Cultural considerations for health professionals caring for kaumātua - Tapu, Noa and Whakamā

Video transcript

**Audio**

Riser sound starts.

**Visual**

The video opens with a wide aerial shot taken at dusk, showcasing a serene landscape cloaked in rolling fog. The mist moves slowly over a dense forest. In the background, a plume of geothermal steam rises gently into the sky, suggesting the presence of a small town or settlement nestled among the trees. Part of a graphic title frame. The logo of Te Tāhū Hauora – Health Quality & Safety Commission – appears prominently at the top, centred above the main title text. The text reads, “Cultural considerations for health professionals caring for kaumātua,” followed by a subtitle, “Tapu & Noa, Whakamā.” The design overlays a subtle purple-to-pink gradient over the misty forest image, with a stylised koru pattern anchoring the bottom of the frame.

**Audio**

Tapu, noa and whakamā are complex cultural concepts. These tikanga, cultural practises, are designed to keep people spiritually and physically safe. A breach of these tikanga, even unintentionally, is a significant event.

**Visual**

The first visual shows an outdoor care facility where two female caregivers greet each other and one is walking with an elderly man in a wheelchair. The man wears a sunhat and a dark vest over a light blue shirt, while one caregiver wears a blue uniform and the other a beige top and brown trousers. They are moving along a garden path surrounded by manicured grass, trees, and a wooden fence. Overlaid text reads "Tikanga — Cultural practices" with a koru-style design and the Te Tāhū Hauora logo.

In the second image, a close-up view captures the moment more intimately, showing the caregiver pushing the smiling kaumātua in his wheelchair as they pass by a beige building with a window.

**Audio**

To understand how this plays a role in care, it's important to learn about tapu, noa, and whakamā.

**Visual**

We see a close-up of a single fern frond gently angled across the frame, its intricate leaflets sharply in focus against a softly blurred background of lush greenery. The same fern remains visible in the background, but the image is now overlaid with clear text explaining the meanings of key cultural concepts. The words “Tapu,” “Noa,” and “Whakamā” appear on the left in bold, with their definitions—“Sacred, restricted,” “Free from tapu,” and “Shyness, embarrassment or shame”—appearing alongside in lighter font. A subtle koru design fades across the lower portion of the screen, visually linking the cultural knowledge to the natural imagery and reinforcing the theme of interconnectedness between the environment and cultural practices.

**Audio**

Tapu means sacred, protected, and restricted. A person's tapu is related to their mana, both of which are passed down from the gods through whakapapa. Breaching personal tapu occurs when the sacredness of whakapapa is not protected. The head and genitalia are particularly tapu as they represent our whakapapa, the spiritual connection to our past and future genealogy lines. It must be protected at all times and to understand how we do this, let's first talk about noa.

**Visual**

The sequence begins with a close-up of a green fern frond swaying gently, held in someone’s hand, drawing attention to the softness and detail of each leaflet. The following frame reveals more of the scene. As the narration introduces the concept of tapu, the word appears on screen in both te reo Māori and English: "Tapu – Sacredness." The positioning of the fern in the person's grip, held upright and steady, signals respect and intent.

Next, the frame shifts to a heartfelt moment of physical closeness. Inside a softly lit lounge space, a kuia and a caregiver embrace. The tenderness of the embrace reinforces the reverence for kaumātua and the deep emotional bonds tied to whakapapa and care. Another elderly woman seated nearby observes the exchange while holding a drawing, adding to the sense of shared space and intergenerational connection.

The screen fills with an aerial shot of a misty forest. Sunlight streams through the morning fog, casting long beams across the treetops. The next image is a more abstract view of inside the forest looking up, showing soft, diffused light filtering through a canopy while smoke lingers.

We return to the domestic setting as a pair of hands carefully places a scalloped porcelain bowl onto a wooden table next to a door. The bowl is delicate, vintage in style, and the gesture is slow and deliberate, reinforcing the preparation of a sacred ritual. This bowl, holding water, sets the stage for what follows next: the person with the fern is seen approaching the bowl and gently dipping the frond into it. The motion is slow, almost reverent, reinforcing the ritualistic nature of what is unfolding.

