



Indigenous Mental Health Intervention Program – Youth

IMHIP-YOUTH

GEM-YOUTH HANDBOOK

**A Culturally Grounded Guide for Use
of a Social and Emotional Wellbeing and
Empowerment Measure with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Young People**

Version 8.3 — October 2025



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA



QCMHR
Queensland Centre for
Mental Health Research

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which this work was conducted, including the Yuggera and Turrbal peoples of Meanjin (Brisbane) and the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples of the West Moreton region. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We acknowledge the profound strength, resilience, and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who co-designed this tool and shared their stories to create something that could benefit others. This handbook exists because of their courage, creativity, and vision.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, and that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the justice system is a direct consequence of colonisation, dispossession, and ongoing systemic racism. The GEM-Youth tool this handbook is about represents a step toward self-determination in how wellbeing is understood and measured.

We acknowledge the leadership and wisdom of the IMHIP-Youth Cultural Governance Group, whose guidance ensured this work remained culturally grounded, ethical, and empowering throughout its development.

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FOREWORD

Our young people have too often been measured by what's wrong with them, not by what's strong in them.

When our kids end up in detention, they're handed forms asking about their problems, their distress, their deficits. They're asked to rate their psychological pain on scales designed in universities, by people who've never walked in their shoes. These tools see our children as broken things to be fixed, rather than whole human beings on a journey.

The GEM-Youth grew from a simple but powerful idea: what if we asked our young people what they thought? What if we listened?

Over two years, 103 young people in Brisbane and West Moreton detention centres sat with our researchers and said, "This doesn't work for us. This isn't how we see ourselves. This isn't our language." They took those deficit-focused questions and transformed them. They replaced clinical jargon with words that made sense.

This handbook documents that journey — not just the research process, but a fundamental shift in how we understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's well-being. The GEM-Youth isn't just another assessment tool. It's our young people saying: "See us as we are, not as your textbooks say we should be."

To the practitioners who will use this tool: remember that every question was shaped by a young person who wanted to be seen, heard, and valued. Approach it with the respect and care they deserve.

To the researchers who will build on this work: honour the leadership of our Cultural Governance Group and the wisdom of our young people who made this possible.

To our young people: you have changed how the world sees you. Your voices are in every page of this handbook. Your strength made this real.

This is your story. This is your tool. This is your way forward.

The IMHIP-Youth collaboration

“

Our young people have too often been measured by what's wrong with them, not by what's strong in them.

”

CONTENTS

How to Use This Handbook	4
Abbreviations	4
Glossary	5
Section 1: The 'Why': Context, Culture, and the Need for GEM-Youth	6
1.1 First knowledges, collective wellbeing and resilience	6
1.2 The Crisis of Over-representation and Systemic Factors	6
1.3 Decolonising Well-being: The Limits of Western Models	7
1.4 Understanding Social and Emotional Well-being (SEWB)	8
1.5 Introducing GEM-Youth: A Culturally Grounded Response	8
Section 2: The 'How': Guiding Principles of the GEM-Youth Development	9
2.1 Partnership and Co-design in Action	9
2.2 A Strengths-Based and Trauma-Informed Philosophy	11
2.3 Yarning: The Method for Cultural Safety and Connection	12
2.4 Upholding Ethical Conduct and Indigenous Data Sovereignty in Practice	13
Section 3: The GEM-Youth Tool: Components and Development	14
3.1 Getting to Know You (GTKY)	14
3.2 How I Feel About Myself (HIFAM)	15
3.3 Thinking About My Everyday Life (TAMEL)	15
3.4 Validation	15
Section 4: Interpreting and Utilizing GEM-Youth Results	17
4.1 Interpreting Scores and Themes	17
4.2 Using yarning to add depth and context	18
4.3 Therapeutic Value: Using GEM-Youth to Build Connection	19
4.4 Using GEM-Youth Longitudinally for Monitoring and Evaluation	23
4.5 Measuring Meaningful Change: Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators	24
Section 5: GEM-Youth in Practice: Application and Integration	25
5.1 Supporting Through-care and early Intervention	25
5.2 Practical guidance for administering the tool	25
Section 6: Future Directions and Broader Impact	28
6.1 Limitations and Ongoing Refinements	28
6.2 Broader Dissemination and Advocacy	29
References	32
Appendix	34

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

- **For Clinicians and Practitioners:** To get started quickly, read Section 3 (The Tool) and Section 5 (In Practice). For guidance on interpretation, see Section 4. For crucial cultural context, refer to Sections 1 and 2.
- **For Researchers:** Sections 1 and 2 provide the theoretical and ethical foundations. Section 3 details the co-design methodology, and Section 6 outlines future research directions.
- **For Policy Makers and Advocates:** Section 1 establishes the imperative for change. Section 6 outlines the advocacy potential and broader impact of this work.

Critical

C & P

R

PM & A

Optional

C & P

R

ABBREVIATIONS

GTKY	Getting to know you
HIFAM	How I feel about myself
TAMEL	Thinking about my everyday life
SEWB	Understanding social and emotional wellbeing
IDS	Indigenous data sovereignty
IDG	Indigenous governance
CBT	Cognitive behavioural therapy
K10/K5	Kessler-10 and Kessler-5 Scales
SDQ	Strength and difficulties questionnaire
GEM	Growth and Empowerment Measure
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
CEC	Community Education Counsellor

GLOSSARY

Cultural safety: The individual and institutional knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies needed to deliver optimal health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities.

Co-design: A collaborative approach that involves the people who will be affected by or use a tool or service as equal partners in its design and development. Rather than designing for a community, co-design works with community members as experts in their own experiences, ensuring the final product is culturally relevant, appropriate, and responsive to their actual needs.

Decolonising: The process of moving away from Western-centric approaches and frameworks in favour of those that are culturally grounded and appropriate for First Nations people.

Deficit discourse: A traditional approach in health research and practice that focuses on problems, risks, and negative behaviours of Indigenous peoples, often wrongly attributing poor health outcomes to individuals or their indigeneity.

GEM-Youth: The Growth and Empowerment Measure for Youth, a strengths-based tool co-designed with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It is used to assess social and emotional well-being (SEWB) and empowerment for therapeutic interventions and research.

Indigenous data sovereignty (IDS) and Governance (IDG): The right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their own data.

Kessler scales (K10/K5): Standardised western assessment tools widely used in Australia to measure psychological distress.

Social and Emotional Well-being (SEWB): A holistic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept of health that recognises an individual's well-being is deeply interconnected with their relationships to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community.

Strengths-based philosophy: An approach that focuses on the existing capacities, capabilities, and resources within Indigenous people and communities. It promotes highlighting strengths like connection to culture and family rather than focusing solely on problems and deficit

Through-care: A model of support that informs care for young people as they move through the justice system and are released back into the community.

Trauma-informed philosophy: An approach that recognizes the profound impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on the mental health and behaviour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It aims to prevent re-traumatisation and considers the broader context of their experiences

Yarning: A culturally appropriate, narrative-based communication method deeply rooted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. It is used for building rapport (social yarn) and as a deliberate research methodology for gathering rich, culturally nuanced information (research topic yarn)

SECTION 1: THE ‘WHY’

Context, culture, and the need for GEM-Youth

This section outlines the critical need for the GEM-Youth. It is grounded in the understanding that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the justice system is not an issue of individual failings, but a direct consequence of colonisation, systemic racism, and ongoing structural disadvantage. To contribute to meaningful change, we must first understand the context of these systemic failures and the limitations of existing, Western-centric approaches to well-being.

1.1 First Knowledges, Collective Wellbeing and Resilience

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures are inherently strengths-based, possessing deep and sustainable understandings of collective wellbeing. This knowledge is centred on connection to country, community, kinship, and spirit, forming holistic models of health that pre-date colonisation and remain vital today.

Cultural integrity: Across diverse nations, wellbeing is intrinsically linked to cultural integrity. Practices like ceremony, storytelling and reciprocal kinship obligations are powerful determinants of individual and collective health, functioning as protective factors against disadvantage.

A strengths-based approach: In all our work, we commit to being strengths-based. The existence and survival of First Peoples today is a powerful testament to the resilience, adaptability, and wisdom embedded within these cultures. The GEM-Youth tool is a product of this foundational strength, offering a mechanism to measure growth and empowerment from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview.

“

**This doesn't work for us.
This isn't how we see ourselves.
This isn't our language.**

”

1.2 The Crisis of Over-Representation

Whilst grounded in strengths, we must address the urgent crisis that necessitates this work. The disproportionate incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people is ongoing and rooted in colonial legacies, ongoing structural racism, and a failure of government capacity and commitment.

The escalating crisis highlights the need for a shift towards culturally safe, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions. Critically, government commitments to rectifying the drivers of incarceration are worsening across Australia.¹ Key structural failures perpetuate this cycle and highlight the need for culturally safe, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led interventions.

Disproportionate contact: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were 27 times as likely as non-Indigenous young people to be in detention in the June quarter 2024.²

Intergenerational incarceration: The cycle is deeply entrenched, with two-thirds (66.4%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in prison having a parent who had also been incarcerated.³

The child protection-to-prison pipeline: The child protection system is a primary pathway into youth justice. About 3 in 4 (76%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people under youth justice supervision in 2022-23 had an interaction with the child protection system in the last 10 years.⁴

Failure of mainstream programs: Clinical models like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) often fail because they focus on individual deficits while ignoring the core issues of oppression, systemic racism, and collective grief.⁵

Problematic data: For decades, dominant research paradigms have produced racialized statistics that portray Indigenous peoples through a deficit lens as “defective, dysfunctional, disturbed and culturally deprived”.⁶

1.3 Decolonising Well-Being: The Limits of Western Models

Standardised Western assessment tools, such as the Kessler Scales (K10/K5)⁷⁻⁹ and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ),¹⁰⁻¹² are widely used in Australia but have limitations with respect to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. These tools carry cultural biases in their design and application, and may focus unduly on deficits, which can be alienating and even harmful in some situations. Their focus on symptom-counting can reinforce a young person's feeling of being a "problem to be solved," damaging the trust required for healing.

In response, the GEM-Youth was co-designed with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people as a strengths-based, empowering alternative.¹³ Rather than measuring distress, it measures empowerment, growth, and connection from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. The following table summarises the critical differences in approach.

	Standard western tools (e.g., K10, SDQ)	Culturally grounded tools (e.g., GEM-Youth)
Development	Developed within Western academic and biomedical frameworks; often top-down.	Co-designed with and for the specific cultural group (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth).
Core Concept	Measures psychological distress, deficits, and symptoms of mental illness. SDQ measures strengths through a Western psychosocial lens.	Measures holistic concepts like Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB), empowerment, and growth.
Cultural validity	Often low; concepts and language may not translate or be relevant to non-Western worldviews.	High; concepts, language, and metaphors are grounded in the community's cultural framework.
Focus	Identifies problems, risks, and what is "wrong" with an individual.	Identifies strengths, resilience, and protective factors like connection to culture and community.
Risk factors	High risk of pathologising, perpetuating negative stereotypes, and causing iatrogenic harm.	Low risk; designed to be an empowering and affirming experience that can have therapeutic value.

