

# What's the harm?

## Development of a Practice Guide for Understanding and Responding to Co-Occurring Gambling and Substance Use Harms

### WHAT IS IT?

 *What's the Harm? A Guide to Understanding and Responding to Co-Occurring Gambling and Substance Use Harms in Service Settings*,<sup>1</sup> emerged out of a project led by the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA). It provides clear guidelines for service providers to recognise and respond to co-occurring gambling and substance use harms.

### HOW DID WE DEVELOP IT?

1. Focus groups identified **service needs and gaps**.
2. Expert committee was convened to develop **key themes** based on identified needs and gaps.
3. Key themes were translated into **knowledge points**.
4. Knowledge points were translated into **practice points**.



### WHO'S IT FOR?

If you work in a health or allied health service setting where you regularly interact with people who are or who may be experiencing gambling and / or substance use harms this *Guide to Understanding and Responding to Co-Occurring Gambling and Substance Use Harms in Service Settings* is for you!



### WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Co-occurrence of gambling and substance use harms is well-established in the literature,<sup>2</sup> supported by population and service user survey evidence,<sup>3</sup> and recognised by those working in the sector.<sup>4</sup>

Co-occurring gambling and substance use may result in greater harms,<sup>2</sup> may complicate clinical responses,<sup>5</sup> raise the risk of premature cessation of treatment,<sup>6</sup> and increase the likelihood of a person presenting with additional harms or complexities.<sup>7</sup>

### HOW DO I USE IT?

- Keep a copy of the *Guide to Understanding and Responding to Co-Occurring Gambling and Substance Use Harms in Service Settings* on hand.
- Familiarise yourself with the key Knowledge Points and Practice Points.
- Complete the online training modules.
- Share your learnings with your team.

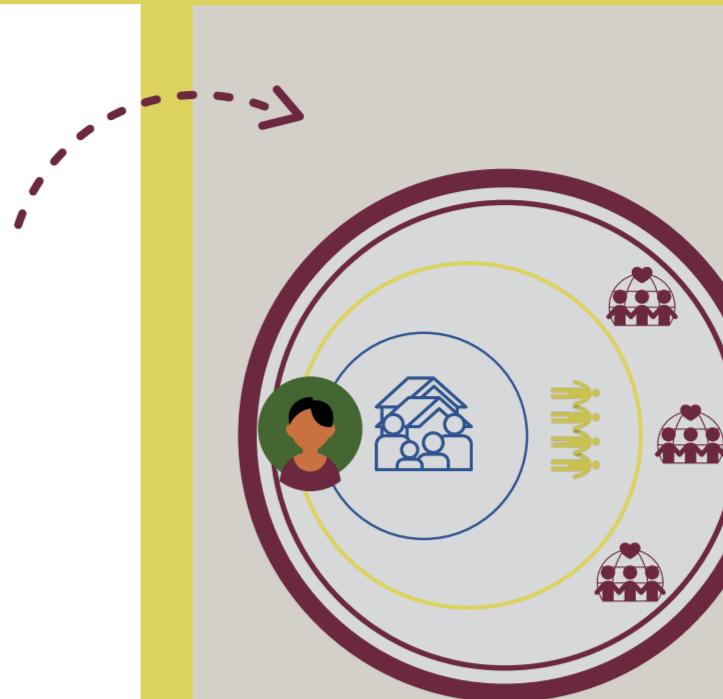


### THEME ONE: THE EXPERIENCE OF HARMS

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**Knowledge point:** Harms from gambling and / or substance use are complex and overlapping, impacting not just the individual but a wider circle including family, community and society at large.

**Practice point:** Explore with service users their understanding and experience of the impacts of their gambling and substance use and what they have observed about the impact on those around them.



By the time a person seeks and receives therapeutic support, the harms they experience from their gambling or substance use can be extensive, multi-faceted and extend beyond the individual to impact families, communities and society at large.

