



Safety and Opportunity Philosophy

August 2025



Acknowledgments

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We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the Traditional Custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded.



We celebrate, value and include people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies and abilities.

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Overview

Background

Being and feeling safe and supported is important for all of us. Many services have historically viewed safety as the absence of risk and have therefore sought to support safety by taking steps to identify and mitigate risks.

This approach has resulted in unintended negative consequences for people that have accessed services. These include:

- the non-reflexive use of tools that might be biased, imprecise, or not supported by good evidence
- a power imbalance where plans are developed by – and for – services rather than consumers
- actions being taken to reduce risks that are in themselves harmful to consumers
- the priorities, values, and goals of services and staff being privileged over those of consumers and the people in their lives.

Contemporary evidence, including from the consumer movement, has told us that a different approach is needed, which includes:

- a focus on co-creating safety rather than managing the risk of harm
- consumers telling their own stories and making their own decisions
- a recognition of our duty to take steps to ensure that the decisions and actions of staff and teams do not cause harm to those they affect
- using dialogue to seek to understand different perspectives and work collaboratively when there are concerns about someone's safety.

Neami recognised a need to adjust our systems, practices, and processes about how risk and safety. The first step was to develop a safety philosophy, which is set out in this document. This framework sets out the foundational principles that underlie how Neami staff and teams can work collaboratively with consumers and the people in their lives to co-create safety.

This framework has six themes, and each theme includes four headings:

1. **We believe...** a value statement
2. **Because...** why it's important
3. **We expect to see...** what we expect to see in practice
4. **So people can experience...** what we hope will be experienced as a result.



Themes

1. Human needs as human rights

We believe safety is created when human rights are upheld.

2. Genuine relationships

We believe in collaboratively building genuine relationships that are trusting and safe enough.

3. Multiple ways of knowing inform our thinking

We believe understanding safety and opportunity relies on bringing together different ways of knowing, including those of people with lived and living experience.

4. Collaborative curious culture

We believe in enabling, fostering and expecting a culture that is both collaborative and curious.

5. Opportunities grow safety

We believe safety develops through opportunity to do (or not do) things, including opportunities to try things out and take risks.

6. There's always room to grow

We believe that checking in with ourselves and each other helps us to co-create safety.



1. Human needs as human rights

We believe safety is created when human rights are upheld.

Because

- Being and feeling safe and having opportunities are fundamental human needs essential to wellbeing.
- People have the right to confidentiality, to refuse treatment, and to decide who is and is not involved in their support.
- Staff have a responsibility to take care for the health, wellbeing, and safety of everybody that is affected by how we go about our work.
- Traditional approaches to risk management can overlook human needs and rights, and this can undermine genuine relationships and limits opportunities for growth.

We expect to see

- Acknowledgement of human needs and human rights displayed in services and internal documentation.
- Information about rights is made available to consumers, carers, children and young people and members of the public in a way that they can understand.
- Neami advocating for sector and government recognition of human rights as the basis of working with safety.

So people can experience

- A culture of shared understanding about human needs as human rights.
- A focus on promoting choice and supporting safety and opportunity rather than a focus on assessing and managing risk.
- Enough safety and support to make choices.
- Services informed by an understanding of human development.

2. Genuine relationships

We believe in collaboratively building genuine relationships that are trusting and safe enough.



Because

- Building trust is the foundation of connection and connection helps us thrive.
- The relationship is at the core of what we do.
- It takes time to know and understand people.
- The process of relational repair can foster growth, safety and opportunity.
- We know the trust and alliance between consumer and worker is an evidence-based predictor of better outcomes.

We expect to see

- Coming together to make sense of what is going on, what matters, and what will help.
- Our relationships hold connectedness through sharing responsibility and power.
- Our documentation facilitates genuine relationships.
- Staff and consumers build a sense of belonging and community Fractures in relationships are worked through.
- Staff engaging with people through a relational, collaborative and contextualised orientation.

So people can experience

- Genuine relationships across and within services.
- A sense of trust and respect.
- Opportunities to learn from each other.



3. Multiple ways of knowing inform our thinking

We believe understanding safety and opportunity relies on bringing together different ways of knowing, including those of people with lived and living experience.

Because

- People have different ideas about safety and opportunity that are influenced by many factors
Traditional risk management approaches have excluded the perspectives of people with lived experience and diverse ways of knowing.
- There is evidence that practices intended to keep people safe have in fact been harmful and created distrust in the system.
- Bringing together multiple ways of knowing improves our capacity to provide a welcoming service that fosters opportunities for agency, choice and self-determination.

We expect to see

- Multiple ways of knowing informing our practice, training, and professional development activities.
- Lived experience knowledge is centred in service design, implementation, evaluation and practice.
- Systems, practices, and processes are co-designed and acknowledge diverse ways of knowing.
- Staff are reflective and open to other ways of knowing.
- Respect for, and evidence of the presence of, multiple ways of knowing within organisational leadership.

So people can experience

- Being seen and understood.
- Respect for and curiosity regarding their ways of knowing.
- Opportunities to learn about self and others.



4. Collaborative curious culture

We believe in enabling, fostering and expecting a culture that is both collaborative and curious.