Finally, a man dressed in black is pictured outside and begins performing the act of sprinkling water onto the door using the fern. He appears to be undertaking a clearing ritual. This entire sequence illustrates the concept of tapu—not just through words, but through acts of care, respect, ritual, and connection to both people and place.

**Audio**

Noa is a balancing force. It means to be free of tapu, neutral and without restrictions. Food and water are common things that are noa. Breaches happen when things that are noa intersect with things that are tapu and vice versa.

Examples of this include passing food over a person's head, placing items that have touched the head on chairs or surfaces we place food on.

**Visual**

The sequence opens with a wide, serene shot of ocean water. The surface is calm with subtle ripples reflecting the soft pinks and blues of the sky above, suggesting a sense of tranquillity and natural balance. The next shot builds on this scene by introducing text on screen: “Noa – Free of tapu.” The same tranquil ocean continues in the background, but the addition of this definition invites viewers to understand the visual as metaphorical — the water representing the cleansing and neutralising power of noa.

We then move into a more intimate and grounded space, with a close-up of two people at a table. One person gently helps another eat, spooning food from a plate. The scene is warm, and the focus on the hands conveys care, attentiveness, and the ritual of nourishment — a central aspect of *noa*. In the foreground, a glass of juice glows softly, and although blurred, it reinforces the idea of sustenance as a key element in daily care.

The following scene depicts a solitary figure standing in front of a large window, looking out toward a backyard framed by autumnal trees and a grey fence. The figure wears a red and blue beanie and slightly oversized clothing, suggesting a quiet moment of reflection or waiting.

Next, the camera returns to nature with a dense, shadowed shot of native bush — the focus is on a large ponga (tree fern), while the foreground is blurred by mossy textures. As the narration describes breaches of noa and tapu, text appears onscreen:  
"Passing food over a person’s head"  
"Placing items that have touched the head on chairs or surfaces we place food on"  
These points appear over the mossy tree scene, reinforcing the link between nature and cultural knowledge.

**Audio**

Breaches can be significant as they risk spiritual safety and may diminish relationships and trust. To resolve this, we must first acknowledge the misstep. Remain open to listening, learning, and following the lead of kaumātua and whānau. At times, the level of breach may require tikanga expertise and particular ceremonies to restore balance and safety. Kaumātua and whānau can determine what and how this happens.

**Visual**

An elderly person’s hand gently holds a photo, the light catching the texture of their skin and evoking a sense of memory and tenderness. The image then shifts to a quiet stream running through the bush, where water trickles over mossy rocks surrounded by ferns and native trees, a peaceful reminder of the natural world and the sacredness of place. Over this scene, text appears that urges us to acknowledge the misstep and to remain open to listening, learning, and following the lead of kaumātua and whānau.

The sequence then moves indoors, where a hand places a fern leaf into a porcelain bowl, preparing for a ritual of cleansing. A printed sign on a closed door reads "Room to be Blessed", signalling a space that requires spiritual attention. A hand raises a fern, poised in the air, suggesting the beginning of a blessing. Moments later, another sign is pinned up: "This Room is Blessed, You May Enter", confirming that the ritual has been completed. The final image shows a group gathered in conversation, where a woman speaks attentively with an elderly man, highlighting the importance of whānau, care, and shared wisdom in restoring balance and trust.

**Audio**

Whakamā is another concept to be mindful of in practice. It refers to shyness, embarrassment, or shame. This may occur when mana is not upheld or when kaumātua self-sufficiency and autonomy are impacted. For example, whakamā may happen if you breach a person's privacy. When breaches to tapu occur first acknowledge the misstep, then listen, learn, and follow their lead.

