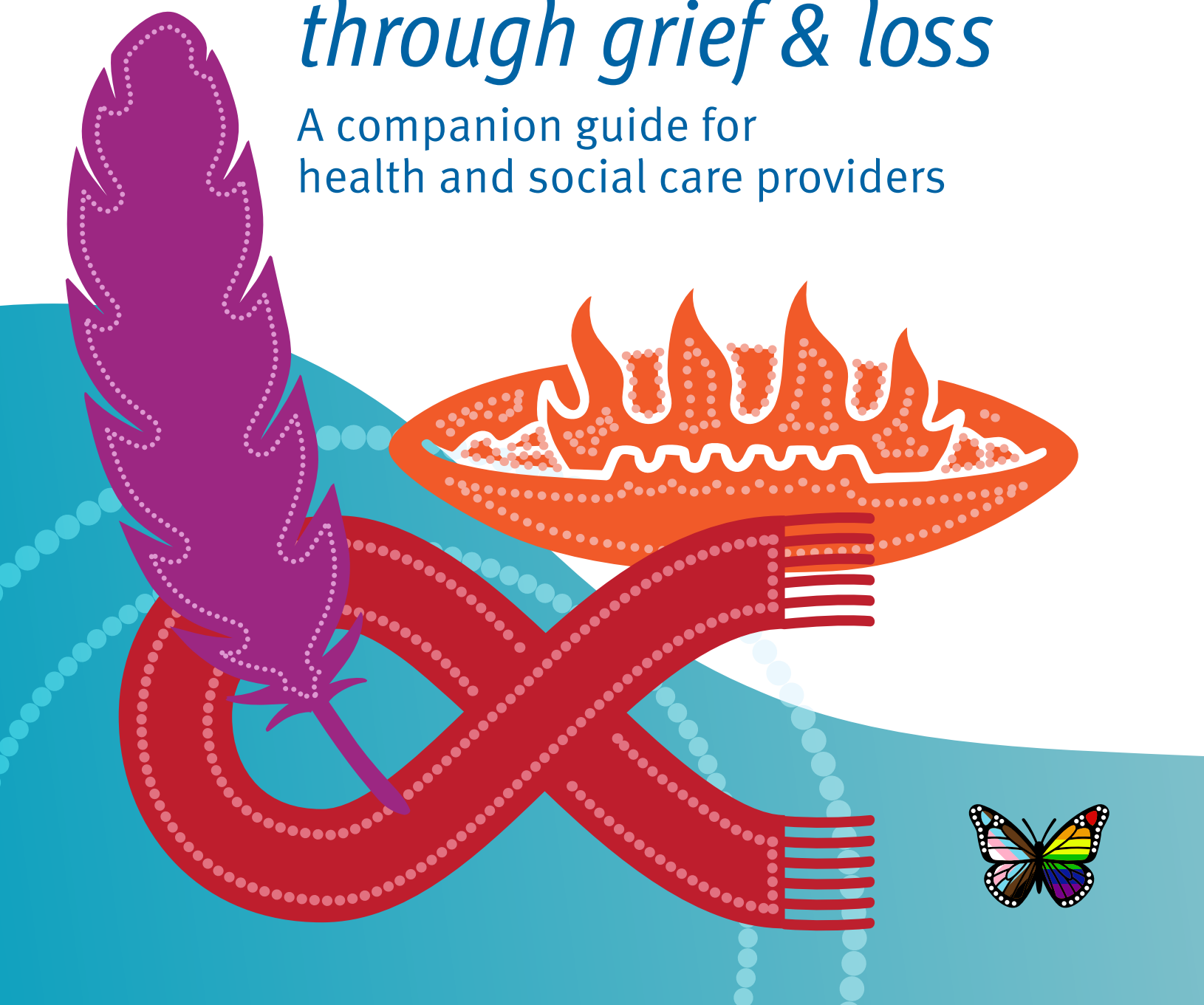




Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss

A companion guide for
health and social care providers



This document was prepared by the Canadian Virtual Hospice. It is intended to provide general information only. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information. The contents do not constitute medical advice and should not be relied upon as such. If you have questions about your health or medical issues, speak with a healthcare provider.

Production of this resource has been made possible through collaboration and financial support from the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer Corporation and Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada or the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer.

The butterfly on the cover features colors to celebrate, honour, and welcome our Two-Spirit/ Indigenous LGBTQI+ people on their paths toward healing and wellness.

Aussi disponible en français :
LivingMyCulture.ca

Please share your feedback on this guide by scanning/clicking the QR code. The purpose of the short survey is to learn from your experience engaging with the Canadian Virtual Hospice Indigenous Voices project. Your feedback will help us strengthen future resource development. Findings will be summarized in aggregate form and may also be used to support future funding applications for Indigenous-led initiatives hosted by Canadian Virtual Hospice. We are committed to using this information respectfully and in ways that reflect the collective experiences shared with us. The survey is anonymous, which means we will not know who has participated.

Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A companion guide for health and social care providers
<https://questionnaire.simplesurvey.com/f/r/CareProviders>





Acknowledgements

Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A companion guide for health and social care providers is part of a project titled *Indigenous Voices 3: Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss*. The Canadian Virtual Hospice (CVH) started this project. It received funding from the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC).

The main goal of this project is to develop Indigenous-led and culturally informed resources and education on grief. It builds on earlier work by CVH in two projects: *Indigenous voices: Stories of serious illness and loss I* and *II*, funded by CPAC from 2016 to 2022.

We gratefully acknowledge Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, whose Indigenous Wellness Framework has informed and shaped the development of this guide. With permission, elements of this model have been integrated throughout the document. We recognize and appreciate Thunderbird Partnership Foundation's leadership and contributions to advancing this work.

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation would like to thank all the individuals, families, and communities who donated several hours of their time to participate in the regional focus groups. The insight, advice, knowledge, and recommendations generously offered during the discussions are invaluable for the development of public health tools and recommendations focused on supporting the existing strengths and needs of First Nations communities across Canada.

The Canadian Virtual Hospice thanks everyone who gave their time, knowledge, and effort to develop this guide. We acknowledge the guidance from the members of the Elders and Knowledge Carriers Circle (EKCC). Their insights were key to creating this resource. We also extend our gratitude to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis scholars, educators, and healthcare providers who supported the development of this resource.





Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Terminology	1
Introduction & welcome	2
Roots: Grounding principles of the guide	5
Activity: Grounding ourselves in gratitude	6
Respect, relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility	7
Equity-oriented care	8
Core components of equity-oriented care	9
Establishing your roots: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflection	11
Activity: Recognizing the self	12
Activity: Connection to land and language	15
Activity: Canadian Virtual Hospice–Indigenous cultural safety training	18
Breath is good medicine: Checking in with ourselves	19
Trunk: Strengthening understanding through education	21
Understanding grief	23
Understanding trauma	27
Understanding resilience	30
Indigenous voices: Exploring our loss	31
Strengthening your trunk: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflecting	32
Guided reflection: Understanding grief	32
Reflection activity: Body mapping	34
Reflection activity: The ongoing impact of colonialism	35
Reflection activity: How am I working within a colonized system?	39
Activity: Addressing inequity in supporting Indigenous clients through grief	41
Indigenous voices: Reclaiming our ceremonies for grieving	45
Activity: Opening conversations about grief	46
Activity: Creating safe(r) spaces	47
Activity: Examining your space	49
Breath is good medicine: Checking in with ourselves	50



Branches: Reaching for support and resources	51
About the guides	52
Overview of spiritual wellness creates hope—an invitation to begin healing	53
Overview of emotional wellness creates belonging—understanding your grief	56
Overview of mental wellness creates meaning—going on your healing journey	58
Overview of physical wellness creates purpose—following up with support	61
Activity: Role of the helper	64
Spruce Cones: Honouring, remembering, and continuing the work	67
Next steps for you as a health and social care provider	68
Supporting regeneration: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflecting	70
Activity: Resilience toolkit	70
Affirmation activity: Honouring balance and boundaries	74
Next steps for the people we support	76
Next steps for the community	78
Conclusion and Appendices:	81
Grief & loss support programs identified in environmental scan	83
Understanding grief—info sheet for community	87
Understanding systemic trauma and resilience—info sheet for community	89
Grief and bereavement support for Indigenous communities	92
References	94







Terminology

The following terminology is used throughout this guide:

Indigenous is a broad term for the original peoples of a land and their descendants. In what we now call Canada, Indigenous Peoples live on their ancestral lands. They belong to hundreds of tribal groups and speak over 50 unique languages within 11 language families. Use the term 'Indigenous' carefully and respectfully, as some original groups, communities, and Nations may prefer to be identified by their distinct names.¹ The term 'Indigenous' will be used throughout this document except when using content that uses other terms. Some terms appear in both literature and legal documents that are in effect today. These include terms such as 'Indian,' 'Native American,' 'Aboriginal,' and 'First Nations.' Some of these terms have colonial connotations for many Indigenous people in Canada. Our language continues to shift and adjust to better reflect identities and experiences.

First Nations are one of the three recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada. First Nations is the preferred term to replace 'Indian' and 'Indian band.' First Nations include status and non-status Indians.²

Inuit are one of the three recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Most Inuit live in 51 communities across Inuit Nunangat. There are four Inuit regions in Canada collectively known as Inuit Nunangat: Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (Quebec), and Nunavut.³

Métis Peoples are one of the three recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Métis Peoples are of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. According to the Métis National Council, a Métis person is someone who self-identifies as Métis, has historic Métis Nation Ancestry, and is accepted by the Métis Nation.⁴



¹ Joseph (2016).