Because

- Being curious helps us understand our own and others' perspectives and priorities.
- Sharing our truths helps us feel connected, creates collective wisdom, and helps Neami grow.
- Practising self-compassion and curiosity is just as important as practising compassion and curiosity towards others.

We expect to see

- Practising being curious about ourselves.
- Engaging in ways that inspire, lead, create, and share.
- A culture where sitting with uncertainty is okay.
- Building collaboration through leveraging strengths, encouraging innovation, keeping promises, and communicating expectations.
- That curiosity is a practice that is developed over time.

So people can experience

- Spaces for reflection prioritised at all levels of the organisation.
- Problems and decisions approached collaboratively through dialogue.
- A culture where asking for help is championed.



5. Opportunities grow safety

We believe safety develops through opportunity to do (or not do) things, including opportunities to try things out and take risks.

Because

- Environments support safety by enabling opportunities.
- Time, space, and resources are needed to foster safety.
- Growing safety involves continual learning.

We expect to see

- Communication that provides hope, affirmation and encouragement.
- Ways of working that encourage growth through opportunities and taking risks.
- That risk is acknowledged and considered but not the focus.
- The opportunity to stay the same is placed alongside other possibilities and seen as just as meaningful a choice as creating change.

So people can experience

- Feeling supported to try things out.
- Supportive management.
- Feeling that it is okay to make mistakes.



6. There's always room to grow

We believe that checking in with ourselves and each other helps us to co-create safety.

Because

- We go about our work collaboratively.
- We are all accountable to ourselves and each other.
- Good practice requires people to grow and learn from themselves and each other.
- Workers require ongoing support and development.

We expect to see

- Teams of consumers, carers, and staff working together to reach decisions and solve problems.
- Spaces for reflection and opportunities for growth at every level of the organisation.
- Conversations where we seek to understand each other's points of view.
- Staff and teams coming to see challenging situations as opportunities for improvement.

So people can experience

- Clarity of boundaries and professional relationships.
- Opportunities to ask for support when needed.
- Opportunities to learn together.



How the safety and opportunity philosophy was developed

A staged approach

Stage 1: Co-creating a philosophy about safety	– Through conversations with a consulting firm called Our Curious Minds, we explored a broad shift in the literature from focusing on minimising risk to optimising safety. – Consultation processes occurred at Neami and Me Well (a former subsidiary of Neami) that included internal stakeholders and a range of people from the community including consumers and carers. – A larger organisational project was established to align ourselves with the current literature and best practices. – The first version of the Safety and Opportunity Philosophy was developed and published in June 2021.
Stage 2: Revising our guidance and direction about safety	– A working group was established at Neami to realign our ways of working with the evidence reflected in Neami's Safety and Opportunity Philosophy. – The working group used dialogue and further consultation processes to engage with the considerations that inform practice at Neami, including the introduction of Collaborative Relational Practice (CRP) and external compliance requirements.
Stage 3: Revising our systems, processes, and practices	– Neami's suite of policies, procedures, guidelines, and forms were rewritten to set out the systems, processes, and practices that were developed following stages 1 and 2. – The new systems, processes, and practices were piloted and finalised based on feedback from the pilot.
Stage 4: Supporting practice change	– The Safety & Opportunity Philosophy was implemented across Neami. This included the development of e-learning modules to support staff to go about their work in alignment with the Safety & Opportunity Philosophy.
Stage 5: Checking in	– The framework, policy, and guideline were added to Neami's Policy Library. – They will be reviewed every 36 months.



Consultation process

Neami National consultations

Stage 1 included a range of internally facilitated online consultations with consumers, carers, staff and board members. Consumer and carer consultations were conducted by people with lived experience. These sessions focused on engaging with Neami staff (as at the time Me Well was undergoing a separate but similar process).

There were 15 consultations held between 12 August and 2 September 2020. Most consultations were focus groups with some consumers and carers provided an option to participate in one-to-one sessions.

A limitation was that it was difficult to engage with consumers and carers during COVID-19 and we recognise that the numbers are lower than we had hoped/anticipated.

Me Well consultation

In July 2019 Me Well received grant funding for several projects under the DHHS (Victoria) NDIS Readiness Grant Program. Me Well identified three workforce development projects that would best support consumer participation through co-design. The Peer Model Pilot Program, Safeguarding Participants and Staff, and Pathways to Support (formerly known as NDIS Access and Navigation and Clinical Supports).

The Safeguarding project was guided by the question “How might we build care, confidence and capability in safeguarding and embed great practice for suicide prevention at Me Well?”

Me Well partnered with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) to support a research and co-design process. The starting point was to investigate and identify current gaps in Me Well suicide risk processes by interviewing nine frontline, management, and other staff at Me Well and Neami and researching examples of innovative practices that may be applied to the NDIS context.

Using the information gathered, Me Well and TACSI facilitated a co-design process with 15 different people from the community to assess what was learnt and to design a case for an improved and desired future state, co-designers included Me Well staff and participants, people with a lived experience of mental ill health, professionals from community mental health and NDIS sectors and curious and critical thinkers from non-related backgrounds such as corporate workers and musicians.

The group created a wealth of insights and suggestions about how the Me Well community needs to change in relation to safety and wellbeing, identifying key principles and developing resources to promote conversation, reflection and change.



More information

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