

# First Nations Language Guidelines


Choosing respectful and culturally  
appropriate language



**DS**  **Dementia Support  
Australia**

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Funded by the Australian Government  
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**Dementia Support Australia is committed to working together with First Nations communities to build and model respect, understanding and appreciation of culture in the delivery of our services, care and support.**

**This Language Guide is developed for staff working in aged and health care supporting First Nations peoples. It aims to provide an understanding of why respectful and appropriate language is so important for building strong relationships with First Nations peoples and how they influence wellbeing and quality of care.**

**It also aims to start a conversation about preferences on terminology use and provides considerations on terms to avoid and recommended alternative terms.**

**This Guide will be updated regularly as appropriate terminology is constantly changing. If you have feedback on this Guide, please contact us through: [dsa@dementia.com.au](mailto:dsa@dementia.com.au) or 1800 699 799.**

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# Introduction and purpose

1



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For this Language Guide we have chosen to use the term ‘First Nations peoples’ for consistency; however, there are other terms that can be used, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It should be noted that across Australia, preferences in terminology will vary for individuals and communities and may also change over time. First Nations peoples may be a term older First Nations peoples are not familiar with. Given the diversity of First Nations peoples’ cultures across Australia, it’s important to ask clients and their carers, the local community and/or external stakeholders about their preferences and protocols around terminology use.



First Nations peoples of Australia have a long and rich history. There are varying estimates for how long they have lived on the continent, with research suggesting at least 60,000 years.<sup>1</sup> First Nations peoples represent a very diverse group of over 500 nations with more than 250 unique languages including around 800 dialects.<sup>2</sup> They are the holders of traditional knowledge systems and beliefs, and have a strong connection to Land, family and community.

This Language Guide and its guidelines provide advice to staff working in aged and health care on the use of respectful and culturally appropriate language when communicating with and about First Nations peoples. There has been increasing recognition that improving cultural safety and creating a safe environment for First Nations healthcare recipients can improve their access to healthcare and the quality of care they receive.<sup>3</sup> This in turn is likely to improve health outcomes and help to address gaps in health and wellbeing between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples. As an integral part of the care approach, communication (including language use) is a key factor in ensuring cultural safety.

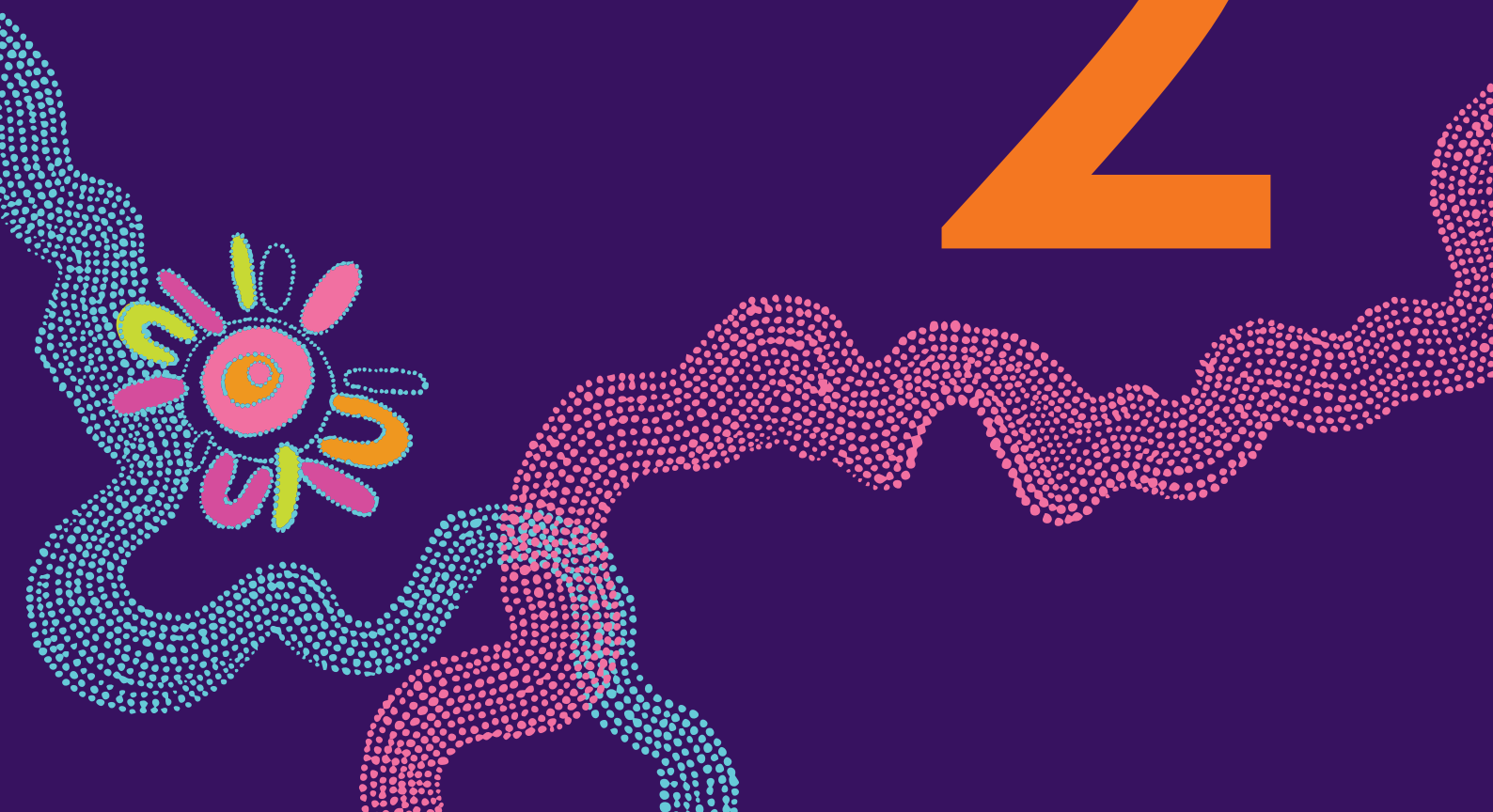
It is also important to learn about the histories, cultures and experiences of First Nations peoples – all of which form their identities and world views. There are specific challenges that First Nations peoples have faced, the impacts of which are still experienced today.