1.4 Understanding social and emotional well-being (SEWB)

Social and Emotional Well-being (SEWB) is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept of health that is holistic and grounded in connection.⁶

It moves beyond the Western clinical idea of “mental health” to recognise that an individual’s well-being is inseparable from their deep, interconnected relationships to:

Land: The source of identity, law, spirituality, and belonging.

Culture: The practice of language, ceremony, and storytelling, which are forms of medicine and healing.

Spirituality: The connection to Country and ancestors that provides strength and purpose.

Family and Community: The core foundation of support, identity, and responsibility.

Challenges to SEWB are often the direct result of unresolved grief and trauma stemming from colonisation, cultural dislocation, and racism.⁶ Healing, therefore, requires more than individual treatment; it requires the reclamation of cultural strength and connection.

1.5 Introducing GEM-Youth: A Culturally Grounded Response

In direct response to the systemic issues and limitations of Western tools outlined above, the Growth and Empowerment Measure for Youth (GEM-Youth) was developed as a culturally grounded, strengths-based alternative.¹³ It is not merely another questionnaire; it is a collaborative tool co-designed with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to counter the historical use of inappropriate and often harmful assessments. The GEM-Youth is fundamentally different from tools like the K10 or SDQ because it:

Is genuinely co-designed: The tool was developed through a deeply collaborative and iterative process involving 103 young people in detention, ensuring it is grounded in their lived experience.¹³ This process was overseen by the IMHIP-Youth Cultural Governance Group.

Focuses on empowerment, not deficits: It was created to measure empowerment as defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves.¹⁴

Aligns with social and emotional well-being (SEWB): The tool’s language, concepts, and even its visual metaphor of a river and fish were shaped by young people to be meaningful and relevant. The inclusion of the item “I feel strong in my culture” on the How I Feel About Myself subscale of the GEM-Youth reflects its alignment with the holistic principles of SEWB.

Offers a validated pathway for understanding change: Initial findings support the tool’s reliability and validity.¹³ It provides clinicians and researchers with a way to assess well-being that avoids the harm of deficit-labelling and actively supports the therapeutic goals of fostering strength, resilience, and connection.

Ultimately, the GEM-Youth offers a way to move beyond simply identifying what is wrong, and towards a conversation that respectfully explores a young person’s strengths and their journey to being well.

SECTION 2: THE ‘HOW’

IMHIP-YOUTH

Guiding Principles of the GEM-Youth Project



PARTNERSHIP & CO-DESIGN

Collaborative & Participatory Foundation



STRENGTH-BASED PHILOSOPHY

Trauma Informed



YARNING

Cultural Safety & Connection



ETHICAL CONDUCT

- Reciprocity • Respect • Equality
- Responsibility • Survival & protection

Guiding principles of the GEM-Youth Project

2.1 Partnership and Co-Design in Action

The co-design process of the GEM-Youth was a deeply collaborative and iterative endeavour, central to ensuring the tool's cultural relevance, effectiveness, and grounding in the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.¹² This approach actively counters the historical use of Western-centric assessments that often lack cultural appropriateness and can perpetuate deficit discourses.^{15,16}

Here are the details of the co-design process and specific examples of how young people shaped the measure:

1. Collaborative and participatory foundation:

Who was involved: The co-design actively engaged 103 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experiencing youth detention at Brisbane Youth Detention Centre or West Moreton Youth Detention Centre between 2021 and 2023.¹³ Their mean age was 15 years and 9 months, with the majority (80%) being male. Beyond the young people, the process also involved their families, carers, Elders, communities, and other stakeholders.

Adaptation of an existing Growth and Empowerment Measure designed with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults: The process took as its starting point an existing measure, the GEM, designed for adults.¹⁴ This was then tested with young people as a basis for further modifications.

Cultural governance: The IMHIP-Youth Cultural Governance Group provided essential leadership and oversight, ensuring the research methodology and the tool's design were culturally grounded and empowering. This aligns with best practice models for community development, such as the World Health Organization's "Nothing for us, without us" principle.¹⁷

Research team: The initial prototype of the GEM-Youth was an adaptation of the original GEM¹⁴ and was then further developed by a multidisciplinary team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal investigators with expertise in youth work, mental health, health and social science, psychology, psychiatry, and social work and importantly co-designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experiencing detention. All interviews and adaptations as part of the co-design process were conducted and implemented by a Garigal and Walkaloo woman researcher.¹³

2. Iterative development and feedback loop:

The co-design was not a single event but a continuous cycle of feedback, critical reflection, and adaptation. An initial prototype (Version 1), closely resembling the adult GEM,¹⁴ was created and then refined through iterative discussions with participants, researcher reflections, and input from the Cultural Governance Group. This process led to seven adaptations of the GEM-Youth before its initial validation.¹³

Consent Process: Even the consent process was culturally informed. While legal consent from in-custody guardians was obtained, researchers additionally sought signed written consent from young people and, where possible, contacted their parents or primary caregivers in the community. Information cards explaining the study were developed with the Cultural Governance Group and a speech pathologist to ensure they were clear and accessible. Young people were also remunerated with a gift card, consistent with the principle of reciprocity.¹⁸

3. Specific examples of young people's influence (shaping the measure):

Young people's feedback directly led to significant changes in the GEM-Youth's language, content, and visual design¹³:

Addressing readability and comprehension:

Initial feedback revealed that Version 1 was too complex, time-consuming, and fatiguing, with young people often unable to read it independently, one young person stating, "I haven't been to school much. I can't understand this" and "This is hard".¹³

In response, young people's suggestions led to simplifying language, using age-appropriate terminology, employing brighter colours, enlarging text, and incorporating easily recognisable concepts to improve readability, comprehension, and engagement.

The "Getting to Know You" section had its introductory sentence removed for redundancy and initial training examples (e.g., "technical training, or TAFE") were replaced with examples more relevant to young people in detention (e.g., "getting a white card or certificate").

Enhancing cultural relevance and perspective:

A profound change to the visual design was made from the initial (adult) GEM: moving away from the adult GEM's North Queensland Kauri pine tree metaphor to a local river metaphor with fish representing stages in a journey. This was created by the researcher and then brought back to the young people for their approval before endorsement by the Cultural Governance Group. This visual aid was particularly helpful for young people who experienced shame in disclosing "negative" emotions, because they were supported in understanding their emotions as like a fish on the river – fluid rather than fixed.

The co-design process resulted in the inclusion of a question directly about cultural identity, "I feel strong in my culture", which was not present in the adult GEM, reflecting its growing importance for youth identity.

Adapting content and question phrasing:

Feedback led to modifying confronting questions or those focusing on negatives to use strengths-based language.

- Questions were re-ordered to begin with questions more likely to encourage positive responses, as opposed to those which could elicit feelings of shame, and to improve coherence. Specific word changes included:
 - “knowing” became “learning”
 - “admire” and “value” became “respect”
 - “confidence in myself” became “good about myself”
 - “calm and relaxed” became “chill”
 - “fear what’s ahead” became “stressed about my future”

Questions were rephrased to focus on the young person specifically, rather than them and their family (e.g., “I can meet the needs of myself and my family” changed to “I feel like I can look after myself”). This was important because many young people in detention are in out-of-home care or haven’t yet had adult responsibilities for family.

- A question about volunteering was removed as it wasn’t applicable to participants.
- For the “Thinking About My Everyday Life” (TAMEL) section, which had undergone the largest transformation from the original adult GEM, young people’s feedback led to simplified wording of questions and responses, depicted as fish in the river, with only four responses having short written descriptions. Concepts like “painful feelings” and “bad things that happen in your life” were rephrased to “when bad things happen to me I can...” because young people related more to anger and were hesitant to discuss pain directly.

Overall user preference:

Significantly, after the developmental changes, young people were observed to prefer completing the GEM-Youth (versions 6 and 7) over the K10.⁷⁻⁸ A speech pathologist also noted that the “visuals really help” for guidance and ease of understanding.

This rigorous and youth-led co-design process has been crucial in developing a tool that genuinely resonates with and reflects the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention.¹³

2.2 A Strengths-Based and Trauma-Informed Philosophy

The GEM-Youth employs a strengths-based and trauma informed philosophy because it is vital for providing culturally appropriate, effective and non-harmful care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

2.2.1 Strengths-based approaches

A strengths-based approach is crucial for several reasons in this context^{15,16}:

Challenges deficit discourse: Traditional health research and practice concerning Indigenous peoples has often been dominated by a “deficit discourse”.¹⁶ This approach focuses on problems and risk behaviours, which can wrongly attribute poor health outcomes to Indigenous individuals or their indigeneity. A strengths-based philosophy actively moves away from this problem-based paradigm, offering a different language and set of solutions.

Recognises and builds on assets, knowledge, and skills: This philosophy promotes values and practices that highlight the existing capacities, capabilities, and resources within Indigenous people and communities.¹⁵ It helps health professionals view young people as assets and invests in their inherent strengths, such as their connection to culture, family, and community, rather than solely focusing on their deficits.

Reframes expectations and opportunities: By focusing on positive attributes and protective factors, strengths-based approaches can reframe institutional policies, programs, and interventions.¹⁵ This makes visible the capability, humanity, and diversity of Indigenous peoples, moving towards “discourses of hope” rather than “discourses of distress”.

2.2.2 Trauma-informed

Addresses historical and intergenerational trauma: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people disproportionately experience poor mental health outcomes due to ongoing and intergenerational trauma linked to colonisation, dispossession, racism, and forced separation.^{6,19} The effects of trauma can be transmitted across generations, impacting individuals and whole communities.⁶

Avoids re-traumatisation: Mainstream healing approaches have often been culturally inappropriate and can inadvertently re-traumatise individuals and families by forcing them to repeatedly recount graphic stories to every service provider. A trauma-informed approach recognises this history and aims to prevent further harm in interactions.¹⁹

Holistic understanding: It acknowledges the profound impact of past traumas and continuing oppression on mental health and behaviour, ensuring that interventions consider the broader context for understanding symptom formation and behaviour.⁶

2.3 Yarning: The Method for Cultural Safety and Connection

Yarning is a culturally appropriate, conversational, and narrative-based communication method deeply rooted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. It fosters cultural safety and strengthens connections by aligning with Indigenous oral traditions and holistic worldviews, empowering individuals within their broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. This method is recognised as a legitimate and effective methodology in Indigenous research and practice.

2.3.1 Yarning as a foundational method for building rapport (“social yarn”)

Social yarning is crucial for establishing trust and rapport, especially when non-Indigenous practitioners or researchers engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families, and communities. Given the history of colonisation and negative experiences with external services, building this trust requires significant time, patience, and a respectful, non-judgmental approach.

