



Let's Yarn About
SLEEP!

FACILITATOR GUIDEBOOK

Sleep Yarns

WITH

TOTEMS, SPIRIT FAMILIES, & STORIES

letsyarnaboutsleeeep.org



Proudly supported by

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Blue**

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Let's Yarn About Sleep Group acknowledges the traditional custodians of the unceded lands, seas and skies of Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge their continued connection and care of their Country.

Attributions

We acknowledge all contributors and peer reviewers who helped to shape this resource guide. This edition consolidates the guide created by, within, and for the Mount Isa community and the guide created for appropriate adaptation for use in other Australian First Nations communities.

Language

Throughout this document, the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' are used interchangeably to reference the First Nations people and communities of Australia. Within LYAS, we use the term 'First Nations'. However, when we work with specific communities or language groups, we seek guidance from those in authority about the respectful and appropriate language protocols.

Notice Of Custodial Interest Of The Mount Isa (Kalkadoon) Community

The images in these artworks embody ritual knowledge of the Mount Isa (Kalkadoon) community. They, and this resource guide, were created with the consent of the custodians of the community. Dealing with any part of the images for any purpose that has not been authorised by the custodians is a serious breach of the customary laws of the Mount Isa (Kalkadoon) community, and may breach the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). For enquiries regarding the permitted reproduction of these images, contact Mount Isa (Kalkadoon) community representatives.

Funding Statement

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ICIP Statement

The featured artworks in this resource are by artist Jacqueline Dunn and were commissioned for the Let's Yarn About Sleep Group. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the primary rights owners of First Nations collection materials. Let's Yarn About Sleep has the artist's permission to use the commissioned works for non-commercial, education purposes. Should the artist change these permissions in the future for any reason, Let's Yarn About Sleep will remove these resources from all platforms. For resources already downloaded by consumers, it is the responsibility of the individual to follow the correct Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) processes.

Front cover image compiled with:

Let's Yarn About Sleep, image courtesy of Aunty Joan Marshall, OAM and Kalkadoon Elders. The LYAS logo is derived from the artwork "Let's Yarn About Sleep" created by Aunty Joan Marshall and Kalkadoon community members.

Feltman® acknowledgment

Feltman® is a diabetes education tool made by Diabetes Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO).

We gratefully acknowledge Diabetes Victoria and VACCHO for permitting and supporting the adaptation of Feltman® for sleep health education purposes.

Citation

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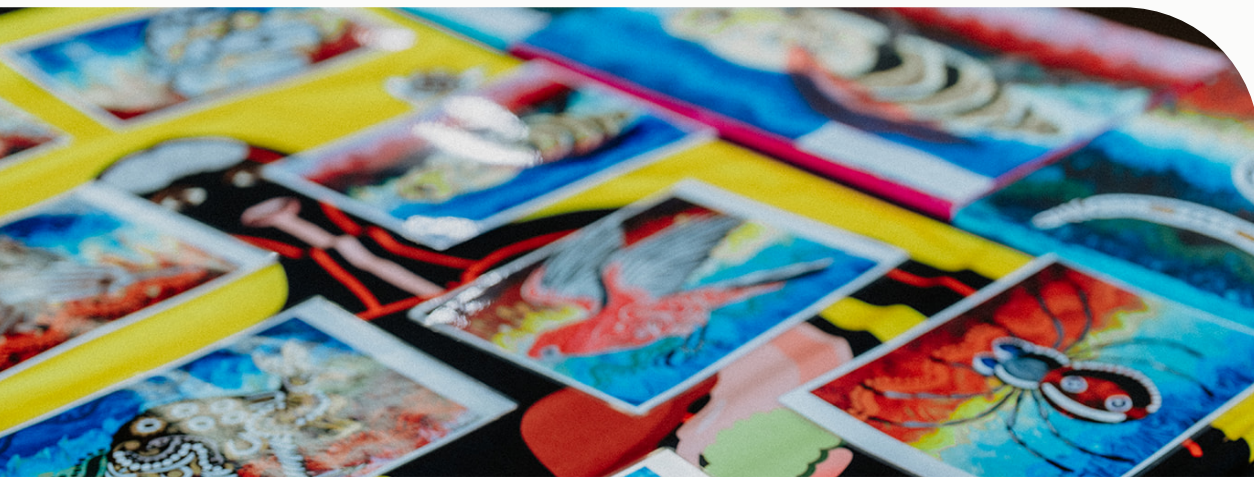
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About the artist: Jacqueline Dunn

Jacki Dunn is a proud Waanyi, Gangalidda woman with Pitta Pitta ancestry through her father and Arrente through her mother. As of date of publishing, Jacki has created two more sleep yarn artworks.