This includes the segregation, displacement and separation of families, which have caused trauma and physical, mental and economic disadvantages for First Nations peoples. Throughout history, First Nations peoples have experienced discrimination, racism and lack of cultural understanding, which have contributed to inequality and social injustice.<sup>4</sup> In the healthcare context, it has been recognised that primary healthcare professionals are poorly equipped to work effectively in a cross-cultural context with First Nations communities in Australia.<sup>5</sup> These and many other factors have led to mistrust towards government and health services. Using respectful and inclusive language demonstrates our understanding and recognition of the complex and nuanced experiences of First Nations peoples.

To better identify and address the needs of First Nations peoples, it is important to improve our understanding of their communities and perspectives, to be mindful of what is culturally appropriate, and to be open to asking questions and listening. These efforts contribute to communication that is respectful and person-centred and stronger relationships based on trust. Through effective communication (and language) we can work towards informed and tailored care, and ensure that First Nations peoples have improved outcomes for quality of care and wellbeing.

# Considerations of the use of First Nations terminology and languages

# 2





**When referencing First Nations peoples in writing, capitalisation demonstrates respect. Therefore, 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' should always be capitalised.**

## **Other examples of terms that should be written with a capital letter are:**

- First Nations peoples
- Indigenous – This term can be considered offensive. Historically it was used to describe animals and plants rather than Australia's population. It also doesn't acknowledge the diversity of cultures and peoples.
- Traditional Custodians/Owners
- Country – This refers to an area of land associated with a culturally distinct group of First Nations peoples. Corresponding terms such as 'Land' can also be capitalised when it is used in place of 'Country'<sup>6</sup>
- Elders
- Uncle and Aunty

*Be mindful of using culturally specific First Nations terms. For example, words like 'mob', 'Uncle' and 'Aunty' should only be used when invited to, as they demonstrate familiarity and trust. Check with the person whether it's appropriate to use certain words.*





# Recommendations for communication and interaction

# 3





**There are some general principles that can be applied for respectful communication with First Nations peoples:<sup>6</sup>**

## **Stand back, be quiet, listen and wait**

Start with building a trusting relationship and finding common ground; don't rush through the interaction. Be mindful that eye contact might not be respectful between opposite genders and expect periods of silence during the conversation. Silences are often used to listen and demonstrate respect or consensus. It is always best to communicate with a person-centred approach that acknowledges the individual and their personality, life and social history, and to respond with open-ended non-judgemental questions.