#### THEME TWO: THE CO-OCCURRENCE OF GAMBLING AND SUBSTANCE USE HARMS

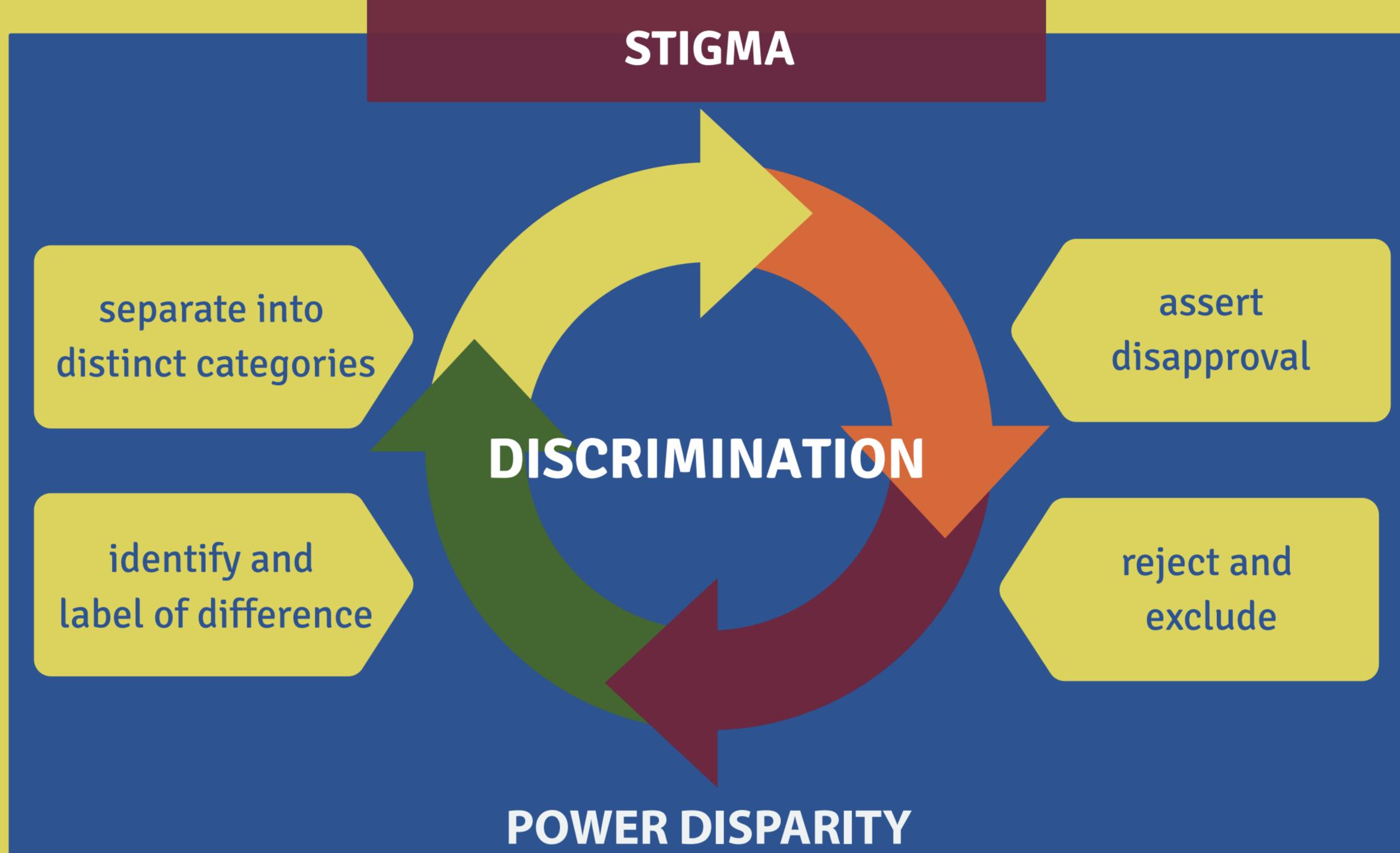
**Knowledge point:** Experiencing harms from substance use can increase the risk of experiencing gambling harms and vice versa.