2.3.2 Yarning as a deliberate research methodology (“Research Topic Yarn”)

Beyond rapport building, yarning serves as a deliberate and effective methodology for gathering rich, culturally nuanced information in both research and clinical assessment. It represents a significant shift from Western-centric, deficit-based approaches that often inaccurately capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of health and well-being.¹⁴

Key aspects of yarning for rapport include:

Relationship focus: Prioritising relationships over immediate tasks, demonstrating long-term commitment, and being transparent about one’s role and connections. For Aboriginal people, understanding kinship and relationships is vital before establishing a connection.

Non-threatening communication: Starting conversations with non-threatening observations to gradually lead to more personal topics, reducing anxiety and shyness. Unlike direct questions, this narrative style prevents inaccuracies, and a nod should be recognised as acknowledgment, not necessarily an answer.

Cultural sensitivity: Recognising that communication involves a combination of English, traditional languages, Aboriginal English, Creole, and significant body language. A lack of immediate response might indicate cultural protocol, requiring patience and recalibrated expectations around timing.

Humility and learning: Earning credibility by accepting Aboriginal ways, showing a willingness to learn, and seeking advice from Aboriginal people to avoid imposing external understandings.

2.4 Upholding Ethical Conduct and Indigenous Data Sovereignty in Practice

Ethical conduct in research and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is guided by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) values and ethics guidelines. These guidelines are founded on six core values: reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity.¹⁸ Before using the GEM-Youth for research purposes, it is important to develop culturally and age-appropriate consenting processes, including remuneration that demonstrates appropriate reciprocity. Guidance is provided in the National Health and Medical Research Council. Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders.¹⁸

SECTION 3: THE GEM-YOUTH TOOL

Components and Validation

This section walks you through each component of the GEM-Youth and explains how it came to be. Understanding the tool’s structure helps you use it more effectively.

3.1 Getting to Know You (GTKY)

As its name suggests, the GTKY component supports elicitation of culturally relevant demographic information, such as how they identify, where the young person lives (and who they live with), and whether they are actively engaged in learning or training. This can help develop rapport with the young person and inform a lot of the yarn.

Getting to know you

Date		Gender	Other
Birthday		Age	
Are you:	Aboriginal	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	Torres Strait Islander
Who is your Mob?			
Where do you currently live?			
Have you always lived there?	Yes	No	↩
If no, where else have you lived?			
Do you have a partner?	Yes	No	
Do you have children?	Yes	No	↩
If yes, how many children do you have?			
Do you work in community?	Yes	No	
If yes, where do you work?			
Do you go to school in community?	Yes	No	↩
If yes, what grade are you in?	Select...		
If no, what grade did you finish?	Select...		
Have you done any training, e.g. white card or a certificate?	Yes	No	
If yes, what training have you done?	Cert I		
What is your usual living situation? (e.g. with family, in out of home care, on streets, couch surfing)			
How many people do you usually live with? (number of adults and children)			
Who do you live with?			
How would you describe the place you usually live?			
Very bad doesn't meet our needs at all Mostly bad some good but mostly problems Ok half 'n' half Mostly good some problems but nothing serious Very good meets our needs			

Figure 1:
An Excerpt of the GTKY

3.2 How I Feel About Myself (HIFAM)

The HIFAM section is composed of 15 items designed to capture the young person's perspective of their psychosocial well-being and empowerment. This scale specifically measures the extent to which a young person can feel and demonstrate certain signs of well-being in their daily life, relating to underlying constructs such as 'inner peace' and 'self-capacity'. Each item encourages self-reflection, utilising a fixed five-point scale (ranging from 1 to 5) where a higher score consistently signifies stronger emotional empowerment. However, items 12 and 14 are reverse-scored, meaning that for these questions, lower scores indicate increased well-being and empowerment.

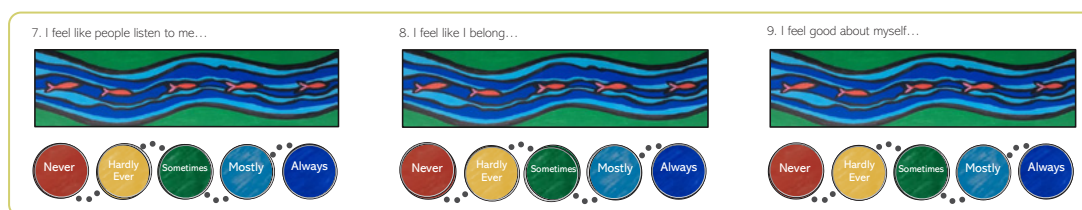


Figure 2: An Excerpt of the HIFAM

3.3 Thinking About My Everyday Life (TAMEL)

The TAMEL scale is a collection of 11 scenarios designed to measure the functional aspects of empowerment and processes of growth in a young person's life. It asks the young person to place themselves into specific, everyday situations (like figuring out how to deal with painful feelings or responding constructively to judgment) and assess their response. Each scenario offers options ranging from a negative state (scored 1) to a positive state (scored 7), where a higher score reflects stronger functional empowerment. Importantly, the TAMEL heavily utilises the river/fish metaphor as a visual aid to guide comprehension, a feature co-designed specifically to assist young people, especially those facing literacy challenges. Higher scores here typically indicate progress in areas such as healing, enabling growth, connection, and purpose.



Figure 3: An Excerpt of the TAMEL

3.4 Validation

Validation is the process of testing whether a tool measures what it claims to and does so reliably. For the GEM-Youth, this involved checking whether the questions work together consistently (internal consistency), whether the tool relates to other established measures in expected ways (validity), and whether young people could understand and engage with it meaningfully. Initial validation was conducted with 103 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention settings, comparing GEM-Youth results against the K10 measure of psychological distress.

Cronbach's Alpha Explained for Non-Researchers

What Is Cronbach's Alpha?

Cronbach's alpha (α) is a statistic that tells us whether questions in a survey or test are measuring the same underlying concept.²¹ Think of it like checking if all the instruments in an orchestra are playing in harmony, high alpha means they're in tune with each other.

The number ranges from 0 to 1:

- **0.8 or higher:** Good or excellent consistency (the questions work well together)
- **0.7 – 0.79:** Acceptable, but room for improvement
- **0.6 – 0.69:** Marginal, room for improvement
- **Below 0.6:** Weak consistency (questions are measuring different things or may be confusing)

A Simple Example

Imagine you're creating a "happiness" survey with 5 questions designed to measure the same construct. Cronbach's alpha checks whether these questions correlate with each other. That is, whether responses to them tend to align across your group.

If questions like "I feel cheerful most days" and "I often smile" don't correlate well across your group of respondents, that suggests they might not both be reliably measuring happiness. One might be measuring something slightly different, making it "out of tune" with the others. This would lower the alpha and flag that question as potentially problematic for this particular survey.

"How I Feel About Myself" (HIFAM)

- **Cronbach's alpha = 0.80:** Strong consistency. These questions reliably measure how a young person feels about themselves as a unified concept.
- **Average inter-item correlation = 0.21:** Questions are moderately connected without being repetitive.

"Thinking About My Everyday Life" (TAMEL)

- **Cronbach's alpha = 0.69:** Marginal, though lower than HIFAM. The questions are somewhat related but could benefit from refinement.
- **Average inter-item correlation = 0.18:** Slightly weaker connections, but within an acceptable range, which makes sense given TAMEL covers a broader range of everyday experiences.

How GEM-Youth Relates to Psychological Distress

We compared GEM-Youth scores with the K10 to see if young people who felt more empowered also experienced less psychological distress:

- **HIFAM and K10:** Strong negative correlation (-0.61). Young people who scored higher on feeling good about themselves scored lower on psychological distress. This makes intuitive sense.
- **TAMEL and K10:** Moderate negative correlation (-0.31). Everyday empowerment also linked to lower distress, but the relationship wasn't as strong as with HIFAM.

SECTION 4: INTERPRETING AND UTILISING GEM-YOUTH RESULTS

4.1 Interpreting Scores and Themes

Total GEM-Youth Scores

The GEM-Youth has a total possible score of 152. Based on our initial analysis, and research and clinical experience, we have identified that a total score under 122 may suggest that a young person could benefit from additional support or intervention.

It's important to remember that given the multifaceted nature of SEWB, wellness and illness aren't necessarily at opposite ends of the same spectrum; they can be considered separate constructs. A young person might score well in some areas while struggling in others, and both HIFAM and TAMEL are designed to be sensitive to change over time, tracking growth and increasing well-being.

With that said, higher scores on these measures do overall correspond with lower levels of psychological distress as measured by tools like the K10, reinforcing their validity as indicators of well-being

Don't forget the strengths!

While answers may indicate unmet social and emotional wellbeing needs that should be addressed, it's equally important that the strengths identified are followed up. In some cases these strengths may be the "key" to helping a young person with some of the challenges identified in other areas.

What scores may suggest

Higher scores generally suggest greater capacity in areas including dealing with painful feelings, creating safety, responding to judgment, engaging with learning, having a voice, being able to say no, and building stronger relationships. Lower scores may indicate challenges navigating everyday life scenarios in these domains.

Understanding HIFAM Scores

The HIFAM scale captures a young person's ability to experience and express well-being in everyday life. Responses use a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger emotional empowerment.

Understanding TAMEL Scores

The TAMEL scale measures functional aspects of empowerment through everyday scenarios. Each scenario presents options ranging from a negative state (scored 1) to a positive state (scored 7). The scale is designed to reflect a young person's capacity to navigate functional empowerment in key life areas.

When to follow up: Any individual item score 3 or lower may warrant further conversation or investigation

Clinical interpretation

Rather than treating scores as definitive indicators, use them as starting points for deeper exploration. Pay particular attention to:

- Hesitations or pauses before answering
- Changes in answers after initial selection
- Responses that seem inconsistent with previous answers or what you might expect based on the young person's presentation
- Patterns across related items that stand out

These conversational cues alongside the scores themselves often provide the most valuable information for care planning and can reveal nuances that numbers alone don't capture.

Scores of 5 or lower

Responses in the lower range of the scale (below 5) may warrant further discussion to better understand the young person's experience and needs in that area. This discussion can help inform what support or strategies might be most helpful moving forward.

Broader observations

The person administering the GEM-Youth alongside the young person may also pick up on other important information – positive or negative – that isn't captured in individual item scores. These observations are equally valuable for understanding the young person's overall functioning and planning next steps.

4.2 Using yarning to add depth and context

Building on the principles of yarning detailed in Section 2.3, this qualitative approach adds essential depth and cultural relevance to quantitative scores.

Centring cultural perspectives: Quantitative measures are often developed from Western frameworks and may not fully capture the holistic Indigenous understanding of well-being (one that encompasses connections to land, language, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community). Yarning helps bridge this gap by revealing local conceptualisations of emotional experience, communicative norms, and cultural understandings of disorder and healing.