² Joseph (2016).

³ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (n.d.).

⁴ Joseph (2016).



Introduction & welcome

Aaniin, bonjour, ᐱᐱᐢᐢᐢ, boozhoo, čuu, gwe', hadih, hóʔa, kalhwá7a'ap, n'it, oki, she:kon, tansi, taanishi, tânisi, tân'si, ʔéx kʷ n', K'althwá7acw, tunngasugit, wéytk, ʔaʔaa, Greetings.

Thank you for engaging with this guide, *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A companion guide for health and social care providers*. This companion guide is intended to help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous health and social care providers. It focuses on learning, unlearning, and reflecting on how to support Indigenous Peoples during times of grief and loss. It acts as a companion to three other guides specifically made for Indigenous Peoples in relation to grief:

- ✓ *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A guide for First Nations Peoples*
- ✓ *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A guide for Inuit*
- ✓ *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss: A guide for Métis Peoples*

Honouring your grief and reflecting on how you support others can be a powerful yet challenging experience. It is important to be kind and gentle with yourself as you navigate this journey. Engaging in this work takes courage and can be healing. It is especially powerful when facing painful or tough emotions. Let these teachings and activities help you on your journey of learning, unlearning, and reflection.

To learn more about the intended role of these resources in our work, relationships, and communities, begin [here](#), or scan the QR code to the right.



Foundational teachings for this suite of resources

All the guides are rooted in Indigenous Knowledges and draw on the Indigenous Wellness Framework⁵ which is developed by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, a division of the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation Inc., is a leading culturally centred voice advocating for collaborative, integrated, and wholistic approaches to healing and wellness. This framework sees health and wellness as a balance between the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of oneself. It is rooted in connection to culture. The guides also emphasize the need to reconnect with the Spirit. They note that Spirit is key to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

⁵ Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2015).



Each guide shows the deep connection and relationship that Indigenous Peoples have with the Land and environment. They reflect a strong relationship with nature and the natural world. The three guides for Indigenous Peoples reflect the changing seasons. Just as the seasons change, grief is also a natural part of life that transforms. Both the seasons and grief cannot be controlled or fixed; rather, they must be acknowledged, honoured, and witnessed.

The *Companion guide for health and social care providers* shows how to support someone through grief by using a tree as a metaphor. A tree symbolizes strength and resilience. These qualities show your ability and dedication to help others through their grief. The tree offers a powerful metaphor for understanding loss, resilience, and renewal. A tree goes through cycles of growth, shedding, dormancy, and rebirth. In the same way, humans also face the seasons of grief. Every tree is unique and ever-growing, just like us.

The roots represent our Ancestors, our cultural teachings, and the strong ties that keep us grounded. The trunk symbolizes our strength and capacity to endure, allowing branches to reach far beyond the base and connect them to the Earth. The spruce cones, which are designed to protect and disperse seeds, ensuring the tree's survival, remind us that grief is not linear but cyclical, sacred, and deeply tied to the Land and Spirit.

The tree teaches us that healing does not mean forgetting. It means growing around the pain, integrating it into our being, and continuing to reach toward the light. This metaphor is the heart of this guide. It invites practitioners to view grief not as a pathology but as a natural, relational process. This process is deeply rooted in community, ceremony, and connections to the Land and to each other.





How to use this guide

The guide helps prepare you to use the three *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss* guides for Indigenous Peoples. You are encouraged to review this guide before engaging with the community, and to revisit it as you continue to support communities. Your feelings and engagement with this resource will likely change over time. So, treat it as a living document. Keep thinking about these concepts as they become relevant.

This guide is divided into four sections, created to help you support people on their grief journey:

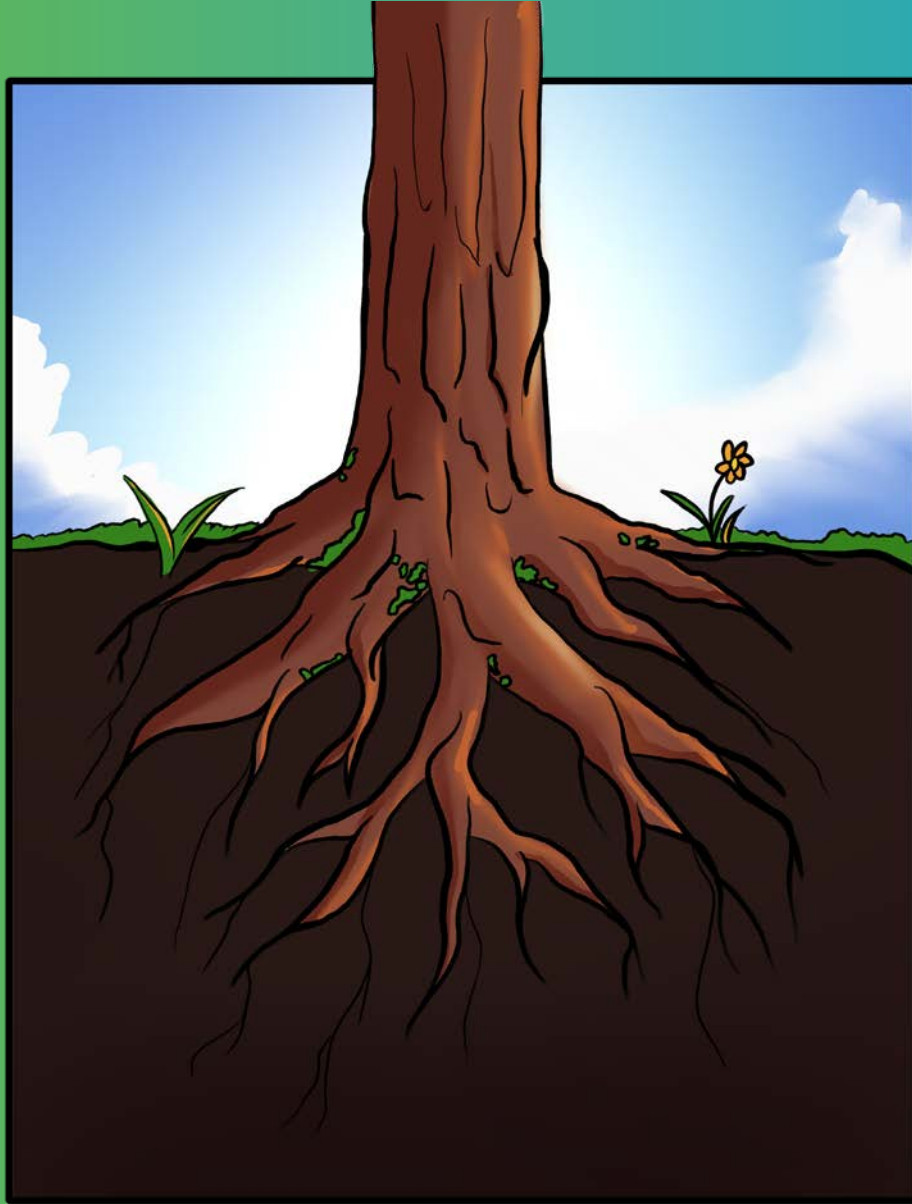
- ✓ Roots: Grounding principles of the guide
- ✓ Trunk: Strengthening understanding through education
- ✓ Branches: Reaching for support and resources
- ✓ Spruce Cones: Honouring, remembering, and continuing the work

Because this work is a meaningful and deeply reflective process, you are encouraged to move at your own pace. Your experience with this guide will be unique to you, as your role and identity are intertwined in this work. Some sections may feel easier than others, and that is okay. Some may hold deeper meaning for you than for others, and some may not resonate with you at all. You are encouraged to reflect on your role and identity. Engage with the guide in ways that highlight your unique experiences.





Roots: Grounding principles of the guide



The roots of a tree reach deep into the Earth, drawing strength from ancestral soil and remaining stable through the changing seasons. These roots represent our foundational knowledge and our connections to the Land, Ancestors, and ourselves. We begin this journey by focusing on connection, ceremony, and community. These practices serve as the foundation for healing through fair and equitable care.



The *Roots* section of the guide focuses on honouring key teachings. It grounds the guide in core values and helps us understand our individual roles as health and social care providers. As care providers, we need to identify and dismantle those barriers. We should not reinforce them. Instead, we must embed equity-oriented principles in our care practices.

In the first section, we talk about respect, relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility. We will highlight the importance of equity-oriented care. This form of care means acknowledging the impact of how systemic influences affect well-being and grief. Finally, this section includes activities designed to deepen your understanding of these principles.

Activity: Grounding ourselves in gratitude

A practice that exists in many Indigenous communities is beginning our day with gratitude. To honour this teaching, you are invited to take a moment to ground yourself as you begin moving through this guide. Take a moment to connect with yourself or with the Land, Creator, Ancestors, or anything else that grounds you.

Consider the following, or reflect on how you can best begin with gratitude.

- ✓ Take time outside to appreciate your surroundings
- ✓ Give someone a compliment
- ✓ Place a glass of water in the sunlight to drink first thing in the morning
- ✓ Say a prayer or message of thanks
- ✓ Light a candle, smudge, or qulliq to honour someone in the Spirit world
- ✓ Wash your face or hands with cool water to awaken your body
- ✓ Write down 5 things you are grateful for

When you identify something that feels right to you, consider carrying on that practice for a week and see how it feels in your mind, body, heart, and Spirit. Sometimes these practices can become part of our daily routine to move forward with gratitude.