**Practice point:** Be curious and ask questions that may open broader conversations about co-occurring gambling and substance use.



of people currently seeking support for gambling, are estimated to be experiencing co-occurring alcohol use harms.<sup>8</sup>

21.2%



#### THEME THREE: OVERCOMING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

**Knowledge point:** People who are experiencing co-occurring gambling and substance use harms can face barriers to accessing or remaining engaged with treatment as a result of stigma (including self-stigmatisation) and discrimination, in relation to one or both of these issues.

**Practice point:** Be prepared to challenge your own biases and assumptions, so you can support service users in ways that are non-judgemental and empathetic. Consider interventions to reduce stigma at an individual and / or organisational or broader structural level.

#### THEME FOUR: TALKING ABOUT CO-OCCURRING HARMS

**Knowledge point:** The language used in a service setting can counter stigma and discrimination, signal a welcoming and non-judgemental environment, and create a safe place for mutually addressing co-occurring harms.

**Practice point:** Be familiar with best practice language but don't let fear of saying the wrong thing (or saying the right thing in the wrong way) stop you from having important conversations about a service user's gambling and substance use.

#### THEME FIVE: CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

**Knowledge point:** Trauma is a common factor in both gambling and substance use and is highly prevalent in people seeking support or treatment for co-occurring gambling and substance use.

**Practice point:** Integrate the principles of trauma informed care into your practice and adopt the 'universal precautions' approach. Be aware of the risk of vicarious trauma and take steps to ensure you have appropriate support and self-care practices in place.

#### THEME SIX: SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT FOR CO-OCCURRING HARMS

**Knowledge point:** Screening tools can be useful in some contexts but don't necessarily capture everything about a service user's experience of harms from gambling and substance use.

**Practice point:** Use screening tools when appropriate but be aware of their limitations and be prepared for ongoing conversations about co-occurring harms.

