *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* model underpins the framework in the following key strategic areas:

Framework Key Strategic Areas

Focusing on prevention

Educating and encouraging individuals, families and communities to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills to choose healthy lifestyles and promote healthy environments.

Intervening before problems become entrenched

Implementing a range of programs and services that identify individuals, families and communities at risk and intervening before problems become entrenched.

Effective law enforcement approaches

Reducing and controlling the availability of alcohol and other drugs and implementing strategies that aim to prevent or break the cycle of offending.

Effective treatment and support services

Providing integrated, evidence based treatment and support services that promote positive and healthy lifestyle changes by effectively responding to an individual's use and those affected by someone else's use.

Strategic coordination and capacity building

Providing improved and targeted responses to alcohol and other drug related problems through capacity building, workforce development, collaboration, evidence based practice, monitoring and information dissemination.

The implementation of *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* is a self-sustaining model that, once embedded and integrated into government planning, encourages a holistic approach across government and community organisations to make sure that Aboriginal AOD policy, programs and service responses are culturally secure and make the best use of available resources and partnerships.^{1(p5)}

STRONG SPIRIT STRONG MIND MODEL IN PRACTICE

The *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* model allows clients to assess how their alcohol and other drug use affects their Inner Spirit and their connections to family, community and country. Figure 26.2 shows the breakdown of the connection between Inner Spirit and mind as it becomes increasingly broken or tangled up by the effects of alcohol and other drugs. As the person uses more and more AOD, their Inner Spirit weakens, the connection becomes broken, their thinking gets tangled and finally the spirit leaves. All of this impacts on their family, community and country.

Figure 26.2: Inner Spirit Assessment Model



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Strong Spirit Strong Mind: The Inner Spirit Assessment Model

The **green area** shows people who do not use AOD or who use them at safe levels maintain a strong spirit. Their connections to family, community and country remain strong.

The **orange area** shows people who use alcohol and other drugs above safe levels on a regular basis. This starts to weaken their Inner Spirit, their connections and their cultural and social obligations towards their family, community and country.

The **red area** shows people who are dependent on AOD and who use them all the time. They start to lose their connection to their Inner Spirit. They also lose their connection to family, community and country and forget their social and cultural obligations.

Clients can be introduced to the concept of Inner Spirit and shown the model as a way of getting them to identify where on the chart their Inner Spirit is. Clients can be asked to reflect on a time when their Inner Spirit was strong and to remember what that was like. Clients can be asked about who in their family or community has a strong Inner Spirit and who can support them to restore their own Inner Spirit. This model demonstrates that people can move through the stages, and that reducing use of alcohol or other drugs can strengthen their Inner Spirit and connections to family, community and country.

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE: THE SEVEN AREAS

The Seven Areas refers to part of the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* Model and aims to address the problems associated with AOD use. It involves assessing the types of problems people may be having with AOD which can affect a person's life in many different ways and that of their family and community.

People with AOD problems will generally have one or more problems in the following areas:

Figure 26.3: *Strong Spirit Strong Mind: The Seven Areas*



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Strong Spirit Strong Mind: The Seven Areas

Health

Your body is getting sick, your Inner Spirit is feeling tangled, you may be feeling confused, stressed, worried, sad or depressed, angry or fearful.

Family and Community Relationships

Putting pressure on your family, fighting with your partner, Elders and your children. Your family are worried and angry about your behaviour. Not observing your family and community responsibilities.

Aboriginal Law and Culture and Country

Not keeping your social and cultural obligations; breaking Aboriginal law when drunk or out of it on drugs; not respecting, passing on or learning your culture,.

Land/Country

Being lonely for country; not looking after and respecting your country.

Grief and Loss

You use alcohol and/or other drugs to cope with issues of: family and friends passing away; loss of family connections due to stolen generations issues; family members being in jail; experiencing painful events within your family and community.

Livelihood/Money and Work

Spending too much money on alcohol and/or other drugs—not buying food for the family, not paying the bills. Humbugging your family for money. Lose your job or can't be bothered looking for work. Can't be bothered with finishing school or getting a career.