Respect, relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility

The following section grounds the guide to the core principles: respect, relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility. Like roots nourish a tree, these grounding principles nourish our understanding of grief. Grief is a process shaped by context, growing and adapting to its environment.

Respect helps us to understand and appreciate the diversity among and within Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples have unique cultural traditions, ceremonies, and practices. They speak unique languages and use different communication styles. Their leadership and political systems are distinct, and their connections to Lands and ways of life vary. Each Nation has its own history and way of life. Acknowledging and honouring this diversity is key to respecting Indigenous Peoples. It helps us provide safe(r) care and support.

Relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility are founded on Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. They honour the interconnectedness of people, the Land, all living things, the cosmos, and our connection to the Spirit world and Ancestors. These concepts centre relationships and outline our responsibilities to one another.

Supporting Indigenous Peoples in their grief journey means health and social care providers must recognize the diversity in these communities while avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. Care providers should leverage their knowledge and skills to build helpful, respectful relationships.

Importantly, effective communication strategies are vital to this process. Effective communication strategies should honour Indigenous oral traditions and storytelling. These approaches should also use humour appropriately and appreciate the value of sacred silence. Providers should remember that English might be the person's second language. Which means they may need an interpreter. Not all knowledge transfers easily from Indigenous languages to western ways. This has led to the loss of knowledge over generations. Colonial impacts, like the Residential School system, caused much of this loss. Communities are working hard to revive traditional ways of knowing and being.

Health and social care providers should watch for non-verbal cues in communication. This can be shown through body language, facial expressions, and gestures. By watching for these cues, they can ensure that they are connecting effectively with those they support. For example, Inuit may answer questions by raising their eyebrows for 'yes,' scrunching their noses for 'no,' or shrugging their shoulders for 'I do not know.' Oftentimes, health and social care providers may repeat the question because they are not aware of body language.



Equity-oriented care

Equity-oriented care means ensuring everyone can access the best possible health and well-being. This focus is especially for those who have been marginalized, underserved, or harmed by colonial and systemic issues. Understanding Indigenous grief is essential. We need to recognize systems and the intersectionality of identities to provide appropriate care.

How is equity different than equality?

- ✓ **Equality** means giving everyone the same resources or care.
- ✓ **Equity** means providing different resources, approaches, and levels of support to meet people's unique needs and circumstances.

Equity-oriented care and grief work

Equity-oriented care matters in grief work. Well-being is not just determined by biology or personal choices. It is also deeply shaped by social factors that influence health. The social determinants of health include:

- ✓ Poverty and economic exclusion
- ✓ Ongoing impacts of colonization (e.g., the Residential School system, the child welfare system)
- ✓ Racism and discrimination in healthcare and social services
- ✓ Relationships we hold or would benefit from
- ✓ Access to, or loss of, language, land, and cultural connection
- ✓ Unequal access to mental health supports and cultural services

This approach helps us support Indigenous people, families, and communities in grief. It encourages us to look beyond personal care. We must understand how structural inequities shape every aspect of health. Including how someone grieves, heals, seeks, and accesses support.

For Indigenous communities, equity-oriented care can mean:

- ✓ Honouring individuals and communities as active decision makers and experts in their own support needs.
- ✓ Offering land-based or cultural healing options rather than clinical therapy.
- ✓ Adjusting timelines or practices to reflect community grieving traditions.
- ✓ Advocating for transportation, housing, and food security, and ensuring that children remain with their parents while one parent seeks medical care.



Core components of equity-oriented care

There are several core components to understanding equity-oriented care. Two key parts are *trauma-informed care* and *violence-informed care*. Another part is *cultural safety*. *Humility* is also important.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that recognizes and responds to the widespread impact of trauma, particularly intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities. It is built on the principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

When helping people with their grief, you need to know how colonization has affected them, both historically and ongoing. Residential schools and systemic racism cause trauma. Knowing this helps you avoid re-traumatizing people in care settings.

Trauma- and violence-informed care expands on trauma-informed care. It acknowledges the effects of different types of violence, like structural, domestic, and community violence. It looks at how violence shapes health and behaviour without placing blame. It also considers both systemic and interpersonal violence in a balanced way.

Understanding how systems create violence is important. Barriers to education and jobs can lead to this violence. By recognizing these signs, we can push for support services that fit cultural needs.

Health and social care providers need to know about the violence that affects Indigenous Peoples during grief. This violence can hurt their healing journeys. Other forms of violence include **lateral violence and internalized oppression**. If you are an Indigenous care provider, these are concepts that must be reflected upon in your practice. If you are a non-Indigenous care provider, these are relevant concepts to consider within the community you are supporting.

Lateral violence is when people in oppressed communities take out their anger on each other. It often stems from colonization, marginalization, and powerlessness. For example, a person might speak harshly to their coworker. Their frustration often comes from a systemic barrier they need to overcome.

Internalized oppression is when a person absorbs and acts on negative messages about their own identity or group. Through learning and unlearning, Indigenous communities continuously overcome these negative perceptions.

The cultural safety and cultural humility components may present as mistrust, self-doubt, or conflict within communities, requiring compassionate, non-judgmental engagement. Addressing these concepts is one way that we can work toward cultural safety and cultural humility.

Cultural safety focuses on power imbalances, systemic inequities, and ensuring care is respectful and free of racism. It is defined by the **recipient** of care (Indigenous communities/individuals,



in this case) but usually focuses on feeling comfortable enough to honour cultural beliefs and practices within an environment or with a specific person.

Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection and learning. It emphasizes listening, openness, and addressing one's own biases. It encourages partnership over expertise.

Both concepts can be incorporated into any support provision by anyone.

Safe spaces and brave spaces

One way to incorporate cultural safety and cultural humility into practice is to create safe(r) and brave(r) spaces.

- ✓ **Safe spaces** aim to provide emotional and physical safety, especially for marginalized groups. Safe spaces are important for healing, trust-building, and open dialogue.
- ✓ **Brave spaces** encourage honest, respectful conversations about difficult topics (e.g., racism, privilege). Embrace discomfort as part of growth and learning.

Balance is key to creating spaces where Indigenous clients and staff feel safe and empowered to share their truths. We cannot promise that a space is always safe or brave. However, understanding these ideas and how they show up in your work can help you see how we support safety and humility. As support providers, we must strive to create a space that meets the needs of the community we support.

Building a foundation in equity-oriented care

Each of these components is essential to grounding our practice in equitable, culturally grounded care. We, as health and social care providers, need to understand and apply equity-oriented care principles in our work. This helps us better serve the communities we support. Understanding these ideas in ourselves and others opens up space for better, culturally informed care. By learning and reflecting on these concepts, you are starting a journey toward fair and culturally informed care. This improves support and creates meaningful change in the system.



Establishing your roots: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflection

As Indigenous and non-Indigenous care providers who work in diverse and ever-evolving communities, we all have unique experiences, identities, and relationships to Indigenous grief support. The activities within this section help you explore your own identities and your connection to the Land. It also expands your understanding of Indigenous cultural safety as it relates to death, dying, and grief.

“

And that’s when I really personally began exploring my Indigeneity, my Métis-ness, and realized the grief that was associated with that, not knowing that, not deliberately or purposefully by my parents, their experiences shaped who they became and shaped how they raised us.”

Bev Cardinal, member of the EKCC



Activity: Recognizing the self

Honouring who we are and how we are coming into this work is an essential part of **cultural humility**, as we first must recognize *who we are* to identify *how we can support* community members. Our identity is shaped by some elements that are not determined by us (the inner circle) and by some elements that may shift and change across different circumstances and times in our lives (the second circle). How we experience these elements is shaped by the systems and people around us.

As health and social care providers, our intersectional identities and those of the populations we support will impact how we provide support and how individuals receive it.

Intersectionality in grief and support

Intersectionality means understanding that people's experiences come from many overlapping identities. These identities include race, gender, class, disability, age, sexuality, and more.

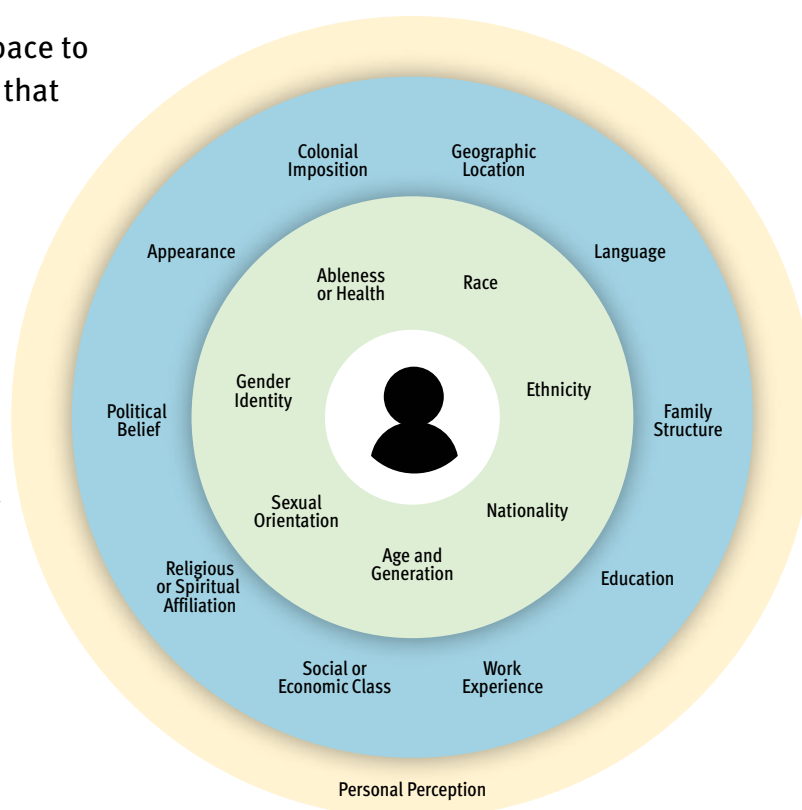
For example:

- ✓ A Two-Spirit youth navigating loss in a large urban centre will need different supports than an Elder living on-Reserve.
- ✓ An Indigenous woman dealing with grief and gender-based violence faces complex trauma requiring specialized care that is informed by trauma and violence.