Contextualising behaviour and symptoms: Assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients is most accurate and effective when it is qualitative and functional rather than normative and categorical, and undertaken from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. Yarning allows practitioners to gather contextual data, understanding how individual behaviours and symptoms are embedded in a person's history, relationships, and lived experiences.

Revealing underlying determinants. While a quantitative score might highlight that a problem exists, yarning can uncover the complex social determinants affecting a young person at individual or community levels – family violence, substance use, unresolved trauma, cultural dislocation, or systemic barriers.

Identifying strengths and protective factors. Although HIFAM and TAMEL are designed to be strengths-based, yarning provides rich narratives about individual and community strengths, resilience, coping mechanisms, and sources of connection that numbers alone cannot capture.

4.3 Therapeutic Value: Using GEM-Youth to Build Connection

The GEM-Youth isn't just an assessment tool. When used thoughtfully, the process of completing it can itself strengthen the therapeutic relationship. Here is how to approach its administration in ways that build trust and rapport with a young person.

Set the frame early

Be explicit about what this conversation is and isn't. Let the young person know that you are interested in understanding their experiences and strengths, not looking for problems or assigning blame. Transparency matters. That is, explain what you will be doing with the information, the boundaries of confidentiality, and what happens next. If the information is going to be used for research, this should be discussed and the young person's consent obtained. Young people are more likely to engage authentically when they understand the process and feel in control of what they share.

Start with a social yarn

Before introducing the tool itself, spend time in casual conversation. Ask about the young person's interests, their day, or what brought them in. This "social yarn" creates a foundation of comfort and signals that you see them as a whole person, not just a set of scores. Let this initial conversation unfold naturally without rushing to the assessment.

Use flexible communication

Keep language simple and avoid clinical jargon. If a young person seems confused by a question, rephrase it in your own words or use examples. Some young people may benefit from visual aids or alternative ways of responding. Others may prefer to have a support person present. For some young people, completing the survey independently is something they value. Equally, some young people may have literacy challenges which may be a source of shame (and which they may try to conceal) if not managed tactfully. Stay flexible and responsive to individual communication styles and preferences and consider how you can work with the young person so that they feel empowered through the process.

Position yourself thoughtfully

Offer the young person choice in how you sit together. Many young people find side-by-side seating less confrontational than face-to-face positioning. You might work through the tool together at a table, sit at an angle, or even complete it while doing another activity.

Let them lead the pace

Resist the urge to move through the tool “efficiently”. If a particular question sparks a longer story or tangent, follow that thread. These moments often reveal the most meaningful information and demonstrate that you’re genuinely interested in their perspective, not just checking boxes. Some questions may need to be revisited; others might prompt discussions that take you temporarily away from the tool. That’s fine.

Check your own assumptions

Before and during the session, actively reflect on any deficit-based thinking or unconscious biases you might be bringing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are often subject to stigmatising narratives. Your awareness of these dynamics, and your conscious effort to challenge them in yourself, directly impacts the safety and openness of the interaction.

Recognise that relationship-building takes time

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, trust develops through repeated, consistent interactions over time. Don’t expect full openness in a first meeting. The GEM-Youth can be a useful conversation starter even if initial responses are guarded. What matters is that you have created a space where deeper sharing becomes possible in future sessions.

EVERY YARN IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD CONNECTION

Use the GEM-Youth to support a genuine yarn to help you listen, understand and create a space where young people feel safe to share their experiences. By taking time to listen, respect the young person’s pace, and showing interest in who they are beyond the assessment, you create a space where they feel safe, valued and more comfortable sharing what matters to them.

Wider applications of GEM-Youth

While designed with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in custodial settings, there are opportunities to expand its use to other groups of young people.

Application context	Guidance and Rationale
Group contexts	Yes, appropriate. The tool can be used in group settings (e.g., programs, camps, youth groups). It can be used to facilitate a shared conversation about empowerment, culture, and growth, leading to collective action planning within the group.
Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people	Yes, appropriate – with minor modifications. The GEM-Youth measures universal concepts; Growth, empowerment, and connection, from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview. However, using the tool with non-Indigenous young people can be a powerful decolonising practice, challenging Western models of wellbeing and encouraging all young people to reflect on their own connection, growth, and empowerment. Some minor modifications to questions specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are required, for example, asking “what is your heritage?” or “what is your whakapapa?” instead of “who is your mob?” in the GTKY section depending on the cultural background of the young person.
Young people not in detention	Yes, appropriate – with minor modifications. While developed in partnership with young people in the justice system, the tool is primarily a strengths and wellbeing measure. The themes assessed (culture, connection, respect, future) are relevant to all young people. Using it in prevention or diversion programs could provide a robust, culturally safe baseline for measuring positive growth outside of a deficit-based clinical setting. References to “in community”, in the GTKY questions can be omitted for young people in the community.

Case study example: Guidance and application

This section provides a detailed, fictional case study using GEM-Youth results for a young person in a youth justice context. The example demonstrates how to integrate quantitative scores (HIFAM and TAMEL) with qualitative yarning data to generate culturally informed, strengths-based care planning recommendations.

Case Study

Participant Profile:

Jake (fictional), 15-year-old Aboriginal young person, third time in detention

Quantitative Results

GTKY Highlights:

- Lives with grandmother when in community
- Grade 9 education, wants to finish school
- Has white card certification
- Rates home environment as “mostly good”

HIFAM scores (potentially worth review):

- “I feel like people respect me” = 3 (Sometimes)
- “I feel like I belong” = 3 (Sometimes)
- “I feel strong in my culture” = 3 (Sometimes)
- “I feel good about my future” = 3 (Sometimes)
- Total HIFAM: 57/75

TAMEL scores (potentially worth review):

- “When someone judges me” = 5 (Tell them if they are wrong, think about if they are right)
- “When I think about my culture” = 5 (I want to learn more)
- “When I think about my cultural identity” = 5 (mostly feel strong)
- Total TAMEL: 55/77
- Total GEM-Youth: 112/152 (well below suggested intervention threshold of 122)

Yarning data context

Cultural disconnection narrative:



I don't know about culture and that... my Nan has told me and my sister stuff, but I haven't seen her in ages and I don't know... I just don't ask her about that stuff. I think she told my dad some stuff about it but yeah... he don't really talk about it either.

I've been called a black dog and shit like that before, I don't really give a shit about that I just don't listen when people say stuff like that to me- they don't know nothing about my family.

I want to know more about my culture and stuff, but no-one's ever told me how to do that.



Respect and belonging themes:



I've done a lot of shit in my life — heaps of people reckon I'm a fuck up. I swear I always get clocked by coppa's just for being black... can't get away with nothing. YJ workers and that even reckon i'm pretty fucked cause i've come back into juvi 3 times now. I used to have a Case worker who was cool but she left and I don't like my new one... she don't really know me.

I can tell even my family- my mum and sisters and stuff are always saying that I need to get my shit together.. and sometimes I do for a while but I always end up coming back here somehow. Feels pretty shit cause I don't want to make my family feel like that... I don't care about what Coppas think about me but when I saw my uncle last time I was out of Juvi he had a mad yarn with me and made me feel pretty shit about all this stuff.



Future uncertainty:



Yeah I use to go to school and it was alright when I had my brutha boys with me... but they all left, I don't want to go to school on my own where I don't even know what the teacher is going on about. I still wanna finish school — my nan reckons I can do anything I put my mind to but she's wumba and don't know how hard it is. It's probably too late now anyway I haven't gone in ages. I wanna do construction like my older cousin and I needa finish year 10 for that so... I don't know I'll figure it out.



Integrated interpretation

Strengths Identified:

- Strong relationship with grandmother
- Motivation for education and training (has white card, wants to finish school)
- Developing cultural awareness and desire to learn
- Stable housing environment when in community

Primary Intervention Areas:

- **Cultural Connection:** Score of 3 on cultural items + yarning reveals desire to learn = Priority for cultural mentorship/Elder connection
- **Identity and Belonging:** Low scores combined with narrative of external judgment = Need for identity-affirming programs
- **Educational Pathways:** Motivation exists but confidence low = Tailored educational support needed

Care planning recommendations:

- Connect with local CEC (to assist with re-connecting with education)
- Arrange cultural mentorship with appropriate Elder
- Involve grandmother in release planning
- Address internalised stigma through identity-affirming programs

4.4 Using GEM-Youth Longitudinally for Monitoring and Evaluation

Understanding the dynamic nature of responses

- **Initial responses and “shame factor”:** Young people, especially in settings like detention, may initially provide more positive or socially desirable responses due to a lack of trust, fear of judgment, or a desire to avoid further scrutiny or perceived “problems”. There can be a “shame factor” that influences how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people respond to questions about their emotional well-being. They may be hesitant to talk about “pain and emotions” directly, preferring concepts like “anger”. This can result in scores that appear higher (more positive) than their actual internal experience.
- **Impact of trust-building:** As trust and rapport are carefully built over time through consistent, culturally safe engagement, young people may feel more secure in openly sharing their true experiences, including their struggles. This could lead to a decrease in initial GEM-Youth scores, as they more honestly reflect areas where they feel less empowered or are experiencing difficulties. This is a positive therapeutic outcome, indicating deeper engagement and the young person feeling safe enough to be vulnerable, rather than a regression in their well-being. It highlights the importance of assessing the GEM-Youth answers and scores critically.

- **Non-linear progress:** Healing journeys are rarely linear. Fluctuations in scores, including temporary dips, should be anticipated and interpreted within the broader context of the young person's evolving relationship with the practitioner and their overall life circumstances.

Longitudinal monitoring and follow-Ups

- The GEM-Youth is designed for longitudinal use, with suggested follow-ups at 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months, to capture growth and change over time. This allows for a more accurate picture of a young person's progress, distinguishing between the possibility of initial guarded responses or temporary fluctuations and genuine long-term shifts in their social and emotional well-being.
- It is a tool that can be repeated over time to determine if the distress is reducing, increasing or persisting.⁷

Cross-referencing quantitative and qualitative data

- **Holistic interpretation:** The most powerful way to understand longitudinal changes is by integrating the quantitative scores from HIFAM and TAMEL with the rich qualitative data gathered through yarning sessions. This mixed-methods approach provides a holistic and accurate picture of a young person's SEWB and empowerment journey.
- **Contextualising scores:** Yarning helps to "add depth and context to quantitative scores" by revealing local conceptualisations of emotional experience, communicative norms, and cultural notions of well-being. For example, if scores initially decrease, qualitative data can reveal whether this is due to increased trust and honest disclosure (a positive sign) or new stressors (an area for intervention).
- **Identifying underlying factors:** While quantitative scores indicate what might be changing, qualitative data can uncover why those changes are occurring, revealing underlying social determinants, strengths, and protective factors. This allows for tailored interventions that respond to the young person's lived experience.
- **Validating experience:** Discussing the score trends with the young person during subsequent sessions, using the language and metaphors (like the river/fish motif) that resonate with them, can validate their experience and reinforce their agency in their own healing journey. This conversation itself becomes part of the therapeutic process.