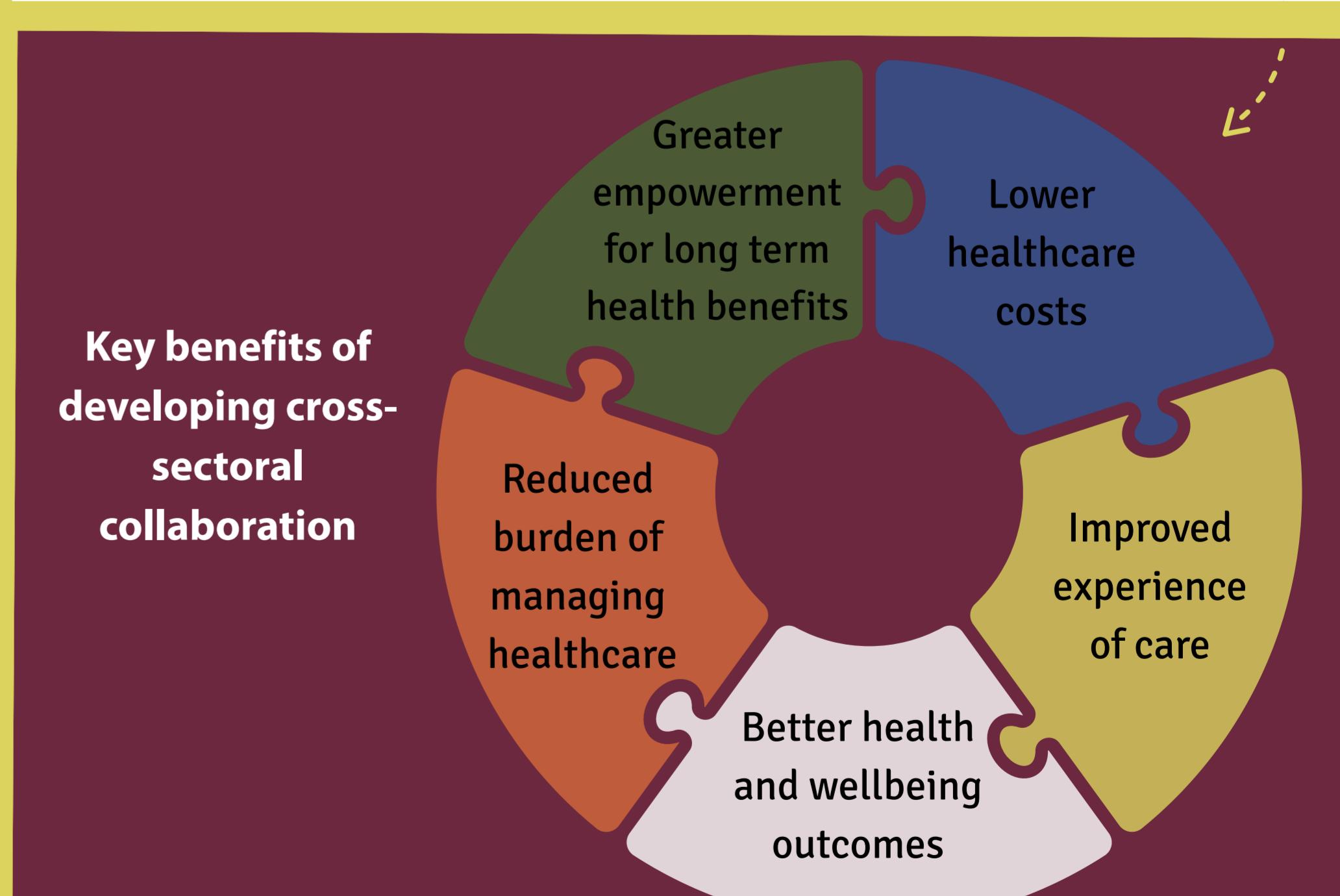
#### THEME SEVEN: RESPONDING TO CO-OCCURRING HARMS

**Knowledge point:** There are a range of different interventions for gambling and substance use, and no 'one-size-fits-all'!

**Practice point:** Brief interventions are an important starting point. Utilise the **FRAMES** method – **F**eedback, **R**espect, **A**dvice, **M**enu, **E**mpathy, and **S**elf-efficacy and follow up with the most appropriate support for the service user.

**Knowledge point:** Where there is greater collaboration between services, a service user will experience better treatment outcomes.

**Practice point:** Collaboration should be established at multiple levels and encompass both formal and informal partnerships between services and between individual workers.



CULTURALLY SAFE SERVICES WILL CONSULT WITH LOCAL ABORIGINAL LEADERS AND ORGANISATIONS TO LISTEN AND LEARN ABOUT HOW THEIR COMMUNITY MIGHT BEST BE SERVED.

#### THEME EIGHT: MAKING REFERRALS

**Knowledge point:** Referring to the right service or services will often be a critical factor in good treatment and harm reduction outcomes for a person experiencing co-occurring gambling and substance use harms.

**Practice point:** Take time to familiarise yourself with local services; get to know intake officers or other key personnel who can facilitate smooth referrals.

A KEY BENEFIT OF A WARM REFERRAL IS REDUCING THE NEED FOR THE SERVICE USER TO REPEAT THEIR STORY MULTIPLE TIMES.



DOWNLOAD YOUR COPY OF THE PRACTICE GUIDE

#### THEME TEN: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

**Knowledge point:** The diverse backgrounds and experiences that service users come with may present an additional barrier to treatment access and engagement.

**Practice point:** Familiarise yourself with resources and services that can support service users of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

#### References

<https://www.atoda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/References-APSAD-poster.pdf>

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