The following activity aims to create space to recognize the many identities we hold that make us who we are.

Look at the circle below. Think about the categories and how they resonate with you and your self-understanding. In the outer circle, there are no categories. This is a space to incorporate identities that the included categories may not represent. Examples for each category are included in the chart; however, you are welcome to interpret and complete the chart as you see fit.¹

Note: Adapted from *Intersectionality and Multiple Identities* by MIT, 2025.



¹ MIT (2025).



Identity category ²	Examples of identities
Race	First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Indigenous, Black, Multiracial, Person of Colour, White, etc.
Ethnicity	'Canadian,' Ojibwe, Nigerian, Puerto Rican, Plains Cree, Russian, South American, Western European, etc.
Nationality	Canadian citizen, Sovereign nation, immigrant, refugee, 2nd-generation Canadian, etc.
Age and Generation	Early 50s, late 30s, baby boomer, millennial, Gen Z, older, younger, etc.
Sexual Orientation	Asexual, bisexual, gay, heterosexual, Two-Spirit, lesbian, queer, etc.
Gender Identity	Cisgender (perception of gender being congruent with sex assigned at birth), transgender (perception of gender being incongruent with sex assigned at birth), non-binary, etc. Expression: appearance, behaviour, and other characteristics that may or may not conform to social expectations of masculinity and femininity, etc.
Ableness or Health	Able-bodied; emotional, mental, physical, or learning disability; persistent or temporary health issue(s); invisible chronic illness; etc.
Geographic Location	Rural, urban, on my traditional territory, remote, fly-in, suburban, away from my home community, poorer or wealthier region, etc.
Language	Speaking an Indigenous language, having an accent, literacy level, speaking in a non-standard dialect, etc.
Family Structure	Common law, divorced, married, single, unmarried partnership, widowed, parents divorced, parent(s) imprisoned, parents married, raised by non-birth parent(s), kinship care, non-traditional parent(s), married with kids, married without kids, unmarried parent, blended family, etc.
Education	Interrupted education, carrying Traditional Knowledge, trades, four-year degree, high school diploma, PhD, private school, public school, etc.
Work Experience	Full-time employed, seasonal, business owner, part-time student, tenured, underemployed, unemployed, fewer or more years of experience, many or few opportunities for further/stable employment, etc.
Social or Economic Class	Impoverished, upper class, working class, office worker, labourer, etc.
Religious or Spiritual Affiliation	Agnostic, atheist, traditional Indigenous spiritual, Buddhist, Christian, Midewiwin, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, spiritual, etc.
Political belief	Left-wing, right-wing, political party affiliation, core political beliefs, etc.
Appearance	Skin colour or phenotype: Indigenous to Turtle Island, African, Asian, brown skin, Caucasian, dark skin, white passing, etc. Other appearance: athletic, beautiful, short, tall, thick, thin, etc.
Colonial Imposition	Residential school, day school, minimal negative impact, Sixties Scoop, displaced, personal or lateral intergenerational trauma
Outer Circle–Personal Perception	What identities do you have that were not reflected in the other areas of the circle? Crafter, leader, Auntie, social worker, sober, Fire Keeper, creative, introvert or extrovert, etc.

Note: Adapted from Intersectionality and Multiple Identities by MIT, 2025.

² MIT (2025).



✓ Once you finish this activity, take a moment to think about these questions. You can either write your thoughts down or share them with a trusted person:

- How does my identity impact me, personally and professionally?

- In what ways does my identity align with or diverge from the populations I support?

- Are there certain parts of my identity that I need to be mindful of when providing support?

- Are there ways that I practice, or could practice, self-care to honour parts of my identity?



Activity: Connection to land and language

For many Indigenous Peoples, grief is not just emotional—it is spiritual and ancestral, deeply rooted in Land. Land is not just where we live; it is a relative, a teacher, and a healer. In this guide, we follow Styres’ decolonizing practice of capitalizing ‘Land.’³ Doing this recognizes that Land goes beyond a physical space. It includes the deep principles, philosophies, and ontologies tied to that space. Styres writes that “Land is spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land is experiential, (re)membered, and storied.”⁴

As health and social care providers, it is vital to understand and respect these connections in order to offer culturally safe support. Health and social care providers need to understand treaties, traditional territories, beneficiaries, and Reserve systems. Understanding this helps show Land and loss are inseparable

for Indigenous Peoples. It also highlights why grief support must include space for these histories and realities.

“*Everything you need in this journey to get you through your life is out your front door, just walk out your front door. And I thought, that’s amazing. Because that’s what I felt like when I was fasting on the Land. That first time I went fasting, I felt I wasn’t alone. I knew that I had helpers there and that it was okay to cry and let all those things go.*”

Kathy MacLeod-Beaver, member of the EKCC

- ✓ **Traditional Territory**—Traditional territories are the Lands that Indigenous Nations have occupied and cared for, for many generations. They have deep ties to these areas since time immemorial. This includes sacred sites, waterways, and routes for hunting, fishing, and trapping.
- ✓ **Treaties**—Treaties are agreements that were made between Indigenous Nations and the Crown. Treaties are often broken or misinterpreted by colonial governments. They often determine the Nations’ rights related to the Land. Understanding the history of treaties in your region is central to respecting sovereignty and rights.

³ Styres (2019).

⁴ Styres (2019), p. 27.



- ✓ **Reserve System**—A colonial construct that forcibly removed Indigenous people from their traditional Lands and confined them to smaller, government-controlled areas. Many Reserves lack proper housing, healthcare, and infrastructure. Still, they remain central to community identity, resistance, and connection.
- ✓ **Beneficiaries**—recognized as members of an Inuit community who are enrolled under an Inuit Land claims agreement, which provides them with certain rights and benefits. To be a beneficiary, a person must meet specific criteria. They must be of Inuit ancestry, be Canadian citizens, and clearly connect with a specific Inuit community.
- ✓ **Inuit Land Claim Agreements**—The agreements are modern-day treaties that were made between Inuit communities and the Federal government. They outline Inuit rights to Land, resources, and governance within territories previously left undocumented and undefined.
- ✓ **Métis Scrip System**—This was a system where the federal government created certificates called Scrip. Scrip promised money or surveyed Land to individual Métis, often located far from where they were living. The Scrip system was fraudulent, with land speculators often acquiring the Scrip for themselves on behalf of Métis peoples. It allowed the Canadian government to further colonize Western Canada and left many Métis displaced and in systemic poverty.

These elements shape how Indigenous communities, Canadians, and the Land connect today.



Part 1: Whose Land are you on?

As care providers, we must reflect on our relationship to the Land and Indigenous communities, and how that influences the support we offer. In doing so, we honour the languages, stories, and Spirits rooted in the places we walk every day.

Visit www.native-land.ca and use the interactive [Native Land Map](#) to identify the **traditional territory** and **language** where you live and work, which are inseparable from Indigenous identity, culture, and healing. Also discover:



- ✓ Any associated Treaties or communities
- ✓ Whether you are on unceded territory, a Treaty area, a Reserve, or another Indigenous community

Note: If you are already familiar with the traditional territory, Treaty, or community you exist upon, feel free to skip to Part 2 of this activity.

Part 2: Reflection—your relationship to the Land

Once you have explored the Land you exist upon, reflect on the following questions:

- ✓ How do I honour the Land I live and work on?
- ✓ What is my connection to the language(s) that are tied to this Land and communities around me?
- ✓ Are you from this Land, or are you occupying it?
 - You may be working in the Land your people have existed on since time immemorial.
 - You could be a displaced Indigenous person, or a colonizer, settler, or immigrant of this Land.
 - How does this influence how I work with the Land?
 - Do I carry my relationship with the Land into my role as a care provider? How?

Recognizing your position on the Land is a critical part of decolonizing your practice. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous care providers, we have unique relationships with the Land. These relationships impact how we experience grief, loss, and healing. Our relationships with the Land are foundational to our understanding of colonization and Indigenous (or non-Indigenous) worldviews.



Activity: Canadian Virtual Hospice–Indigenous cultural safety training

Honouring the diverse experiences of Indigenous Peoples is a continuous and relational process. The Canadian Virtual Hospice offers Indigenous cultural training for health and social care providers. The training provides key insights into Indigenous beliefs, values, and care perspectives. It also explores historical and systemic factors. These factors still impact the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. This program helps health and social care providers better understand advanced illness, palliative care, and grief. It is guided by the voices and experiences of Indigenous Peoples.

The training includes five modules:

1. Understanding Indigenous culture in palliative care
2. Indigenous Peoples' journey through end-of-life care
3. Creating a safer space and wise practice for end-of-life care
4. Grief experienced by Indigenous Peoples–Part I
5. Grief experienced by Indigenous Peoples–Part II

You can complete each module on its own or focus on a specific area of interest. Or you can take them all together for a more comprehensive learning experience.