Legal

You've been busted for drugs. You've been charged with assaults, breaking and entering, homicides, manslaughter, drinking and driving, or other crimes while you were drunk or out of it. You have been to jail or have a criminal record.

Impacts of Colonisation and Alcohol Use

For many Aboriginal people, the history of colonisation and their marginalisation in Australian society means that sometimes their problems are very complex. As a mental health worker (MHW) or counsellor you will find that when clients present with multiple issues, you need to separate the issues out and address their alcohol and other drug use. Sometimes when people start to get more control back in their lives from their problematic or harmful alcohol and other drug use, they will find that other areas of their life also start to heal. The Seven Areas assist in gathering the information required to understand and support the client. They help guide the questions and provide a framework for the answers.

Addressing the Determinants of Social and Emotional Wellbeing

By using the Seven Areas you can explore the risks, pressures and problems a person is experiencing in their life and ask about problems relating to those issues including:

- physical and psychological health;
- relationships with family, children, friends and community members;
- socio-economic status—including housing, money, accommodation, jobs, lifestyle;
- engagement with the criminal justice system and police;

- disengagement from school;
- access to country and caring for country; and
- social and cultural obligations, breaking cultural rules and not passing on culture.

Using a storytelling board can help clients to map out the issues, and visualisation of their story can help increase awareness. These are important issues that are often associated with peoples reasons for AOD use at harmful levels. For further discussion of the social and cultural determinants of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, please refer to Chapter 4 (Gee and colleagues); Chapter 6 (Zubrick and colleagues); and Chapter 8 (Wilkes and colleagues).

STRONG SPIRIT STRONG MIND PROGRAMS

Use of the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* model in mainstream resources and programs for applying in the AOD field, has resulted in the development of culturally secure evidence-based, best practice interventions, informed and developed by Aboriginal people to address AOD use in the Aboriginal community.

Strong Spirit Strong Future: Promoting Healthy Women and Pregnancies, Resource for Professionals

This resource kit is part of a suite of resources developed by the Western Australian Drug and Alcohol Office as part of the *Strong Spirit Strong Future* resources and training. It is designed to assist practitioners to conduct brief interventions with Aboriginal women to reduce alcohol related harm through using the Inner Spirit model and Stages of Change.⁶ The culturally secure resource promotes a clear message that the safest thing to do when pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding, is not to drink alcohol.⁷ It also highlights that partners, family and community all have a role in supporting women to have a healthy pregnancy. (For further discussion of Aboriginal-led initiatives, see Chapter 20 (Hayes and colleagues).

CONCLUSION

Strong Spirit Strong Mind underpins a range of important policies, programs and practices. It is a model and a way of working which highlights the importance of practitioners adopting an Aboriginal perspective of social and emotional wellbeing and culturally secure, strengths-based approaches to Aboriginal healing. These approaches are essential to address some of the many issues impacting on the health, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

RESOURCES

Strong Spirit Strong Mind—Culturally secure resources

A range of culturally secure resources can be found on the Drug and Alcohol Office (DAO) website:
<http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au/Informationandresources/Publicationsandresources/CulturallysecureresourcesforAboriginalpeople.aspx>

Strong Spirit Strong Future: Promoting Healthy Women and Pregnancies

Information about the *Strong Spirit Strong Future: Promoting Healthy Women and Pregnancies* project is available from the DAO website:

<http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au/Informationandresources/Engagingthecommunity/CommunityPrograms/StrongSpiritStrongFuture.aspx>

FASD Consultation Forum 2010 Report: http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?Command=Core_Download&EntryId=621&PortalId=0&TabId=211

REFLECTIVE EXERCISES

1. How might the concept of Inner Spirit be useful in working with clients to address their alcohol and other drug use?
2. How do the Seven Areas allow you to assess the types of problems people may be having?
3. As a practitioner, in what ways might you apply the *Strong Spirit Strong Mind* model to address Aboriginal clients' social and emotional issues?

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