“Both my parents showed me ways of traditional painting and drawing. I paint contemporary Aboriginal art style. I was born and grew up in Mount Isa, and left Isa in my early 20’s. I didn’t start painting until 26 years of age while living in Townsville and moved to Brisbane. I’m now living in Mount Isa.”



01 Introduction

About this resource, how it was created and how it can be used to facilitate Sleep Yarns.



About Let's Yarn About Sleep

Let's Yarn About Sleep (LYAS) is Australia's first sleep health equity program, striving to promote culturally responsive sleep health care and achieve healthy sleep alongside First Nations Australians. The LYAS program is rooted in co-design, end-user empowerment, shared decision-making, and a deep understanding of local priorities and began in Mount Isa on Kalkadoon Country in collaboration with the Kalkadoon Elders who expressed the need for better sleep for their community's young people. Since then, Let's Yarn About Sleep has continued to grow roots within 20 communities in Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory, collaborating with community members and Elders through journeys of genuine engagement, consultation and collaboration to address systemic inequities in sleep health care.

Why this Resource was Created

Community consultation and co-design showed there was a lack of resources to support sleep health education in First Nations communities in Australia. The resources in this booklet were created by local community members and knowledge holders in the Mount Isa community.

How this Resource has Been Used

This resource has been used to support culturally responsive sleep health education in the Mount Isa community, with adolescents as part of the LYAS Sleep For Strong Souls program.

Important to Consider Before Use

LYAS has delivered these tools in conjunction with the Feltman[®] tool with Diabetes Victoria and the Victoria Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)¹. Organisations can approach and contact Diabetes Victoria and VACCHO for proper agreements and use of Feltman[®], should they wish to implement these tools in a similar way. The cards in this resource can be used in different educational forms otherwise.

Not all totems, animals, artworks, or descriptions in this guidebook will apply to every First Nations community context.

¹ Diabetes Victoria. (n.d.). Feltman and Feltmum. Retrieved January 20, 2026, from <https://www.diabetesvic.org.au/support-services/support/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/feltman-and-feltmum/>

Purpose and Application

This engaging, hands-on activity is designed to help participants understand how sleep loss affects physical, social-emotional, and spiritual well-being. Using animal, spirit family, or totem cards as relatable metaphors, participants explore the impact of poor sleep on various physical and mental functions and why it is important to protect and prioritise sleep health.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the activity, participants will:

- Recognise how sleep loss affects different body systems.
- Understand the importance of sleep for mental, emotional, and physical health.
- Remember key health messages using culturally appropriate metaphors.
- Feel motivated to improve their sleep habits.

Materials Needed

- Set of cards (each card shows an animal and explains how sleep loss affects a specific body part or function)
- Large human body outline poster or mat
- Tape, Velcro, or magnets (to attach cards to the body outline)
- Marker or pointer (optional)

Setup

1. Lay out the human body outline on a table or mount it on a wall where all participants can easily see and reach.
2. Prepare the animal cards by mixing them or organizing them for easy distribution.

***Totem:** refers here to a natural object, animal, or person that is believed to have spiritual significance or representative of a particular cultural group.*

***Spirit Family:** refers here to either a spiritual concept, connection or specific families/groups that hold deep energetic resonance for a person.*

Instructions for Facilitators

Step 1: Introduction

- Briefly introduce the importance of sleep and how it affects overall health.
- Explain that each totem card represents a part of the body affected by sleep loss and what that means.

Step 2: Matching activity

- Distribute the cards to participants or place them on a table.
- Invite participants to place each card near the body part on the outline where they think sleep loss causes the effect described.
- Encourage discussion as participants decide where to place cards and why.

Step 3: Review and explanation

- Go through each animal card with the group.
- Elaborate on how sleep loss impacts that part of the body, using simple language and examples.

Step 4: Group reflection and discussion

- Ask participants how the activity helped them understand the importance of sleep.
- Invite participants to share personal experiences or thoughts about sleep and health.
- Reinforce key messages about the role of sleep in brain function, emotional and spiritual well-being, physical health, and safety.

Facilitation Tips

- Adjust timing based on group size and engagement level.
- Use simple language and relate information to participants' daily lives.
- Encourage questions and active participation.
- Use examples or stories to illustrate key points.



02 Totems, spirit families & story cards

This section contains the cards, their names, and each part of the body, mind, and spirit they are symbolic of. These cards and their descriptions were created by the Kalkadoon community Elders and leaders, and may not be culturally appropriate for all First Nations Australian communities.



GALAH

MENTAL HEALTH

Galah is an active, high-energy, playful bird, but it can be easily traumatised if handled roughly. Like a traumatised Galah, lack of sleep can affect mental and emotional health. Sleep and mental health are very closely linked. People who do not sleep well are at high risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. Good sleep strengthens emotional and mental resilience, improves coping with bad things, and reduces stress and negative thoughts.