We recognize that access to online training can be limited. Therefore, this guide aims to bring together the main themes and teachings from the Indigenous cultural safety training. It ensures that the Spirit of this learning is available to all providers.

These modules can be accessed by visiting the Canadian Virtual Hospice > [Learning Hub](#) > Indigenous Cultural Safety Training





Breath is good medicine: Checking in with ourselves

As we come to the end of this section, you are invited to pause and reflect, supporting your mind, body, heart, and Spirit with a moment of intentional breathing. Breathing exercises can help draw our attention to our breath and slow our breathing during times of stress.

The following exercise aims to connect you to Mother Earth and invites us to coregulate with the Land.

1. Take a moment to connect with the Land however you see fit, such as putting your hands or feet on the ground, your arms around a tree, or looking to the sky and watching snow fall or clouds blow.
2. Allow your mind and body to get comfortable in whatever position you are in.
3. If one or both of your hands are free, place a hand over your heart and a hand on your belly.
4. Breathe deeply, allowing your breath to expand your belly rather than your ribs.
5. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth or however feels most comfortable to your body.
6. Turn your focus to how you are connected to the Land, and the grounding energy the Land carries. Allow this connection to bring balance as you move forward in your journey.





Trunk: Strengthening understanding through education



The trunk is the tree's supportive base: strong, steady, and able to weather storms. In the context of grief, it symbolizes our capacity to learn, to carry knowledge, and to stand in truth. The Trunk section of the guide strengthens our understanding of the grief process. It supports us through education and gives insight into the cultural, emotional, and spiritual aspects of grief. Like the rings of a tree mark its growth through every season, learning deepens our awareness and prepares us to support others with humility and care. Education is another form of medicine that can fortify us to walk alongside grief with integrity and compassion.



Much like the trunk of a tree, this section starts wide, covering general understandings of grief. It then narrows to different experiences of grief and finally focuses on personal experiences and practices. The Trunk section covers a lot of information. It asks you to reflect on your grief, your role as a care provider, and the setting where you provide services. Remember to be kind to yourself and take breaks as needed. Before you begin, take a moment to complete a mindfulness exercise to honour your mind, body, heart, and Spirit.

Mindfulness moment

The mindfulness moment practice is meant to help you notice how you feel. Focus on your mind, emotions, Spirit, and body—right now. It invites awareness of sensations in your body, like tension or restlessness. It also helps you notice things around you, such as temperature, sound, or how fabric or air feels on your skin.

You can take as much or as little time as you need—about five minutes is a good place to start.

✓ **Find a comfortable position.**

You may wish to sit, stand, or lie down, whatever feels best for your body in this moment.

✓ **Connect with your surroundings.**

If possible, choose a place that helps you feel grounded or connected to the Land, such as being outdoors or near a window with natural light.

✓ **Begin with your breath.**

Gently bring your attention to your breathing. Allow it to find its own natural rhythm—steady, calm, and unforced.

✓ **Scan through your body.**

Starting at the tips of your toes, slowly bring your awareness upward through each part of your body. Notice what sensations arise—warmth, tightness, calm, or movement. There is no need to change anything. This time is to notice what is there.

✓ **Release tension where you can.**

If you find areas that feel tight or uncomfortable, take a moment to pause and allow that part of your body to soften, if it is ready to.

✓ **Reach the top of your head.**

Keep your awareness moving through your body until you reach the crown of your head. Take a moment to notice your whole self—connected, breathing, and present.

✓ **Return your focus if your mind wanders.**

When thoughts or distractions appear, notice them with kindness. Then, gently bring your focus back to your breath or the sensations you feel.

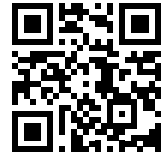
Take a few more slow breaths before you finish. When you are ready, open your eyes or look around, noticing how you feel after taking this time for yourself. If it feels appropriate, continue with this guide, or take your time to address any needs that may have come up first.



Understanding grief

Grief is a normal human reaction to the loss of someone or something. It affects us in many ways—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Grief is complex. People, families, and communities grieve losses in different ways. These differences depend on gender, age, culture, and the circumstances of the loss.

This section provides helpful tips on the types of grief that may be experienced by you or the community you support. You are invited to begin by hearing about the interconnectedness of grief and different losses by scanning the QR code to the right, or clicking [here](#).



Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something we love. It is not something that needs to be eradicated. Each Indigenous Nation has its own ways of acknowledging and working with grief. In some ways, this acknowledgement can be ceremonies held in a Longhouse, a Sweat Lodge, a Shaker Church, or other forms of collective spiritual practices. Grieving ceremonies show the culture's strength. The ways people handle death, burial, and grieving have remained similar for hundreds of years. Culturally specific practices and rituals are observed during times of death, grief, and loss.⁵

Mourning is the express of grief after a significant loss. Cultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs can influence mourning practices. Mourning helps people remember the person, event, or thing of importance to them. It also provides emotional support through family and community.

Bereavement is the period of mourning and adjustment following the death of someone in your life. It means losing someone significant and the emotional, psychological, and physical reactions that come with that loss. Grief covers the feelings that come with loss. Bereavement is the broader term. It includes the whole experience of mourning, which includes the process of grieving and coming to terms with the death.

When grief is hard to define, it might be:

- ✓ **Ambiguous grief and loss**—Ambiguous grief and loss refers to the emotional pain and confusion that comes when a person faces a loss that is not clear or lacks closure. This makes the grieving process more complex and challenging. Ambiguous grief is different from conventional grief. In conventional grief, there is usually a clear loss, like a death. But with ambiguous grief, the loss is uncertain, ongoing, or undefined. This makes it hard for people to process and resolve their emotions.
- ✓ **Anticipatory grief**—Anticipatory grief refers to the grief felt before a loss happens, particularly when the loss is expected or near. Anticipatory grief usually happens when someone knows that a person is going to die. Whether due to illness, aging, or another foreseeable cause.

⁵ Richardson, personal communication (March 12, 2025).



It lets the person begin the grieving process while they are still alive. This can help them emotionally prepare for the upcoming loss.

- ✓ **Collective grief and loss**—This refers to the shared experience of grief in a group, community, or society after a significant loss or tragedy that affects many people. Collective grief is different from individual grief. While Individual grief is personal and private, collective grief happens when a community faces a loss together. This often leads to a unified process of mourning. This relates to events like natural disasters, mass violence, the loss of cultural heritage, or the death of a significant public figure for a community.
- ✓ **Secondary losses**—Secondary losses refer to the additional losses that occur because of a primary loss. Secondary losses are indirect or hidden losses. These losses might not be obvious at first, but they can have a significant emotional, social, and psychological impact. While primary losses are often tangible and related to the event (e.g., the death of a person), secondary losses are the ripple effects of that loss. They can affect various aspects of a person's life.

E.g., residential school survivors' primary loss was being removed/stolen from their family and community. The secondary losses included losing a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver(s). This negatively affected neurodevelopment and made it hard to feel safe in relationships. Survivors also lost language, culture, and a sense of belonging to family and community. For instance, residential school survivors faced abuse, which led to losses like innocence, trust, and the ability to feel.

We can be impacted by losses outside of human relationships, such as:

- ✓ **Ecological grief**—Ecological grief, or eco-grief, happens when people see harm to the environment, ecosystems, or species. It is the emotional and mental reaction to losing our environment. This includes awareness of long-term ecological changes, such as climate change, deforestation, species extinction, and the decline of natural resources. Ecological grief impacts individuals, communities, and whole societies. It happens when they see ecosystems being destroyed. Effects can be noticed in both human and animal life. For example, mining can harm the Land. Flooding forces Indigenous communities to relocate. Contamination leads to boil water advisories. Climate change also causes fires that threaten people's and animals' homes.
- ✓ **Historical unresolved grief**—Historical unresolved grief is part of the historical trauma response. It refers to deep grief from ongoing losses. These losses are made worse by the banning of Indigenous healing practices and ceremonies⁶.
- ✓ **Spiritual grief**—Spiritual grief is the emotional and psychological pain that arises when a loss disrupts one's spiritual beliefs, practices, or sense of purpose. Spiritual type of grief is often

⁶ Brave Heart et al., 2012, p. 10



linked to a crisis of faith or spiritual questioning, and it can occur in response to various kinds of loss, including the death of a loved one, the loss of one's health, or even personal identity or community.