4.5 Measuring meaningful change: Quantitative and qualitative Indicators

Quantitative Indicators of Change — Guiding, Not Defining:

GEM-Youth Tools	Indicator Guide
HIFAM (How I Feel About Myself)	Any score 3 or lower on an individual HIFAM item may indicate an area where the young person could benefit from follow-up or investigation.
TAMEL (Thinking About My Everyday Life)	Any score 5 or lower on an individual TAMEL item may suggest that a young person struggles with functional empowerment in that specific scenario and should be used to inform future care.
Total GEM-Youth score	A total score under 122 (out of a possible 152) might suggest that a young person may benefit from an intervention.

- **Contextualising cut-offs:** It is vital to emphasise that these cut-off scores are guides for discussion and further investigation, not definitive diagnostic thresholds. Relying solely on numerical cut-offs can promote “deficit thinking” and be misleading or stigmatising, especially for groups already experiencing vulnerability. They should always be interpreted in the context of the individual’s unique story, cultural background, and the comprehensive qualitative data gathered through yarning.
- **Measuring empowerment and growth:** The GEM-Youth measures empowerment, growth, and connection from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, which is conceptually different from simply measuring psychological distress. Higher scores indicate stronger empowerment and well-being, while lower scores suggest areas for growth and support.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE STRENGTHS!

Even where areas of need are identified, it's important not to lose sight of the strengths identified. Aside from allowing for positive and empowering yarning, building on a young person's strengths may be an important part of addressing areas of need.

Meaningful change — beyond the numbers:

Recognising positive shifts: Any positive change in GEM-Youth scores, even small increments, should be acknowledged and celebrated as indicators of growth and increased empowerment. This aligns with a strengths-based approach.

Interpreting “negative” score changes: As discussed in Section 4.3, a decrease in scores after the initial sessions can be a meaningful sign of increased trust and openness. When a young person feels safer to report their struggles honestly, this is a therapeutic success, not a failure of the intervention. These “negative” shifts reflect a deeper level of self-awareness and willingness to engage, which are crucial for true healing and growth. If discussing decreases in wellbeing with the young person, it’s important to approach the conversation through a trauma-informed lens. One way that may help reduce experiences of shame is to lean on the metaphor of the “fish in the river”, to discuss how these experiences are temporary points in a fluid journey, they are not fixed forever.

Qualitative indicators of change:

Meaningful change extends far beyond numerical shifts. Qualitative data from yarning sessions provides rich insights into:

- **Shift in narrative:** Changes in how a young person talks about themselves, their future, and their challenges. That is, moving from deficit-focused language to more hopeful, agentic, and strengths-based narratives.
- **Increased self-efficacy and voice:** Evidence of the young person “gaining voice and being heard,” expressing their views, and actively participating in co-designing their support plan.
- **Enhanced connection:** Reports of feeling more connected to family, community, culture, or Country.
- **Improved coping strategies:** Demonstrating new “knowledge and skills” in dealing with difficult situations, managing emotions, and making changes in their lives.
- **Reflexivity and insight:** The young person’s ability to reflect on their experiences, understand their emotions, and articulate their needs more clearly.
- **Holistic perspective:** Remember that wellness and illness are not always inextricably linked²⁰ and can be considered separate constructs. The GEM-Youth is designed to capture holistic SEWB, which includes elements like connections to land, language, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family, and community, which other quantitative measures cannot fully capture.

SECTION 5: GEM-YOUTH IN PRACTICE

Application and integration

This section explores how the GEM-Youth fits into broader frameworks for change.

The GEM-Youth is more than a measurement instrument; it is a tool for building connection and planning for the future. This section provides practical guidance on how to integrate the GEM-Youth into your work to support young people through early intervention and through-care, and how to navigate the common challenges of administering the tool in complex environments.

5.1 Supporting through-care and early Intervention

The true value of the GEM-Youth is realised when its insights are used to inform culturally appropriate through-care and early intervention models. The tool is designed to identify a young person's strengths and areas where they desire growth, providing a clear pathway for planning post-release support.

By using the GEM-Youth results and the accompanying yarn, practitioners can work with a young person to co-design their support plan. For example, a low score on "I feel strong in my culture" could be an indicator that linking the young person with a local Elder, a cultural program, or on-Country experiences should be a priority. Similarly, themes emerging from the TAMEL scenarios can highlight the need for specific life skills programs or mentorship. The goal is to use the tool as a bridge, connecting the young person with the holistic, wraparound support they need to thrive in the community.

5.2 Practical guidance for administering the tool

Administering the GEM-Youth effectively relies on creating a safe, relational space. The process should feel like a conversation, not an interrogation.

Setting the Scene

- **Find a safe space:** If possible, move away from noisy or disruptive environments. A quiet room or a more relaxed space is ideal. Acknowledge the limitations of the environment if any with the young person.
- **Build rapport first:** The co-design process highlighted the importance of a social yarn before diving into the tool itself. Start with a genuine, open conversation to build trust and connection.

The Yarning Process

- **It's a conversation:** This does not necessarily need to be a form to be filled out alone. The practitioner's role is to sit with the young person and guide them through the tool, reading questions aloud and explaining concepts as needed.
- **Use the visuals:** The river/fish metaphor was specifically co-designed to aid comprehension. Actively use this visual to help explain the response scales for the TAMEL section, especially for young people who may struggle with written text. The river/fish metaphor was also chosen due to its inherently mutable nature—just because a young person answers a particular way today doesn't mean that answer can't or won't change in the future.

Navigating common challenges

Managing time and fatigue: The tool was simplified partly in response to feedback about participant fatigue. Be mindful of the young person's energy levels. Break the session into smaller parts if needed and manage your time effectively.

Handling custodial interruptions: Lockdowns and high levels of noise are common challenges within custodial environments. Be prepared to be flexible. If interrupted, ensure you note where you were up to and make a clear plan with the young person about when you can resume.

Supporting independent completion: Some young people may prefer to complete parts or all of the GEM-Youth independently. This is completely acceptable and should be respected. In these cases, ensure the young person knows they can ask for clarification on any items, and remain available nearby without being intrusive. The same rapport-building and cultural connection principles apply - just adapted to provide appropriate space while maintaining support.

Providing literacy support: While some young people will want to complete the tool independently, and have the literacy skills to do that, others may experience shame if they feel the process highlights challenges they have. Be aware of this and work with case managers and speech and language therapists to find ways to actively support participants with literacy issues to ensure they feel comfortable, and their responses are accurate. The simplification of language (e.g., "confidence" becoming "good about myself") was a key co-design outcome to assist with this, but direct support is still essential.

Example: Pre-Administration Phase and During Administration

Pre-administration phase (15-20 minutes)

Setting preparation:

- Find the quietest available space
- Arrange chairs at a slight angle (not directly facing - reduces interrogation feeling)
- Have tool printed and ready, with extra copies in case of interruption (or to facilitate reading questions out loud, if a young person wants to complete the tool themselves)
- Inform staff of approximate timeframe to minimise disruptions

Initial contact script:

"G'day [name], I'm [your name]. I'm here to have a yarn with you about how you're going — not about what you've done or why you're here, just about you as a person. We've got this tool that other young people helped design, and it's all about your strengths and what's going well for you. Before we start, want to tell me a bit about yourself? Who's your mob?"

Building rapport ("Social Yarn"):

- Ask about family, Country, interests
- Share appropriate information about yourself
- Listen for connections to culture, family relationships, future goals
- Look for signs of fatigue, literacy concerns, or resistance

Transition to tool:

"So this tool we're gonna use - it was made by young people like yourself who were in places like this. They got sick of people asking them what was wrong with them, so they made something that talks about what's strong about them instead. Want to have a look?"

During administration

GTKY section management:

- **Read questions aloud:** "I'll read these out and you can tell me your answers, or you can read along if you want"
- **For housing quality question:** "This first one's about where you usually live when you're in community - not here, but your real home"
- **If literacy issues evident:** "No worries mate, I'll read everything out. You just tell me which answer fits"

HIFAM section guidance:

- **Introduce fish scale:** "See these fish here? They're a bit like all of us, they're in this spot today but they're not stuck there. Which fish matches how you feel about this?"
- **For difficult items:** "This one's about feeling strong in your culture. If you're still learning about that, that's totally normal. Which fish feels right for where you're at now?"
- **If participant shows fatigue:** "Want to take a break? We can finish this later if you need"

TAMEL section navigation:

- **Explain scenario approach:** "These ones are different - they're about everyday situations you might be in. Just think about what you'd normally do or how you'd feel"
- **For complex items like judgment scenario:** "So if someone was judging you or talking down to you, what would you normally do? There's no right or wrong answer - just what's true for you"

SECTION 6: FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND BROADER IMPACT

This concluding section looks forward, acknowledging ongoing work and the wider advocacy role of the GEM-Youth.

6.1 Limitations and ongoing refinements

The GEM-Youth represents a significant step forward in culturally grounded assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. However, like all measurement tools, it has limitations that must be acknowledged and addressed through ongoing refinement and validation work.

Methodological considerations

Internal consistency and validation approach:

While the GEM-Youth demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$ for HIFAM and 0.69 for TAMEL), the measurement approach has inherent limitations. Cronbach's α was selected as the primary measure of internal consistency because test-retest reliability was not feasible in detention settings, where researchers and clinicians have limited access for repeated assessments. Future validation work should also explore the underlying factor structure of the tool, to provide a more robust understanding of the tool's psychometric properties.

Setting-specific limitations and adaptation needs

Sample size and representativeness:

The sample size about which the tool has been validated and cut-off scores identified remains relatively small, and data are not yet disaggregated by sex, with males significantly outnumbering females in custody where the tool was developed. It has also been developed exclusively within detention settings. Further work should seek to trial the GEM-Youth with other groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to strengthen its applicability to other settings.

Visual metaphor and cultural relevance:

The river and fish visual metaphor was co-designed with young people in Southeast Queensland, where extensive waterways make this imagery culturally resonant. However, it remains unclear how effectively this metaphor will connect with young people from different Countries, particularly those without strong connections to riverine environments. The adult GEM's use of a Kauri pine metaphor in North Queensland demonstrates the importance of locally relevant imagery, suggesting that regional adaptations of the visual elements may be necessary.

Practical implementation challenges

Administrative burden:

Health professionals have raised concerns about the tool's length and the time required for completion (45 minutes to one hour). This presents significant challenges for clinical settings where time constraints are common, such as emergency departments or triage situations. Co-designing a shortened version of the GEM-Youth may be useful to enhance its clinical utility while maintaining its cultural integrity and psychometric properties.