## **Get to know the local community**

Find out the names of the Traditional Custodians, take time to understand their histories and local languages, and be open to constant learning. Often when a community sees that you are interested in learning about them, they will become more open and trusting.

## **Be respectful at all times**

There may be times when men's and women's business (e.g. the purposeful separation of roles and responsibilities by gender) are happening within a community, and this might impact effective communication. You may find that a male Elder is unwilling to discuss his wellbeing and health journey with a person who identifies as female and vice versa. Planning ahead of time to seek advice and involvement from other members of the family, or if possible, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker and Health Practitioner, may help to better support the person and tailor care to ensure their comfort.

## **Have an open heart**

Recognise that there is great diversity in the experiences, knowledge, and world views of First Nations peoples. Genuinely seeking to understand another's unique life story, history and ways of being can help inform better care for the person, build connections, and put an end to stereotypes, myths and misunderstandings.

## Inner deep listening and quiet still awareness

Many First Nations peoples practice deep listening which involves listening respectfully which can help build community. The word for this in the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River Region is 'dadirri' (da-did-ee).

Dr. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, an Aboriginal Elder from this region describes the concept as follows:



*In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years. Another part of 'dadirri' is the quiet stillness and the waiting. Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course - like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth.<sup>7</sup>*

# Language considerations

# 4



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This section covers terms that should be carefully considered and/or avoided when communicating with or about First Nations peoples. The rationales and recommended alternative terms are included.

These language considerations have been adapted from: Indigenous Australian Health and Cultures,<sup>8</sup> ‘Language and Terminology Guide’<sup>9</sup> and ‘Communicating Positively: A Guide to Appropriate Aboriginal Terminology’<sup>10</sup>.



## Family, communities and culture

Family, Land, language, law and ceremony are key elements of First Nations culture that are interconnected. The First Nations kinship system defines how people relate to one another and determines their role, responsibilities and obligations to each other, to Land and in ceremonies.

It's important to keep in mind that there are different preferences between First Nations communities and individuals. Therefore, always check with the person how they would like to be referred to and if you can use certain First Nations terms.

Avoid using	Considerations
<p>Native, ATSI (as an acronym), Aborigine, Aboriginal/s, Islanders</p>	<p>Consider using: First Nations peoples, Aboriginal person/people, Torres Strait Islander people, or a specific language group. There are many different language groups, e.g. Koori, Murri, Yolngu and Noongar.</p> <p>Rationale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Native', 'Aborigine', 'Aboriginals' or 'Islanders' should be avoided as they do not recognise the diversity of First Nations peoples and have racist connotations from Australia's colonial past. A more appropriate term to use is the adjective 'Aboriginal' (e.g. Aboriginal woman) and always with the person included at the end.</li> <li>• 'ATSI' as an acronym is considered disrespectful to some; in 2007, the Australian Bureau of Statistics received a written request from the Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to not use this term.</li> <li>• It's a sign of respect to refer to First Nations peoples by their language or cultural group such as 'Koori' or 'Noongar'. It also demonstrates the connection to Country.</li> </ul>

Avoid using	Considerations
(Your/their) Mob	<p>Consider using: Family, community</p> <p>Rationale: 'Mob' is a term identifying a group of First Nations peoples associated with a particular place or Country and is generally used by First Nations peoples to identify themselves (e.g. 'my mob') or refer to a language group (e.g. the 'Wiradjuri mob'). It is important to ask for permission before using this term (especially by non-Aboriginal or non-Torres Strait Islander people) as it may be perceived as inappropriate.</p>
Chiefs, old folk	<p>Consider using: Elders</p> <p>Rationale: 'Elders' are men and women who have gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Being of age doesn't mean that a person is an Elder. In their community Elders can be referred to by Aboriginal people as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle'. Sometimes the term 'boss person of the community' is used.</p>
Aboriginal leader	<p>Consider using: Spokesperson, representative</p> <p>Rationale: 'Aboriginal leader' simplifies the complexity of Aboriginal social structures and diversity of the community. Someone can be elected by a group to be their spokesperson or representative. There is not a person that can speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people.</p>