Grief can become more challenging through:

- ✓ **Cumulative grief**—Cumulative grief refers to the experience of grief that builds up over time due to multiple losses, whether they are physical, emotional, or psychological. Instead of grieving one significant loss and moving through the stages of grief, cumulative grief involves facing multiple losses, which can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. Cumulative losses can occur consecutively or simultaneously, and their compounded effect can make the grieving process more intense and prolonged.
- ✓ **Complicated grief**—Complicated grief, also known as prolonged grief disorder or persistent complex bereavement disorder, is a type of grief that goes beyond the typical grieving process and interferes significantly with a person's ability to function in daily life. While grief is a natural response to loss, complicated grief is marked by intense, prolonged feelings of sorrow and mourning that do not seem to improve over time and may even worsen.
- ✓ **Delayed grief**—Delayed grief occurs when someone experiences grief long after a loss rather than immediately following the event. It may occur because the person cannot process the emotions at the time of the loss due to shock, emotional numbness, or other factors. Over time, the feelings can resurface, and the person may feel the full weight of their grief, even though the loss occurred a long time ago.
- ✓ **Disenfranchised grief**—Disenfranchised grief refers to grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially supported, or publicly mourned by others. It occurs when an individual's loss is not recognized or validated by society, which can lead to feelings of isolation, confusion, or guilt for the person experiencing grief. Disenfranchised grief often arises in situations where societal norms or expectations minimize or invalidate the emotional pain someone is experiencing. Indigenous people experience disenfranchisement when society does not validate the historical and present traumas from colonization.
- ✓ **Prolonged grief**—Prolonged grief, also known as complicated or persistent grief, is a condition where someone experiences intense and enduring sorrow or mourning for an extended period after a loss, far beyond what is typically expected. While grief is a natural response to loss, prolonged grief goes beyond the normal grieving process and can interfere with daily life and functioning.
- ✓ **Stigmatized grief**—Stigmatized grief refers to the grief that is marginalized, dismissed, or misunderstood due to the nature of the loss or the circumstances surrounding it. Stigmatized grief is often compounded by societal or cultural stigma, which can lead to the bereaved feeling isolated, judged, or unsupported in their mourning process. The grief associated with stigmatized losses is frequently not recognized or validated by society, making it more difficult for individuals to process their emotions and find appropriate support.



For example:

- Infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion
 - Individuals involved in the justice system
 - Death by homicide
 - Death by suicide
 - Individuals struggling with addictions and substance-related deaths and their grieving families
 - Individuals struggling with mental health issues and their grieving families
 - Illness-related, such as HIV/AIDS
 - Intergenerational and multigenerational trauma
- ✓ **Traumatic grief**—Traumatic grief is a very intense and complicated form of grief. Often coming from the sudden, violent, or unexpected death of a person. Traumatic grief is different from typical grief. While typical grief is a natural response to loss, traumatic grief mixes strong emotions about the loss with the trauma of how or when the loss happened.

Traumatic grief can lead to significant emotional distress. It can impair a person's ability to function and may result in complicated grief or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When a person connects with themselves and others, it can help them heal from trauma. This connection may reduce their chances of getting stuck in grief.



Understanding trauma

Trauma is the emotional, psychological, and physical impact of a very distressing event or series of events. Trauma happens when someone faces situations that overwhelm their ability to cope. This inability to cope can lead to a wide range of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual responses. These traumatic experiences can leave lasting emotional scars, affect one's sense of safety, and influence behaviour, relationships, and overall well-being.

An Indigenous perspective on trauma responses sees how trauma affects the whole being. It focuses on fixing the imbalances of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health caused by trauma. Imbalances continue when a person feels disconnected from themselves, their Land, family, community, culture, and the Creator. This disconnection creates challenges in living life: “Trauma will be experienced differently among individuals and groups based on their social location, resources and intersectional position (e.g., ability/disability, economic status, gender, body size, etc.).”⁷

The following describes different types of traumas Indigenous Peoples may experience.

- ✓ **Historical trauma**—Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a Native American social worker known for her work on historical trauma experienced by the Lakota People, defined historical trauma as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including one’s lifespan.”⁸

“*Even though Métis communities were pretty self-sufficient, there was no real homeland, and so we can still visit those road allowance communities as long as we can, as we know how to find them geographically but at this point, I think it’s sad to have to say that they’re now part of history, they’re part of history, so we don’t have those communities to go back to. So, in the cities and towns, it’s incumbent upon us to create those communities and create those spaces.*”

Bev Cardinal, member of the EKCC

⁷ Richardson, personal communication (March 12, 2025).

⁸ Brave Heart et al. (2012) S177-S178.



Historical trauma comes from centuries of colonization and abuse. This has had devastating effects on Indigenous health and well-being.

Examples of forms of colonial violence:

- Contact with Europeans
- Colonization
- Assimilation
- Forced relocation and displacement
- Loss of Land
- Loss of access to Land and resources
- Loss of economic structures
- Loss and disruption of family systems
- Forced sterilization and non-consensual medical experiments
- Death from infectious diseases
- Banning of spiritual and cultural practices
- Systemic racism and discrimination
- Ancestors who did not get to grieve or be grieved
- Residential School system
- Loss of the right to raise our children in our culture
- Remains of children's bodies discovered on residential school grounds
- Stolen sacred items/objects
- Injustices within the child welfare and justice systems
- Loss or theft/destruction of traditional teachings, cultural knowledge, and Language
- Experience of violence or abuse (physically, sexually, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally)
- Influence of religion and churches
- Missing Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Men, Boys and Two-Spirit Peoples
- Slaughter of Inuit dogs by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)



- ✓ **Intergenerational trauma** refers to the transmission of the effects of trauma from one generation to the next. Trauma from parents, grandparents, or even more distant Ancestors affects their children or descendants. This impact can occur even if the children never faced the original traumatic events directly. While Indigenous communities are significantly impacted by these traumas, we also see the Intergenerational strength and resilience that is passed down through the generations.

Western science on epigenetics shows that experiences and environments can change the structure of human DNA. These changes can be passed down from one generation to the next. Indigenous Knowledge Carriers refer to epigenetics as ‘blood memory,’ suggesting our stories are passed down through genetics. Trauma can be passed through DNA structures generationally in addition to ancestral knowledge.⁹

- ✓ **Multigenerational trauma** refers to the effects of trauma passed down through multiple generations. This often includes trauma from three, four, or more generations. It highlights the cumulative and compounding nature of trauma that builds across generations, affecting not just immediate descendants but also distant generations. Despite this harmful transmission, Indigenous Peoples show resilience through the protective factors of family networks, generational relationships, community support systems, cultural and spiritual resources, and shared collective history. This history bonds people together, creates a sense of belonging and humour, and reminds us that good things can come out of negative situations.¹⁰
- ✓ **Race-based violence/trauma**, also known as racial trauma or race-related stress, refers to the emotional and psychological harm caused by racism, discrimination, prejudice, or violence based on racial or ethnic identity. Race-based violence or trauma can occur both at an individual level (e.g., personal experiences of racism) and at a collective or societal level (e.g., historical or systemic racism).
- ✓ **Vicarious trauma** refers to how repeated exposure to others’ trauma begins to alter your own worldview, sense of safety, and emotional health. It is common for health and social care providers who hold roles requiring us to process the traumatic experiences of the individuals we work with. Vicarious trauma is also often held by community members who support those around them.

⁹ Thunderbird Partnership Foundation & Deleary (2019).

¹⁰ Linklater (2020), p. 26.



Understanding resilience

Resilience is the ability to process adversity through relationships with the Creator, others, and self.¹¹ Linklater shares, “Indigenous resilience should be seen as a culturally rooted, community-based response that encompasses resistance and survival strategies as leading sources of strength.”¹² Resilience can be both intergenerational (passed from generation to generation) and individual (built throughout a lifetime).

Resilience grows from strong relationships with competent and caring adults in families and communities, strong cognitive skills, self-regulation, a positive self-view, and a motivation to be effective.¹³ By working to build these skills in ourselves and the individuals we work with, we are building resilience within our communities.

Resiliency is the ability to withstand trauma and turmoil and to continue living and engaging in a productive life.¹⁴ Linklater emphasizes that resiliency focuses on the strengths of Indigenous Peoples and their cultures, providing a needed shift away from focusing on pathology, dysfunction, and victimization.¹⁵ For each experience of grief and trauma, there is an equally, if not more powerful, example of resilience.

¹¹ Linklater (2020), p. 25.

¹² Linklater (2020), p. 26.

¹³ Linklater (2020), p. 25.

¹⁴ Linklater (2020), p. 25.

¹⁵ Linklater (2020), p. 25.



Indigenous voices: Exploring our loss

While learning about types of grief and grief experiences can be helpful, grief remains a deeply personal experience. Each person and each loss is unique. Listening to others and learning from their journeys can help us better understand how to support someone through their grieving process. Turning to Elders and Knowledge Carriers can ground our understanding of grief in generational experiences and Traditional Knowledges.

The *Indigenous voices: Exploring our loss* video shares the perspectives and lived experiences of Elders and Knowledge Carriers from across Turtle Island. Access the video through the QR code. After watching, take time to reflect on the following questions:



- ✓ What is something shared by the Elders and Knowledge Carriers that stood out to you? Why did it resonate?
- ✓ How does listening to Elders and Knowledge Carriers feel in your mind, body, heart or Spirit?
- ✓ In what ways can Land, culture, community, and Traditional Knowledge support healing?
- ✓ What is one teaching you will carry forward into your personal or professional practice?
- ✓ What responsibility do we hold to carry these teachings forward in our work with Indigenous communities?



Strengthening your trunk: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflecting

Everyone experiences grief and loss differently, depending on who they are and the situation around that loss. The “Strengthening your trunk” section invites you to reflect on your own experiences of grief, the grief in the community you support, and how you handle that grief now or plan to in the future. The activities here explore key aspects of grief and Indigenous experiences. This helps us better understand ourselves, the systems we work in, and the changes we aim to make. As this section calls on you to do some significant reflection on yourself and systemic trauma, take your time to reflect and take breaks as you engage with these topics.

Guided reflection: Understanding grief

Grief is something we all feel at different times in our lives. It can show up in our thoughts, bodies, hearts, and relationships. Sometimes we know right away we are grieving, and other times we do not notice it until later.

The next activity is designed to help you reflect on the grief you may be holding, whether it is your own or something you have seen in others. There are no right or wrong answers. Take your time, be honest with yourself, and remember: your feelings matter.