Environmental factors:

While the co-design process identified and partially addressed issues such as noise, lockdowns, time pressures, and perceived peer pressure in detention settings, these remain inherent challenges that impact both comprehension and young people's comfort in completing the measure. These external factors continue to require careful consideration in tool administration and interpretation.

Interpretive and clinical application gaps

Cut-off scores and intervention thresholds:

Provisional cut-off scores are provided in this handbook, however, further research is needed to verify and refine these. This includes collecting data from young people outside custodial environments and understanding what score patterns may reliably predict particular outcomes.

Cultural safety in implementation:

The GEM-Youth's co-design and ongoing evaluation are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, ensuring cultural integrity. However, as the tool is disseminated more broadly, there is a critical need to address how non-Indigenous clinicians and researchers can deliver the measure in ways that remain culturally safe and decolonised. Crucially, the determination of cultural safety in implementation rests with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their communities. This requires ongoing training programs and reflexive practice frameworks to ensure practitioners understand the impact of their own cultural perspectives and biases on their interpretation of responses.

Future refinement priorities

- Comprehensive validation across community settings with diverse participant groups
- Regional adaptation of visual metaphors and cultural references
- Development of shortened versions for clinical efficiency
- Establishment of robust cut-off scores through larger-scale studies
- Creation of cultural competency training programs for non-Indigenous practitioners
- Exploration of alternative psychometric approaches better suited to the tool's unique design

The identification of these limitations does not diminish the GEM-Youth's significant contribution to culturally appropriate assessment. Rather, acknowledging these areas for growth ensures the tool continues to evolve and improve in ways that serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people effectively and safely.

6.2 Broader dissemination and advocacy

The GEM-Youth extends beyond its immediate application as an assessment tool. It represents a paradigm shift toward culturally grounded, strengths-based practice that has the potential to influence policy, reshape service delivery, and advocate for systemic change in how we approach youth well-being assessment and intervention.

Transforming mental health service delivery

Informing culturally responsive pathways: The GEM-Youth provides evidence-based support for culturally responsive mental health service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Its validation demonstrates that assessment tools can be both psychometrically sound and culturally grounded, challenging the false dichotomy that has long existed between scientific rigour and cultural appropriateness. This positions the tool to inform policy decisions about service delivery models, funding priorities, and professional training requirements.

Building the evidence base: As the GEM-Youth generates longitudinal data on youth empowerment and social and emotional well-being, it contributes to a growing evidence base that documents what works for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth mental health. This evidence can inform service commissioning, program evaluation, and the development of best practice guidelines that prioritise culturally safe, strengths-based approaches over deficit-focused interventions.

Advocacy for systemic change: The GEM Youth's very existence advocates for the inadequacy of current assessment practices. By demonstrating that young people prefer completing the GEM-Youth over other Westernised measures, it provides concrete evidence for policy makers and service providers about the need to move beyond Western-centric assessment models. This positions the GEM-Youth as both a practical tool and a powerful advocacy instrument for systemic change.

Challenging deficit discourse in research and practice

Disrupting traditional research paradigms: The GEM-Youth directly counters the historical dominance of deficit discourse in Indigenous health research. Its strengths-based design and empowering language provide a concrete alternative to research approaches that have long portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a deficit lens as defective, dysfunctional, disturbed and culturally deprived.¹⁶ The tool's dissemination serves as advocacy for research methodologies that honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

Shifting professional practice: As health professionals engage with the GEM-Youth, they are exposed to an assessment approach that actively builds connection and explores strengths rather than cataloguing problems. This exposure can influence broader practice approaches, encouraging clinicians to adopt strengths-based, relationship-centred methods across all their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and families.

Training and capacity building: The GEM-Youth's implementation necessitates training programs that address cultural competency, decolonising practice, and strengths-based approaches. These training initiatives have the potential to influence professional education curricula and continuing professional development requirements, creating ripple effects that extend far beyond the tool's direct application.

Potential for adaptation and universal application

Cross-cultural adaptation: While specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, the GEM-Youth's co-design methodology and strengths-based philosophy offer a template for developing culturally appropriate assessment tools for other Indigenous and marginalised populations. The principles underlying its development (genuine partnership, cultural grounding, and empowerment focus) can inform similar initiatives globally.

Informing tool development: The lessons learned from the GEM-Youth's co-design process, including the importance of visual metaphors, simplified language, and cultural governance structures, provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners developing assessment tools for diverse populations. This includes understanding how to adapt tools for different settings while maintaining cultural integrity and psychometric validity.

Methodological innovation: The GEM-Youth's integration of yarning methodology with quantitative assessment demonstrates innovative approaches to mixed-methods research and practice. This methodological contribution extends beyond Indigenous contexts, offering insights for anyone seeking to develop more relational, culturally responsive assessment approaches.

Advocacy through implementation

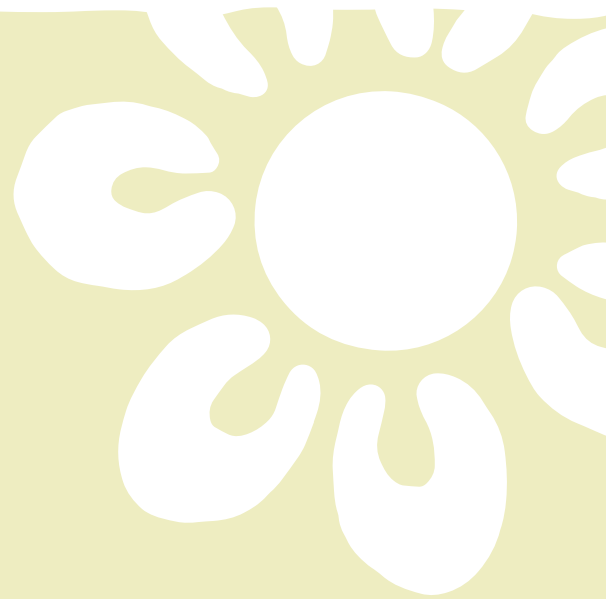
Demonstrating feasibility: Every successful implementation of the GEM-Youth demonstrates to policy makers, funding bodies, and service providers that culturally grounded assessment is not only possible but preferable. This practical demonstration is often more powerful than theoretical arguments for change.

Building allied networks: The tool's dissemination creates networks of practitioners, researchers, and advocates who are committed to strengths-based, culturally responsive approaches. These networks become powerful agents for broader systemic change, sharing knowledge, resources, and advocacy strategies.

Supporting Indigenous data sovereignty: The GEM-Youth's implementation under Indigenous data sovereignty principles provides a practical example of how research and assessment can be conducted in ways that serve Indigenous communities' interests and priorities. This modelling supports broader advocacy for Indigenous data sovereignty and self-determination in research and practice.

Summary

The GEM-Youth's impact extends far beyond its immediate application as an assessment tool. Through its dissemination and advocacy potential, it contributes to a fundamental shift toward approaches that honour Indigenous knowledge, prioritise strengths and connection, and challenge the systemic inequities that have long characterised Indigenous youth mental health services. Its broader impact lies not just in what it measures, but in what it represents: a vision of assessment and intervention that is both rigorous and respectful, evidence-based and empowering.



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APPENDIX

Date of data collection: _____

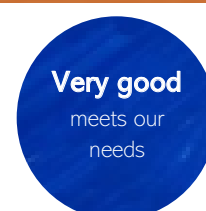
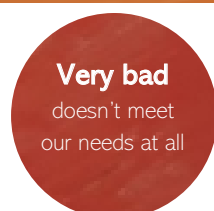
Participant ID: _____

GEM-Youth

Growth and Empowerment Measure for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people

Getting to know you

Date				Gender	
Birthday				Age	
Are you:	Aboriginal	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	Torres Strait Islander		
Who is your Mob?					
Where do you currently live?					
Have you always lived there?	Yes	No			
If no, where else have you lived?					
Do you have a partner?	Yes	No			
Do you have children?	Yes	No			
If yes, how many children do you have?					
Do you work in community?	Yes	No			
If yes, where do you work?					
Do you go to school in community?	Yes	No			
If yes, what grade are you in?					
If no, what grade did you finish?					
Have you done any training, e.g. white card or a certificate?	Yes	No			
If yes, what training have you done?					
What is your usual living situation? (e.g. with family, in out of home care, on streets, couch surfing)					
How many people do you usually live with? (number of adults and children)					
Who do you live with?					
How would you describe the place you usually live?					



How I feel about myself

Which fish fits your answer:

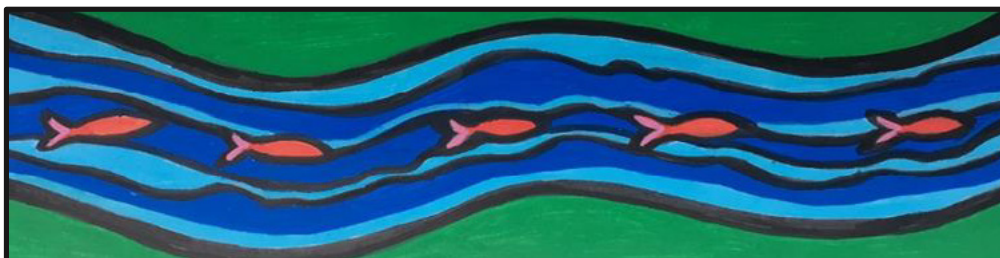
1. I feel happy with my life...



2. I feel like I have lots of energy...



3. I feel like I have lots of opportunities...



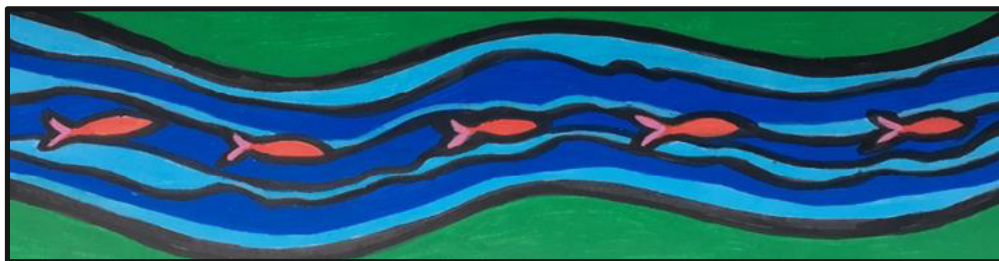
4. I like to learn new things...



5. I feel like I'm good at learning...



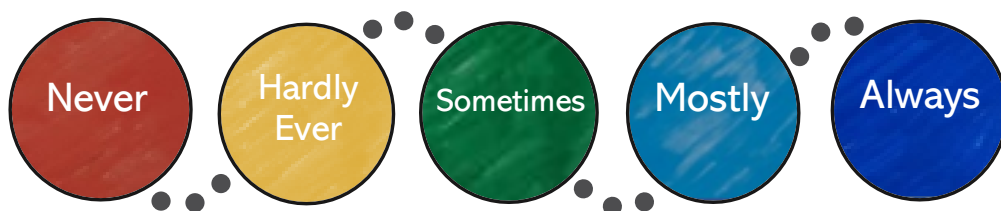
6. I feel like people respect me...