KANGAROO

MEMORY

Kangaroos are known for their memory and ability to remember the lay of the land and their surroundings. Like a Kangaroo, a good memory is a key to success in life. During sleep, your brain forms new pathways that help you process and store information as memories and allow your brain to recall information when needed. When you don't get enough sleep, your brain can't form these pathways, making it harder to focus, concentrate, and remember things you've learned. Sleep loss can affect both your short- and long-term memory. So, if you sleep well like a Kangaroo, you can hop and bounce through difficult stages in your life with high energy and a clear mind.



CROCODILE

FOCUS

Crocodiles can stay focused on their prey and have all their attention glued to their target. They can easily switch from being still to suddenly active to catch what they're after. A lack of sleep slows down reaction time and affects your ability to focus. If you don't get enough sleep, you are more likely to make risky choices and lose focus on important things in your life, such as sporting commitments, education, or work.



EMU

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Emu is a curious animal that doesn't like socialising and can quickly lose control of its emotions. Healthy sleep is important for emotional regulation. Night-time sleep affects your daytime mood, emotional reactivity, and your ability to manage both positive and negative emotions. Like an Emu, if you're not sleeping well, you might feel more aggressive and get into arguments or fights with your peers. That's why healthy sleep is important for keeping your emotions balanced and managing stress or life's challenges.



NATIVE BEE

ENERGY

Native bees are very social and full of energy. They keep moving quickly from flower to flower. Like a bee, during sleep, you go through different sleep stages that are important for feeling refreshed when you wake up and for having good energy during the day. If you don't sleep for enough hours, or if your sleep is interrupted, you'll feel tired during the day and won't have enough energy to get through everything you need to do.



BUTTERFLY

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Butterflies are pretty and full of joy and colour. Like a butterfly, good sleep is essential for your physical appearance. Your body repairs and recovers while you sleep, which affects your skin, hair, and overall look. At night, your skin has its highest blood flow, which raises body temperature and helps repair the skin. Not getting enough sleep or going to bed late can cause skin dehydration, dark circles, hair loss, breakage, damage, and even affect your growth.



GOANNA

WEIGHT GAIN

If you overeat, you will swell up like a Goanna. A good night's sleep is important for maintaining a healthy weight. Inadequate sleep affects your metabolism and disrupts the hormonal balance that controls your appetite. When you don't sleep well, your body doesn't respond properly to insulin—a hormone that turns sugar and food into energy—and instead stores it as fat. Poor sleep also makes you crave junk food, feel hungrier, eat unhealthy meals, and skip exercise. Lack of sleep can increase your risk of obesity, high blood pressure, heart problems, and other serious health issues. If you want to maintain a healthy weight, it's time to check your sleep habits and prioritise sleep—so you don't swell up like a Goanna.



ECHIDNA

IMMUNE SYSTEM

Echidnas are solitary animals that hibernate during cold winters in burrows. They need a specific body temperature (25°C) to experience the dreaming stage of sleep (REM sleep) and have a very slow metabolism. This is thought to be one reason why they can live for a long time (up to 50 years). Like an Echidna, you also need a strong immune system—the body’s internal defence that fights infections—to live a healthy and long life. During sleep, different parts of your immune system work together to strengthen your body’s ability to recognise and fight infections. People who don’t sleep well or have late or irregular bedtimes have weaker immune responses, making it easier to get sick and harder to recover from infections. Sleep loss can also increase the chance of allergy attacks in people with food allergies. Therefore, if you sleep well, you are less likely to get sick after being exposed to a virus, like the common cold, and you will have a stronger immune system to fight infections.



SPIDER

BALANCE AND CONTROL

Spiders have a unique ability to control and adjust their movements to keep themselves safe, find food, and respond to changes in their environment. Like spiders, balance, coordination, and movement control are important for keeping us safe. Even one night of poor sleep can make you clumsier and less coordinated. Lack of sleep affects motor control and coordination just like being drunk. If you don't get enough sleep, you may stumble, have uneven steps, slower reaction times, and poor balance. This can make daily activities more dangerous and increase the risk of falls, accidents, and injuries.



SNAKE

LIBIDO

The snake is a symbol of charm and sexual energy. Sleep loss is linked to low sex drive and problems with fertility. If you don't get enough sleep, sex hormones like estrogen and testosterone can become unbalanced, leading to lower libido. Poor sleep can also cause emotional and relationship problems and reduce intimacy. So, besides good health and well-being, good sleep can help promote a better sex life.



03 Adapting this resource

This section contains a story card created during the adaptation of this activity for broader application outside the Kalkadoon community. It complements the previous cards and illustrates how the resource can be customised to reflect the needs of different communities. A template is provided at the end of this section to assist in adapting the tool for use in other Australian First Nations communities and groups.