“Grief is not all that bad. Grief is our way of life, too. We need to release; we need to approach it in a healthier way. Nowadays, it’s drugs and alcohol, and that’s how they think that they’re releasing their grief. But it’s drowning it. And once the alcohol and drugs keep going at it, keep going at it—still suppressing your grief in there, your feelings in there. One point, it all blows up. And it all blows up. You’re crying ... you let out a huge cry ... some of us don’t know how to talk to people. How to release our grief.”

Naulaq LeDrew, member of the EKCC



✓ What grief am I holding in my body, thoughts, heart, Spirit, or relationships?

✓ Are there certain types of grief that I see in the people around me?

✓ Is there a type of grief I was not previously aware of?

✓ Have there been times when I was experiencing grief I am only beginning to understand?

✓ Have I grieved with members of my family, chosen family, community, or person(s) I support?
Do you think this experience was (or would be) different from when you grieve by yourself?



Reflection activity: Body mapping

Grief will impact us, and the people we support, in many ways. Being aware of how it impacts you personally is an important step in learning to talk about grief and recognizing how this work may impact you. Take a moment to identify a loss (big or small) you have experienced.

Body mapping is a practice that can help us recognize what we are experiencing and how we experience it. Body mapping provides us with the space to reflect on how we are affected by grief, without any pressure to capture everything we think, feel, and experience. How the body map looks is not important—the process is what matters.

Grief is unique to every person. Reflecting on an experience of grief, consider:

- ✓ What do I experience in my body?
- ✓ What emotions surround my grief?
- ✓ How are my Spirit and spirituality affected?
- ✓ How is my mental well-being changed?

You do not need to have all the answers! Adding a colour, symbol, or blank spaces to show confusion or lack of feelings is a great addition to a body map. Seeing this in yourself is just as meaningful as any other experience.

Use the body shape to the right to express your experience with grief. Add words, colours, lines, and symbols. Show how it affects you and where you feel it in, on, or around your body.

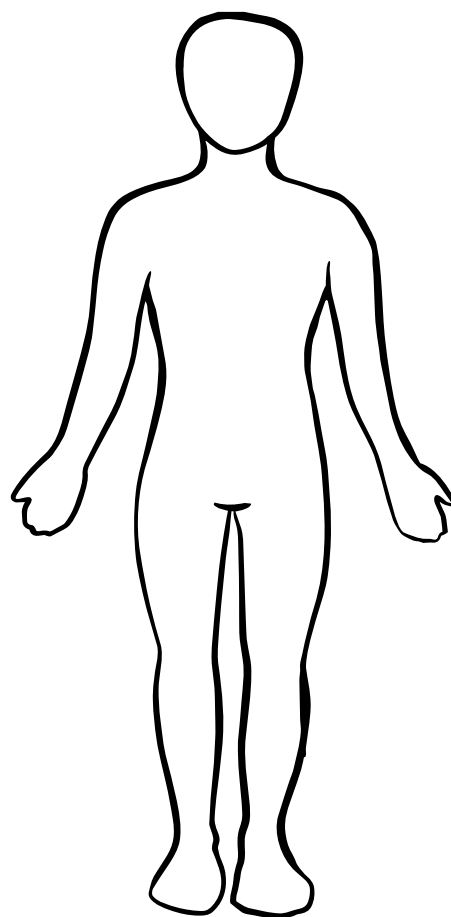
Your body map only needs to make sense to you—there are no rules in body mapping! Expressing yourself through this activity's visual elements is easier or harder than other types of reflection. Either way, you are doing meaningful, brave work.

Reflecting on the process of mapping your grief:

- ✓ What was this experience like?
- ✓ What made it comfortable or uncomfortable?

“We may be on a different path, but we’re going in the same direction. Same thing, but differently, because each person is an individual.”

Naulaq LeDrew, member of the EKCC





Reflection activity: The ongoing impact of colonialism

Colonization in Canada was and is not just about Land theft—it is an intentional attempt to eradicate Indigenous cultures, languages, and families. The Canadian government, along with churches and other institutions, created laws and systems that harmed Indigenous Peoples. These laws aimed at both physical and cultural genocide. While this might feel like the past to some non-Indigenous people, these harms continue to be perpetuated today, especially in health and social services.

Ongoing trauma in health and social services

Indigenous people today still face systemic racism in health care settings, schools, and social services. For example, Joyce Echaquan died in 2020 after being mocked and neglected in a Quebec hospital. Brian Sinclair passed away in 2008 after being ignored for 34 hours in a Winnipeg emergency room. Trevor Dubois died in 2026 in his hospital room from an interaction with hospital security. Indigenous people are less likely to receive proper care, more likely to be misdiagnosed, and often feel unsafe seeking help. These traumatic experiences are built upon the historic and ongoing systemic violence that exists in the systems we work within.

“

A powerful thing from the past, you know, in the colonization of Indigenous people was the silence, the silencing, right, that we could not talk about our emotions. We could not talk about her feelings because we had to conform. We had to conform to Western ways. We couldn't complain, right? We couldn't advocate for ourselves. So, I think that silencing is very deadly ... whether you're angry, whether you are emotional. And for me, growing up, because I had come from intergenerational trauma, the deaths around me were not dealt with, right? So, like buying a headstone 14 years later is really significant to acknowledging, oh yeah, your mother did pass away. And the stone says that, right. It literally says it. Right, so it becomes real in that way, and you're able to move on.”

Albert McLeod, member of the EKCC



Recognizing trauma

Understandably, many Indigenous people carry deep wounds that are passed down through generations. Grief is not just about personal loss; it is about the loss of language, culture, family, and safety. Understanding this context is essential for anyone supporting Indigenous clients through grief. Service providers have a responsibility to acknowledge Canada's legacy of violence and racism. They should listen to survivors and work to dismantle the systems that still harm Indigenous communities.

Potential sources of intergenerational trauma and disenfranchised grief

Residential schools (1831–1996): From 1831, Canada forced over 150,000 Indigenous children into residential schools, run by churches and the government. Children were forcibly taken from their families, forbidden to speak their languages, and subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Thousands died from neglect, starvation, and disease. The last federally run residential school closed in 1996. The scope of this atrocity is still unfolding. Hundreds of children's graves, whose existence has been denied by church and state, are being found at residential school sites across Canada.

Sixties Scoop (1950s–1980s): From the late 1950s, child welfare authorities began taking Indigenous children from their families in large numbers. They placed these children in non-Indigenous foster and adoptive homes. The process continued into the 1980s. Over 20,000 children lost their families, languages, and cultures, often suffering abuse and neglect. The Sixties Scoop was not about protecting children; it was about forced assimilation. To this day, the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system is still an indicator of the continuation of this practice.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People: Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people are targeted at higher rates for violence, murder, and disappearance. From 2016–2019, Canada launched a National Inquiry, which concluded that this crisis is a direct result of colonial policies and amounts to genocide. Indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be murdered or go missing than non-Indigenous women. Investigation into their cases is considerably less likely, or stunted, by racist attitudes and barriers embedded in policing.

Mainstream education system: Residential schools and day schools aimed for assimilation until the mid-1990s. The education system continued to socialize Indigenous Peoples into western society and away from their culture and communities. The dismissal of Indigenous pedagogical practices and the slow implementation of Indigenous content into western curriculum reflected deep-seated racism in mainstream society. As a result, many Indigenous languages have been lost with the death of first-language speakers, at the cost of a rich understanding of their respective cultures and traditions.¹⁶

¹⁶ Khawaja (2021).



A note to Indigenous support providers

As an Indigenous service provider, recognizing your own experiences of trauma, including grief, loss, and the impacts of colonization, can be an important part of caring for others. For some, feelings of internalized shame or encounters with lateral violence can arise. This includes gossip, exclusion, or bullying in workplaces or communities. These issues often stem from intergenerational trauma. Practising self-care is vital and can vary from person to person. It may involve connecting with culture and community, participating in ceremony, spending time on the Land, journaling, joining talking circles, or seeking guidance from Elders.

Indigenous support providers are also not protected from potential mistreatment within the health and social care systems. While we often focus on how we must individually protect ourselves, we must also recognize that Indigenous support providers face systemic racism and barriers, just like the communities they support. Though self-care is essential, remember that we cannot solve systemic issues individually.

Setting boundaries is important. Permit yourself to say “no” when you need to and remember you do not have to take on the emotional labour of educating others about Indigenous issues unless you choose to. When experiencing violence or trauma of any kind, know these are not your fault, and support is available. You can seek help from trusted peers, Elders, support groups, mental health professionals, or Indigenous organizations. Reaching out for support and practising self-care helps you offer safer, more grounded support to your clients and community.

Activity for Indigenous support providers: Reflecting on the lived experience of colonialism

Instructions: Set aside 10–15 minutes for personal reflection, journaling, or conversation with a trusted person:

- ✓ How has colonization affected you, your family, and your community from an emotional, social, or cultural standpoint?
- ✓ What feelings come up for you when you think about working in systems shaped by colonization?
- ✓ Are there moments when you have felt unseen, misunderstood, or harmed by these systems?
- ✓ How has being an Indigenous helper impacted your relationship with non-Indigenous colleagues? With Indigenous clients? As an advocate outside your organization?
- ✓ What has your experience of lateral violence been? How did you respond?
- ✓ What helps you feel safe, valued, or supported in your work or healing journey?

