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A SUICIDE PREVENTION  
TOOLKIT

# Trauma and suicide in Indigenous people



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suicide prevention



**IN THIS TOOLKIT**

*What is trauma?*

*What are Indigenous  
healing practices?*

*Trauma-Informed Care  
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and historical trauma*

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Trauma is very common among people in Canada, and the Indigenous people in Canada (First Nations, Metis and the Inuit) have nearly 4 times the risk of severe trauma than the non-Indigenous population (Haskell & Randall, 2009).

Colonialism is responsible for much of the trauma experienced by Indigenous people all over the world, and its effects continue to this day (Linklater, 2014; Haskell & Randell, 2009).

Most people receiving treatment for mental health issues have had some form of trauma (Rosenberg, 2011). Trauma places people at higher risk for additional mental health issues such as depression and addiction. People who have experienced trauma are also at greater risk for suicide.

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# What is trauma?

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Trauma is “a horrific event beyond the scope of normal human experience” (Greenwald, 2007).

Some examples of traumatic experiences include:

- motor vehicle collision;
- rape;
- losing a loved one; and
- childhood abuse, neglect.

Some of the many traumatic experiences caused by colonialism include:

- forced settlement of nomadic tribes;
- forced relocation from traditional settlements; and
- removal of children from their homes into residential schools, non-Indigenous foster homes or orphanages in the “sixties scoop”.

## **HISTORICAL TRAUMA**

The traditional ways of living that fostered resiliency in Indigenous communities were almost completely abolished by colonialism: not only did acts of colonialism cause trauma in Indigenous people, but it also affected their means of coping with and healing from trauma. This is why historical trauma is so enduring and continues to negatively affect generation after generation of Indigenous people today (Linklater, 2014; Haskell & Randell, 2009).

## **EFFECTS OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA:**

- depression and mental illness, sometimes leading to suicide;
  - feelings of hopelessness;
  - addiction as a result of coping by drinking or doing drugs (substance abuse); and
  - sexual and physical abuse including domestic violence.
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# What are Indigenous healing practices?

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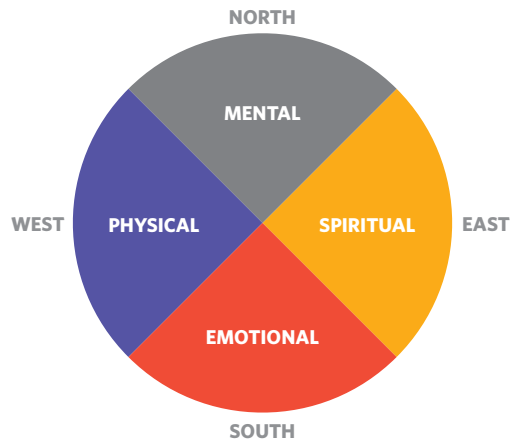
## Indigenous healing practices are often based on natural law and the medicine wheel.

Natural law is the widespread Indigenous belief in the interconnectedness of nature, animals and man. There are 7 natural laws that provide guidance to human beings, each of which are derived from the animals that personify them: Love (eagle), respect (buffalo), courage (bear), honesty (sasquatch), wisdom (beaver), humility (wolf) and truth (turtle) (Bouchard & Martin, 2009; Piitoaysis Family School, n.d.).

The medicine wheel recognizes four aspects of the individual: the physical, the mental, the spiritual, and the emotional. All of these are taken into account when looking at a person's overall health. These aspects are interconnected and, when balanced, an individual is whole and healthy (McCormick, 1996). The coordinate

indicators (north, east, south and west) symbolize the individual's connection with Mother Nature, which is also vital to their health and well-being (Margot, L. & McKenzie, M., 2006).

The medicine wheel approach is different from typical western healing practices because it is holistic and considers all aspects of the individual equally, whereas western medicine tends to focus on the individual's physical health in isolation.



(Veriest, 2006)

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**SOME EXAMPLES OF HEALING PRACTICES INCLUDE:**

- sweat lodges;
- smudging; and
- healing circles.

**EFFECTIVE HEALING PRACTICES:**

- are informed by Indigenous peoples themselves;
- are culturally relevant;
- strengthen bonds with Indigenous traditions and heritage; and
- foster resilience, which helps those exposed to trauma survive, resist and cope with its destructive effects (Haskell & Randell, 2009).

**INDIGENOUS HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS AND HELPERS IN THE HEALING MOVEMENT DRAW ON:**

- ceremonies;
- traditional knowledge; and
- cultural practices (Linklater, 2014).

**COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES: “TWO-EYED SEEING”**

The best health outcomes of Indigenous peoples are achieved when they provide leadership in addressing their own trauma and mental health. However, collaboration between mental health providers, who offer more mainstream approaches, and affected communities is also crucial.

*“Learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing... and using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all”*

**ESKASONI MI'KMAQ ELDER  
ALBERT MARSHALL (HOGUE &  
BARTLETT, 2014, PP. 30-31).**

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# Trauma-Informed Care and Indigenous healing practices

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Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is a determined effort to implement a better approach to treating people that takes into account the impact that previous traumatic experiences have had on an individual's overall mental health.

*“What is wrong with you?” has shifted to “What has happened to you?” (Rosenberg, 2011).*

Most Indigenous communities base their healing practices on the belief that connection with nature and community is vital to the overall health of an individual, while TIC stresses the well-being of the individual.

Read more about TIC in *iE13: Trauma-Informed Care: Trauma, substance abuse and suicide prevention*

Despite this difference, both traditional Indigenous healing practices and TIC share common elements. Both:

- understand that a traumatized person's behaviour is a normal response to trauma;
  - embrace a strengths-based approach (as opposed to a deficiency-based approach which focuses on the flaws in the “character” of the trauma survivor);
  - respect the individual and their culture and treat them with dignity (Haskell & Randell, 2009);
  - are holistic in acknowledging the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual aspects of one's overall health; and
  - believe there is no “cookie-cutter” path for one's health and no single “correct” way or approach (Linklater, 2014).
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**IN ORDER TO EFFECTIVELY TREAT TRAUMATIZED PEOPLE WHO ARE INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE WORKING WITH THEM:**

- need to be trained to deliver a trauma-informed approach in an Indigenous context; and
- must be aware of the interplay of traumatic historical events and social conditions that impact both the community and the individual (Haskell & Randell, 2009; Linklater, 2014).

Cultural safety and competence have been identified as key components in providing services to Indigenous people. Without them there are greater chances of inaccurate or inappropriate assessments, inadequate treatment, and risk of re-traumatization (Twigg & Hengen, 2009).

**TRAUMA-INFORMED INDIGENOUS PROGRAMS**

- Round Lake Treatment Centre, Vernon, British Columbia
  - Biidaaban Healing Lodge, Pic River Nation, Ontario
  - Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society, Lantzville, British Columbia
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# Restorative justice and historical trauma

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## Restorative justice attempts to repair the harms done to people and relationships through wrongdoing.

It tries to restore those damaged relationships and ensure that everyone involved is treated with equal concern, respect and dignity. It is not a return to the past but the creation of a better future (Llewellyn, 2008). People are interconnected and when wrongs are perpetuated it affects not only the victim and offender but the fabric of society.

Restorative justice owes much to the insights of Indigenous conceptions of justice. It is a restoration of balance and harmony like that represented by the medicine wheel (Llewellyn, 2008). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada is one such example of an organization dedicated to restorative justice.

Read the Truth and Reconciliation  
Commission Calls to Action at  
<http://bit.ly/1ETcJ8g>

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