SKY

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

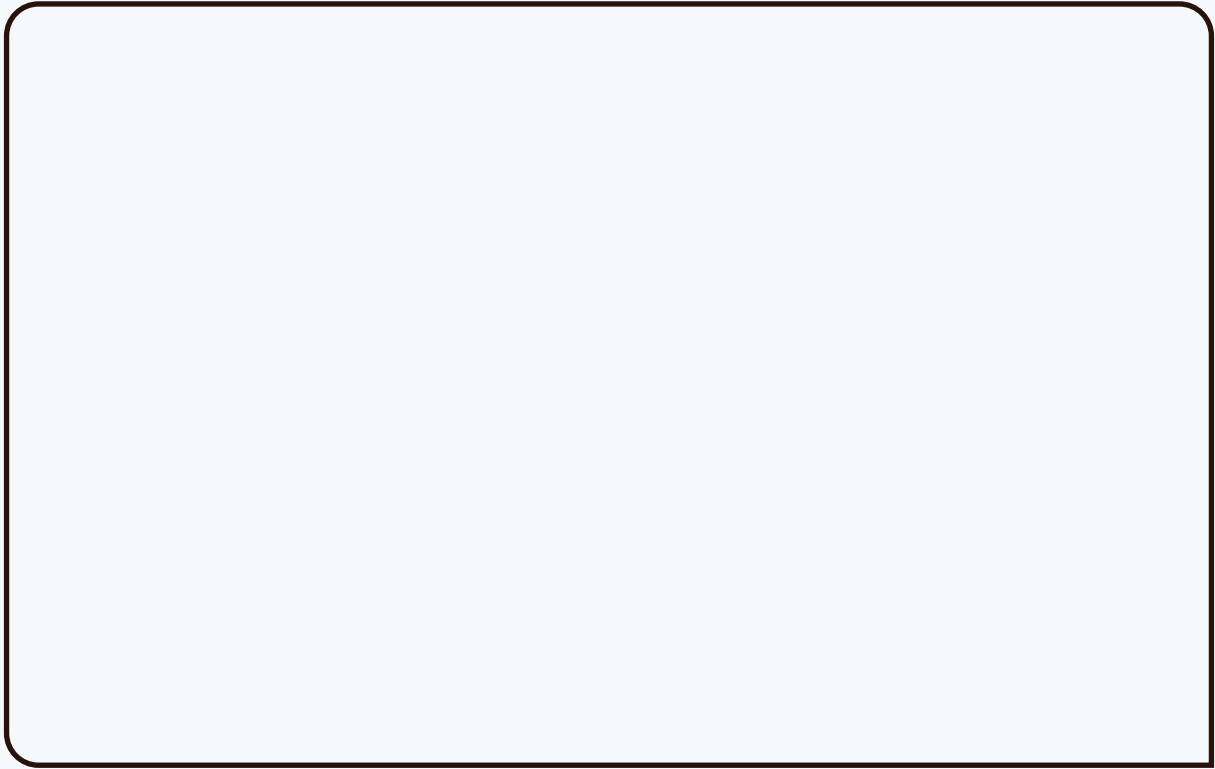
Sleep is like the night sky: a map connecting us like the stars to the land and sea, a space to rest, dream, and find guidance. The Sky is a constant, calm, unchanging entity, while the weather, sunshine, clouds, and storms represent the fleeting nature of our thoughts and feelings. Looking up at the night sky, we see more than the moon and stars. The sky reminds us of our stories and connection to our ancestors, culture, and people. Through dreaming, we can walk with ancestors, hear their wisdom, and carry forward the stories that keep culture strong. Sleep also gives us the energy to participate in cultural ceremonies, dances, and songs and care for our Country. When we are well rested, our spirit feels stronger, happy and full of energy, and we can give more back to our community.

However, when sleep is poor, that connection can weaken. Without proper sleep, it can be harder to remember dreams, feel close to ancestors, or find inspiration for song, dance, or art. Poor sleep can also make it difficult to join in cultural activities or have the energy to care for Country and community. Over time, this can leave the spirit feeling heavy, disconnected, and less able to shine. Just as the stars light the darkness, sleep lights our spirit. It inspires new ideas for art, music, and storytelling. It helps us heal, recover, and stay connected to who we are. The sky is always there, reminding us that sleep is not just about closing our eyes but about keeping spirit, culture, and community alive.

We have intentionally chosen not to commission an artwork for this aspect. Instead we include space for other First Nations Australians to use an image, totem, or symbol to represent spritual well-being that is culturally relevant and appropriate to them.

Using this template

We encourage you to use this template to create more cards to support this resource as you facilitate a Sleep Yarn activity. Creating relevant and culturally significant cards for your community helps the Sleep Yarn activity to become more culturally responsive and reflective of your community's needs.



TOTEM, SPIRIT FAMILY, ANIMAL

SYMBOLISM

Narrative: _____





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