**Visual**

The sequence of visuals opens with a wide establishing shot of a residential care facility situated across a riverbank. A manicured lawn is bordered by a black fence, while a cluster of buildings, including what appears to be communal and residential spaces, sits in the background under a moody sky and misty hills. The word Whakamā appears on screen, alongside its English definition: “Shyness, embarrassment or shame.” This overlay signals a thematic shift, cueing viewers to reflect on the emotional undercurrents that might be present within this setting.

We then move indoors, where a kaumātua sits quietly in a wooden chair, dressed warmly in a hoodie and striped beanie, with their hands folded and a serious, contemplative expression on their face. The subtitle Whakamā continues in this shot, anchoring the emotion being expressed visually. The kaumātua looks slightly withdrawn, reinforcing the meaning of the term being introduced, hinting at a moment of internalised discomfort or disconnection.

In the following scene, and elder wāhine and care staff sit together at a table in close proximity. One appears to be gently explaining something to the other, reading or going over written material. Their faces show concentration and care, and the body language is intimate and respectful. This conveys the beginnings of a restorative interaction, a shift from isolation to relational engagement.

A close-up shot follows a pen writing in a lined notebook. The hand appears steady and the words written are partially visible.

We return briefly to the two wāhine at the table, this time focusing more closely on the elder kuia who is now visibly engaged. Her gaze is soft, her lips are pursed, and there is a quiet dignity in her presence. The conversation seems to be building trust, signalling an easing of whakamā through relationships.

The final scene widens again to show the kuia, the female care staff and a male nurse standing beside them. The three are gathered around a colourful printed chart or poster, with the kuia pointing towards something specific. The onscreen text reads “Listen, learn and follow their lead,” reinforcing the intended approach to supporting kaumātua: one that centres respect, attentive care, and cultural responsiveness. The interaction is calm, cooperative, and anchored in shared presence.

**Audio**

In another example, kaumātua may experience changes in physical ability, mobility, or cognition, which can be a source of whakamā. Supportive practices include whakawhanaungatanga, relationship building and supporting kaumātua by focusing on their strengths. By learning about tapu, noa and whakamā, you are showing respect for deeply embedded cultural concepts and demonstrating a willingness to protect the spiritual and physical wellbeing of kaumātua.

**Visual**

The video begins with a wide aerial shot of a residential care village, with well-maintained grounds, light-coloured buildings, and neatly arranged landscaping, indicating a peaceful and welcoming environment. The next scene moves inside, where a caregiver gently holds the hand of a kaumātua, supporting her as she prepares to stand. The caregiver is smiling warmly, creating a sense of trust and compassion.

In the following shots, the caregiver helps the kaumātua rise from her seat, offering both physical support and emotional reassurance. Another staff member is nearby, observing and ready to assist. As the kaumātua steadies herself, the frame shifts to a close-up of her walker, which the caregiver adjusts with care. Hands come into focus, delicately positioned on the handles, symbolising the practical and emotional aspects of the support being provided.

As the narration mentions whakawhanaungatanga, the words “Whakawhanaungatanga – Relationship building” appear onscreen, overlaid on a close-up of both women’s hands gripping the walker together. This moment visually reinforces the message of connection and shared responsibility.

The video then moves outside, showing the kaumātua walking with the support of her walker, accompanied by the caregiver and two other women. They are engaged in gentle conversation, smiling and maintaining eye contact, which conveys a sense of community and dignity.

This is followed by a joyful scene of the caregiver and kaumātua laughing together while walking along a fence line. The caregiver holds on gently from behind to ensure stability, and the kaumātua appears to be enjoying the moment, her face lit up with laughter.

The final visual sequence returns to an aerial view of the wider landscape, cloaked in morning mist with soft light touching the treetops and homes below. The Te Tāhū Hauora logo appears, followed by a call to action inviting viewers to learn more in the Frailty Care Guides at [www.hqsc.govt.nz](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/), all set against a gradient background featuring soft purple and blue tones with elegant Māori design motifs.

The video ends.