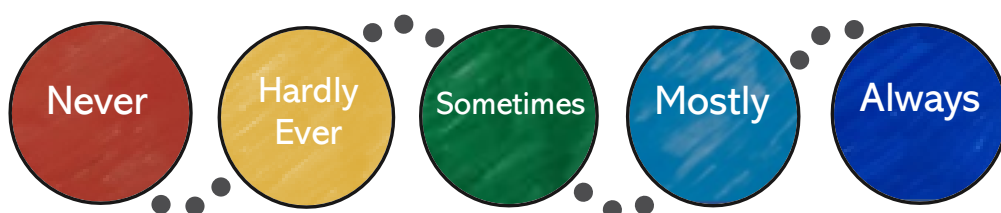
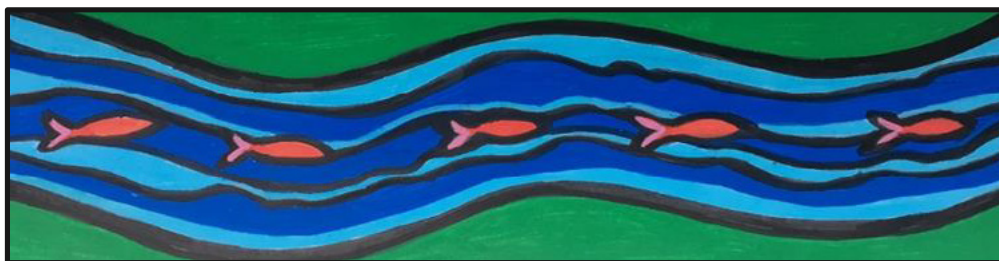
7. I feel like people listen to me...



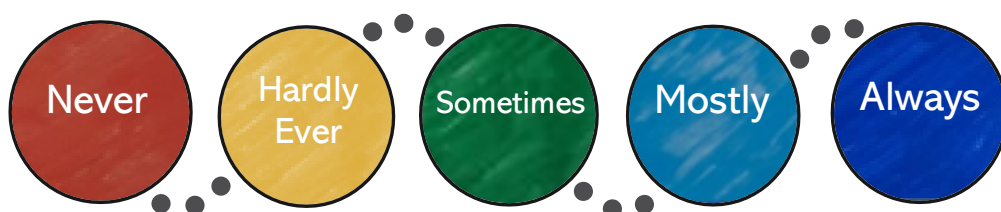
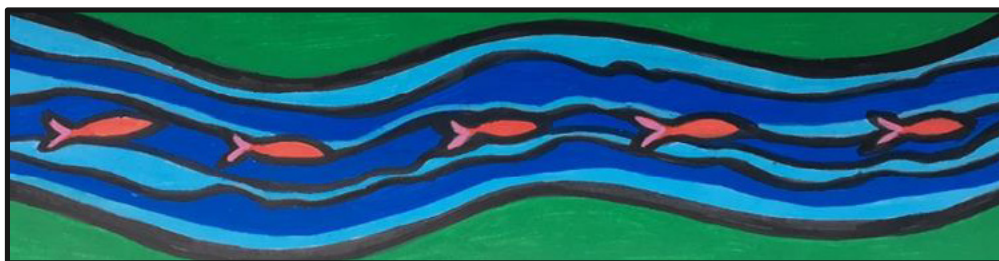
8. I feel like I belong...



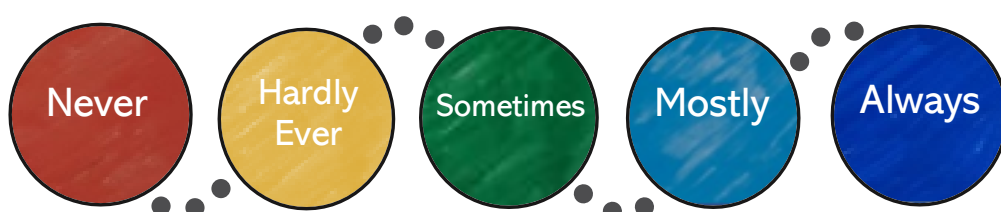
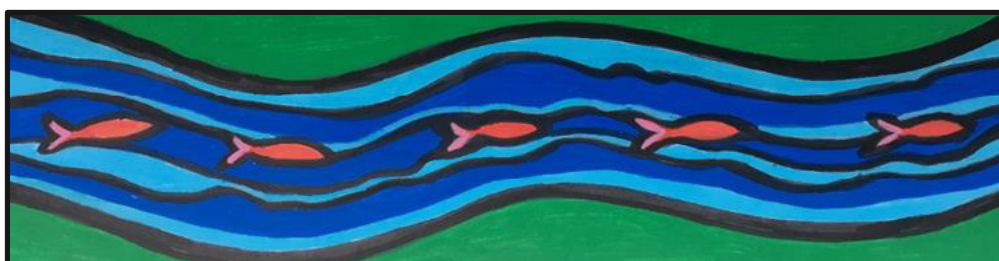
9. I feel good about myself...



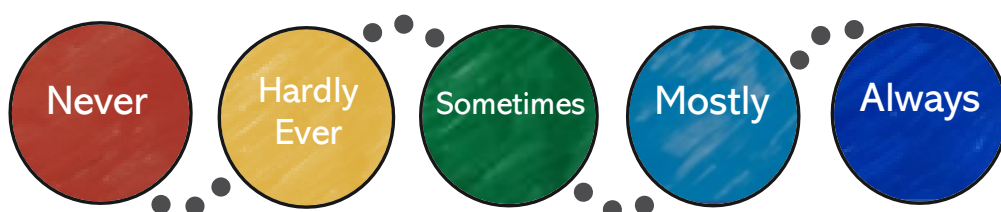
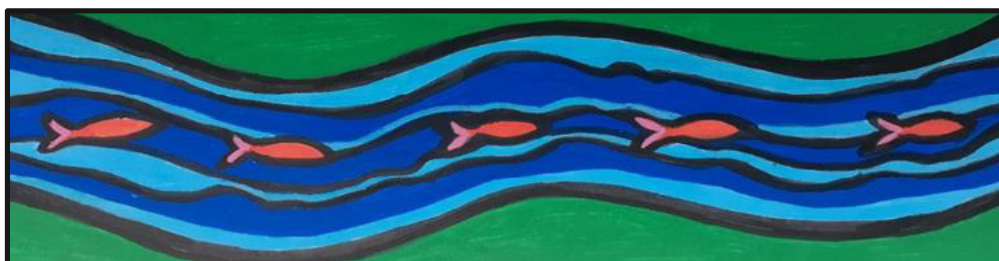
10. I feel like I can look after myself...



11. I feel chill...



12. I feel stressed about my future...



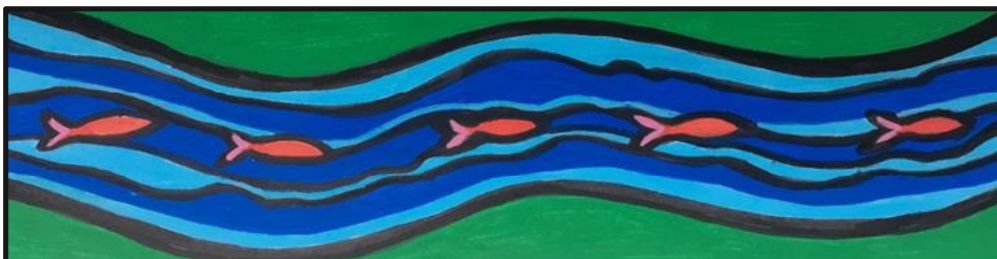
13. I feel good about my future...



14. I feel angry about life...



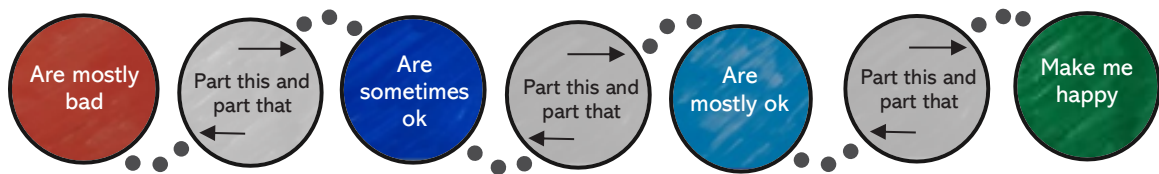
15. I feel strong in my culture...



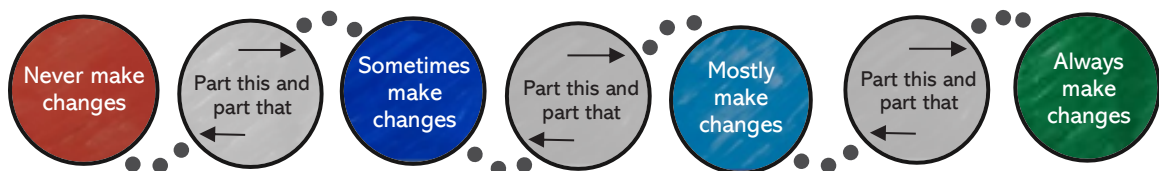
Thinking About My Everyday Life

Which fish fits your answer:

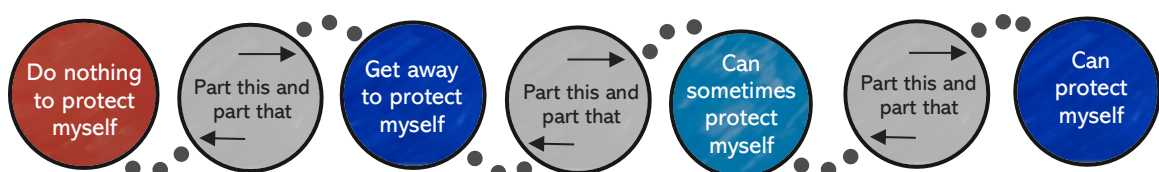
1. The relationships in my life...



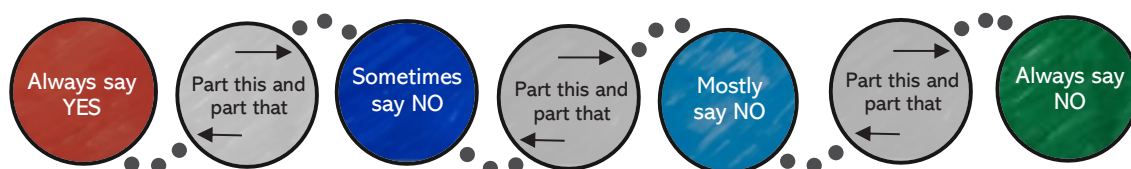
2. When I want to make changes in my life I can...