Avoid using	Considerations
Nomad, nomadic lifestyle	<p>Rationale: There has been a long-held myth that First Nations peoples led nomadic lifestyles and wandered about as hunter-gatherers. The claim of Terra Nullius (meaning the land belonged to no one) was based on this kind of distinction. In actual fact, First Nations peoples have an extremely strong connection to Land and many Aboriginal nations have their own distinct borders. Movements were based entirely on their knowledge of the seasons, environment and for other specific purposes. It is helpful to be curious about First Nations peoples and learning from them so that we can accurately and respectfully communicate about their lives, histories and cultures.</p>
Walkabout	<p>Rationale: This word has a different meaning to different First Nations peoples. It's often used by non-Aboriginal people in a non-traditional context, for example, when someone is late or doesn't turn up. Describe the situation or action instead of using this term and ask the person what the word means to them.</p>



## History

Using language that acknowledges historical events and the experiences of First Nations peoples after colonisation is important to demonstrate respect and understanding. It is crucial to learn about and be aware of Australia's history and its impacts on First Nations communities.

Avoid using	Considerations
The Government	<p>Consider if the use of the term is needed. If it's a local government organisation or initiative you're referring to, consider using (depending on the type of organisation) 'your local health network', 'your local council' or 'community network'.</p> <p>Rationale: The word 'government' could be associated with negative connotations due to past and recent policies that have caused trauma and grief for First Nations peoples.</p>
European settlement, European arrival	<p>Consider using: European invasion, European colonisation</p> <p>Rationale: The importance of using the term 'invasion' or 'colonisation' over 'settlement' or 'arrival' is that it acknowledges First Nations peoples' experiences, the force that has been used and the absence of negotiation.</p>
The stolen ones, the lost kids	<p>Consider using: The Stolen Generation(s)</p> <p>Rationale: Policies of forced removals of First Nations children were in place from 1910 to 1969, however there are many stories of forced removals before and after these dates. The term Generation(s) acknowledges the impact it has on the children, their parents and families and their descendants.</p>

## Care needs and health

First Nations peoples have a holistic view on health that includes mental, physical, cultural and spiritual health, with Country being central to wellbeing. Many medical problems do not have a traditional name (e.g. dementia, depression, pain, heart problems). It is important to use the terms to raise awareness and to explain the disease and symptoms in plain language. Terms used by the person to express how they feel may be 'no good spirit', 'feeling sad and lonely', 'feeling no good', 'longing/crying/being sick for Country'. It may be helpful to use [communication cards](#) to help with communication and explaining medical terms.

It is important to deliver care that is appropriate to the individual, responsive to their needs and expressed in their way and from their perspective.

Avoid using	Considerations
Dying, death	Consider using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad News (a Torres Strait Islander term that refers to a period of cultural practices and protocols associated with the passing of a loved one)</li> <li>• Sorry Business (an Aboriginal term that refers to a period of cultural practices and protocols associated with the passing of a loved one)</li> </ul>
Institution, health facility, aged care facility	Consider using: care home, clinic (can be seen as a symbol of Western medicine), aged care, health and wellness centre  Rationale: The word 'institution' and 'facility' may have negative connotations due to past and recent policies that caused trauma for First Nations peoples.

# Resources, references and acknowledgements

# 5





The resources below are just some examples where you can find additional information about topics covered in this guide.

## External resources

The Dementia Centre has developed multiple resources for First Nations peoples' family carers and care staff. A brochure and poster about the DSA service, helpsheets and a set of 58 Communication Cards can be accessed via the DSA Resources Library at <https://www.dementia.com.au/resource-hub>

## Books

- Thackrah, R., Scott, K., & Winch, J. (2011). **Indigenous Australian Health and Cultures: An introduction for health professionals.**
- Brett Biles & Jessica Biles (2019). **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Health & Wellbeing.**
- Bible Society Australia (2017). **Our Mob, God's Story. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists Share their Faith.**

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Dementia Support Australia (DSA) is a free nationwide service led by HammondCare, funded by the Australian Government. Our role is to improve the quality of life for people living with dementia and their carers. We do this by getting to know the person with dementia to understand the causes of changes in behaviour and work together with carers, care workers and local networks to work out the best plan. We keep in contact with carers and care workers while they support the person with dementia to live well in their own environment.

DSA offers free support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year throughout Australia. Contact DSA or refer someone with dementia to our service through:

 **1800 699 799**

 **dsa@dementia.com.au**

 **dementia.com.au**



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