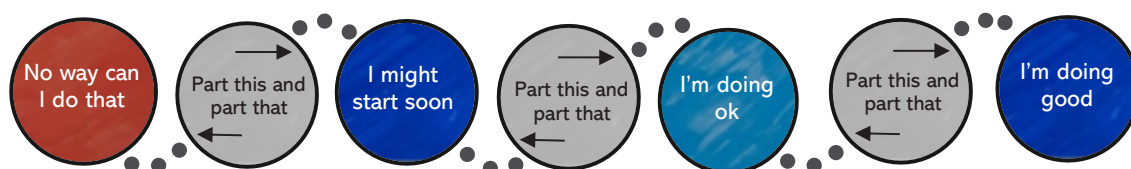
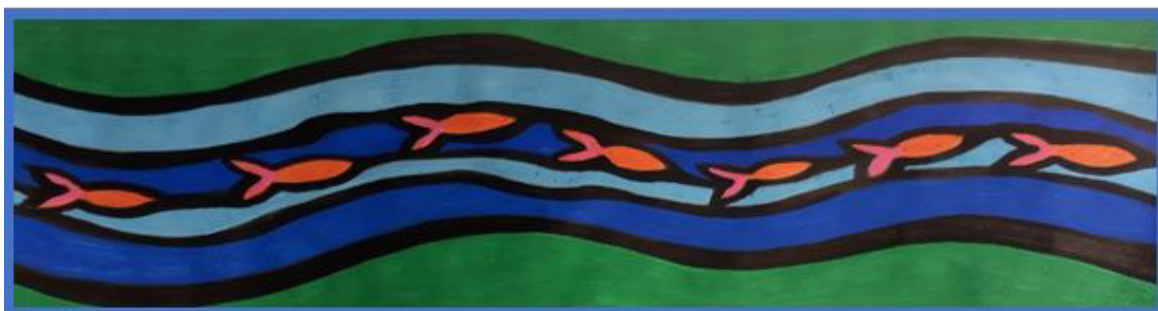
3. When I think I might get hurt I...



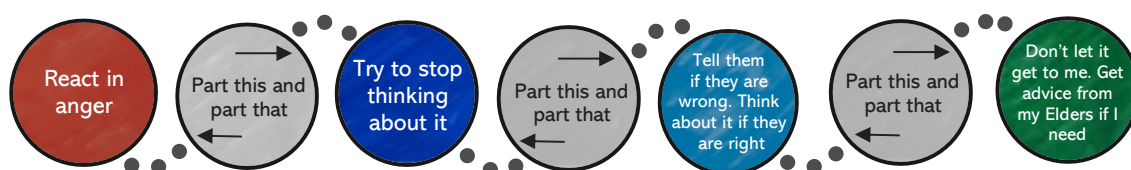
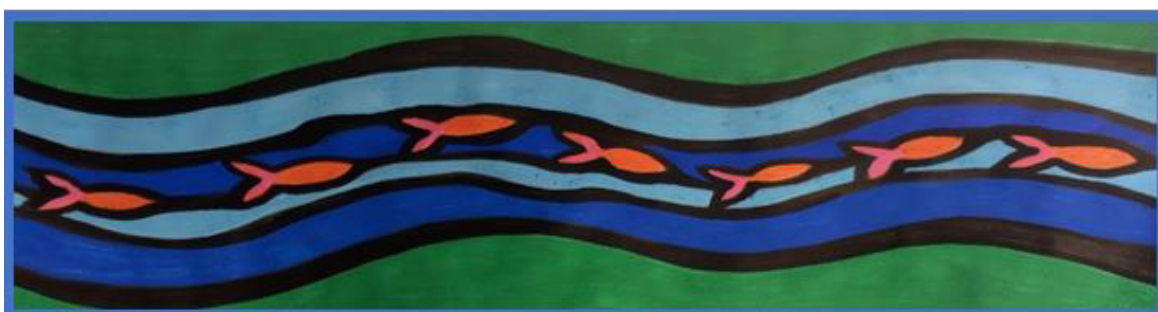
4. When someone asks me to do something I don't want to do...



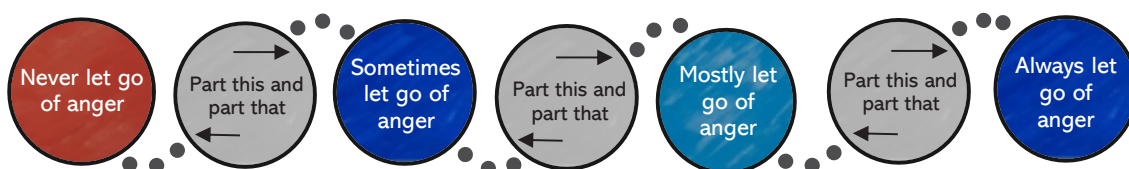
5. When I think about my learning I feel...



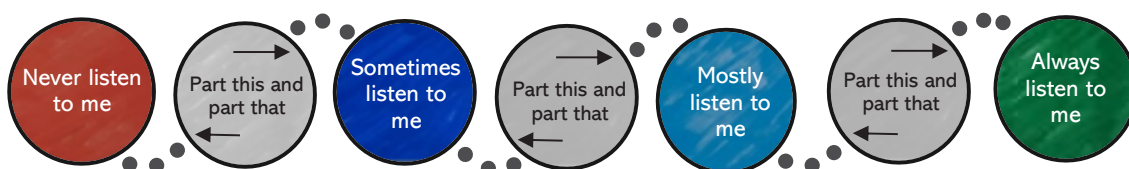
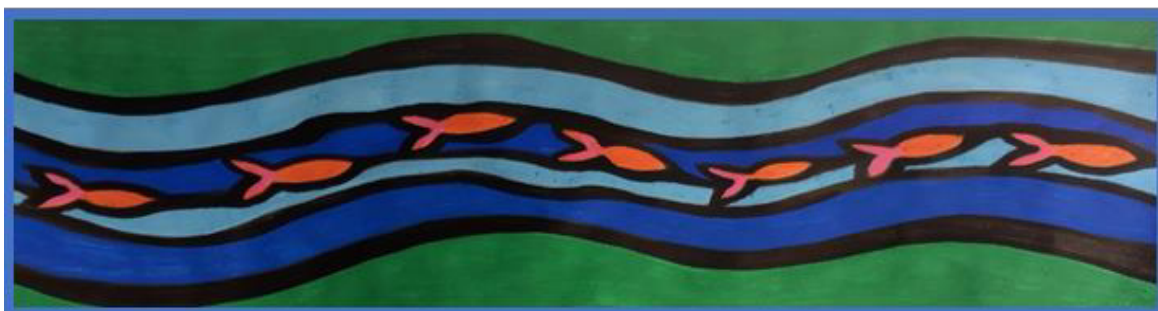
6. If someone judges me I...



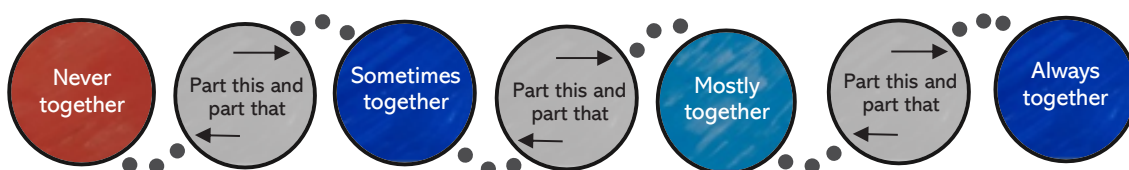
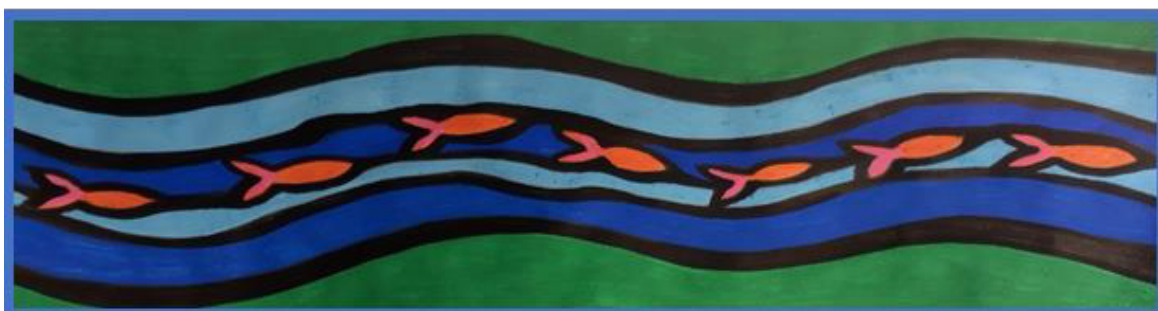
7. When bad things happen to me I can...



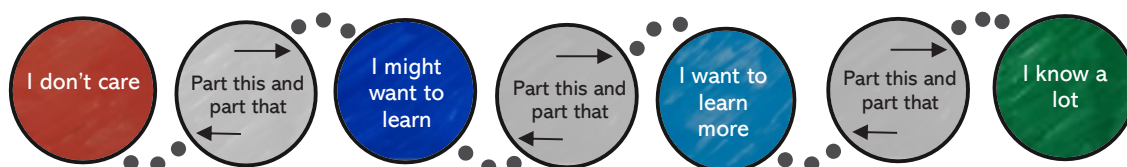
8. When I speak up to my friends and family they...



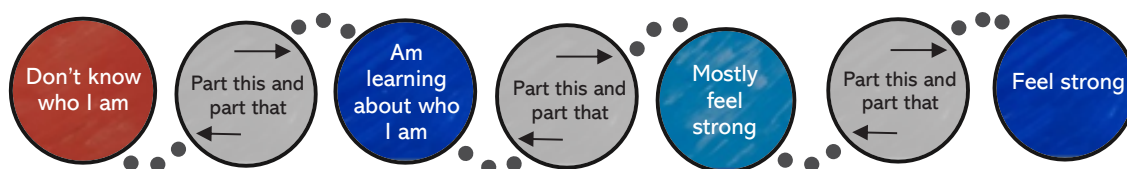
9. My family and friends can always work out their problems...



10. When I think about my culture, I feel like...



11. When I think about my cultural identity I...



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The IMHIP-Youth project is a collaborative partnership between The University of Queensland and Children's Health Queensland.

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IMHIP-YOUTH CULTURAL GOVERNANCE GROUP

The Cultural Governance Group (CGG) provided essential strategic and cultural oversight for the IMHIP-Youth project over a sustained period of five years. The group was a highly valued entity, consisting of diverse members in terms of age, gender, disability, location, and experience across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The CGG ensured that the project's integrity remained grounded in community accountability and cultural safety.