Optional: Consider sharing your reflections with a peer, supervisor, Elder, or other support, if you feel comfortable.



Activity for non-Indigenous support providers: Reflecting on your knowledge of colonialism

Instructions: Take 10–15 minutes to write or discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What do you know about the history of colonization in Canada and its impact on Indigenous Peoples? Where did you learn this? Where would you have expected to learn this, but did not?
- ✓ Can you identify ways your workplace or professional role might benefit from systems created during colonization?
- ✓ Have you ever noticed policies or practices that might make it harder for Indigenous clients to feel safe or understood?
- ✓ What steps could you take to learn more about Indigenous histories and perspectives, and to challenge colonial practices in your work?

Optional: Share your reflections with a colleague, supervisor, or in a group and discuss ways to support change in your organization.





Reflection activity: How am I working within a colonized system?

When you work in health or social services, your job and workplace are part of systems created during colonization. This means you may have more power or privilege than the service recipients you support, even if you do not realize it. For example, you might have the authority to decide what kind of help someone gets, or your organization's rules might make it harder for people to feel safe or understood.

Policies and procedures may overlook Indigenous ways of knowing, healing, or family structures. This can happen in both mainstream and Indigenous-led organizations. It is important to notice these things, ask questions, and listen to your clients' experiences. By doing this, you can help ensure your support does not perpetuate past harms but instead helps build trust and healing.

Reflection questions for providers:

- ✓ In what ways might my role or my organization's policies make it harder for service recipients to feel safe or heard?
- ✓ How do I benefit from the systems created by colonization, even unintentionally?
- ✓ Have I ever made decisions for a client without fully understanding their cultural background or needs?
- ✓ What steps can I take to include Indigenous-centred ways of healing and family structures in my work?
- ✓ How can I use my position to interrupt harmful practices and support positive change for Indigenous clients?

“We're always changing what we do. Changing rules, what the heck is a rule anyway? It sounds silly when you really think about it. So that's what our ceremonies taught us, that there is no such thing as a rule. There is protocol. And so, protocol is to be able to respect those things that have been here that actually hold us on the earth.”

Betty McKenna, member of the EKCC



Action Items: Here are some ways service providers and organizations can support the health and safety of Indigenous clients and communities:

- ✓ **Cultural humility:** Enhance skills by learning about the diverse cultures, histories, and traditions of the Indigenous communities you serve. This helps you engage respectfully with clients and understand their unique challenges. Practitioners should also de-centre their views on what works best for those they serve, especially when they don't belong to the community. For many, this means moving beyond a mainstream, Eurocentric model of support to better meet the needs of each individual.
- ✓ **Community engagement:** Build relationships with communities to understand their needs. Involve community members in decision-making to ensure their voices are heard.
- ✓ **Capacity building:** Support Indigenous communities in building capacity to provide effective services. Use training programs, mentorship, and sharing best practices. Empowering Indigenous community members supports their self-determination and self-governance.
- ✓ **Trauma- and violence-informed practice:** Recognize the historical and ongoing trauma faced by the community. Approach situations with this awareness to provide better support. Provide culturally responsive interventions that promote healing, resilience, and well-being.
- ✓ **Support self-determination:** Advocate for Indigenous self-determination. Empower communities and individuals to make their own decisions about their needs and practices. Recognize and respect Indigenous communities' inherent rights and jurisdiction over their own members.
- ✓ **Prevention and early intervention:** Prioritize prevention and early intervention strategies to address the root causes of grief in communities. Provide support services, resources, and education to help clients build strong support networks and address underlying issues such as those related to intergenerational trauma.



Activity: Addressing inequity in supporting Indigenous clients through grief

As a health and social care provider engaging in ongoing education, such as using this guide, you are working to better support Indigenous Peoples. Take a few minutes to consider these areas of inequity involved in care provision, and jot down your ideas for addressing them. Discuss with colleagues if possible. Reflect on their absence and ask yourself if they were excluded because they were overlooked, or if your organization currently lacks the capacity to follow through with them. Below the table are some general actionable practices that may apply to your role or organization.

Potential areas to address inequity	Actionable practices within my role
Address systemic racism in service delivery Service providers and organizations must actively identify, challenge, and dismantle racist practices in their services. They should also build accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable, respectful care.	
Create and maintain culturally safe(r) organizational environments Organizations and service providers can review and adapt policies, procedures, and practices to align with Indigenous values, realities, and community-defined standards of safety, dignity, and comfort.	
Recognize and integrate individuals' and communities' perspectives Professionals must listen to, validate, and incorporate Indigenous Knowledges, lived experience, and feedback into their decision-making, assessment, and service provision.	
Adapt practice to reflect Indigenous worldviews Expand beyond western clinical models. Learn about and respectfully integrate Indigenous approaches to healing, grief, kinship, and community care.	
Normalize and support conversations about grief and loss Organizations and support providers must create space for discussing grief related to colonial harm and systemic neglect. Ensure these conversations are supported without judgment or avoidance.	
Acknowledge and respond to historical and intergenerational impacts Learn to understand how colonial policies and intergenerational barriers affect current service needs. Reflect this understanding in assessments, planning, and interventions.	
Identify and address additional structural or practice-based barriers Professionals and organizations must continuously assess for emerging challenges. Seek guidance from Indigenous communities and adjust practices to reduce harm and improve access.	



Action-based practices to consider:

- ✓ Build trust through transparency, consistency, and authenticity.
- ✓ Engage in ongoing cultural safety training.
- ✓ Recognize community members are experts in their own support needs.
- ✓ Collaborate with other Indigenous care providers to understand experiences.
- ✓ Share knowledge with, and learn from, others within your workplace, such as administrators, security, or maintenance.
- ✓ Listen deeply and prioritize client-led conversations.
- ✓ Acknowledge and validate experiences of trauma and loss.
- ✓ Ensure appropriate cultural protocols and reasonable compensation are provided to Elders and Knowledge Carriers.
- ✓ Create safe, welcoming spaces for open discussion about grief.
- ✓ Avoid clinical labels and instead use language that invites sharing.
- ✓ Support community members through all experiences of grief, such as humour, anger, or anxiousness.
- ✓ Consult with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Carriers, and/or community members.
- ✓ Reflect on your own role and organizational practices. Advocate for change where needed.
- ✓ Support self-determination in healing and care decisions.



One of the things the Elders teach us is that the Ancestors give us that old wisdom. But part of taking that old wisdom is adapting it to the current context we're living in. So how do we take that old wisdom and this new wisdom that we are living with, and how do we move forward together with that?"

Dr. Holly Prince, Project Lead



Engaging with Elders & Knowledge Carriers

Elders and Knowledge Carriers are individuals who lead meaningful lives and are trusted for the knowledge they possess. Although they may not always be available, they can offer powerful support when they are, particularly in learning about language, ceremony, wellness, and grief.

✓ **Elders**—Within Indigenous cultures, older community members with valuable knowledge and experience are viewed as Elders. Elders may be community members who know and live the ancestral ways of their people. Their community recognizes them as being in the position of an Elder. The position of Elder is not necessarily age-related; it is someone who carries wisdom. Elders might be used interchangeably with Knowledge Carriers as they carry ancestral knowledge of their people. The term ‘senior’ is generally age-related, whereas ‘Elder’ is not.

“

I was taught by Elders ... You're never alone, Gerry, your late father and mother, you know, they're all around, so you're never alone. They're spirits now, and maybe you don't see them or feel them, but they're there. And that really did something for me, settled me on another level. I was already feeling settled, but it even brought me even more. So, you know, stronger myself.”

Gerry Oleman, member of the EKCC

- ✓ **Knowledge Carriers**—Like Elders, Knowledge Carriers are recognized by their community. They have learned their ancestral knowledge and teachings through Elders and other community-recognized roles (Healers and Medicine People). They may carry specific knowledge and teachings to pass on to future generations. Like Elders, they will embody the teachings of living a good life. They may also be referred to as Knowledge Keepers or Knowledge Holders.
- ✓ **Healers and Medicine People**—Healers and Medicine People are identified and trained by other Healers or Medicine People. They are guided by the Creator and Spirits to offer healing to others. They are trained in accordance with their abilities to work with plant medicines, offer counselling, use doctoring techniques, and perform ceremonies.



Approaching with respect

Each community has its own processes, but here are some general steps for asking an Elder or Knowledge Carrier for support:

- ✓ Introduce yourself: Share your name, Nation, role, family names, the area where you are from, or how you were directed to them.
- ✓ Make your request: Say clearly what you are asking for (help, teachings, guidance).
- ✓ If appropriate, provide a gift, honorarium, or offer a bundle of tobacco when making a request or when the Elder arrives. This shows respect and allows them to decide if they accept the request.

If an Elder or Knowledge Carrier is unavailable, that is okay. Valuable knowledge can also be found through community organizations, videos, books, online resources created by Elders or Knowledge Carriers, and the people around us. These sources are often a helpful starting point for care providers in the early stages of learning.

Because colonization forcibly disrupted and removed knowledge, relearning is part of reclaiming it. Knowledge remains meaningful and worthy of respect, regardless of how it is accessed—we honour Traditional Knowledge in all its forms.

The following video shares Traditional Knowledge and wisdom from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Carriers in this spirit and invites you to reflect on these teachings.

“ Our men said, ‘Why don’t you have your grandmothers there? You see, in those years, it was the grandmothers who had the power and all the—it’s a reality because we’ve been doing a lot of research on grandmothers.’ They were the leaders in the community, the grandmas were. The men even went to the grandmothers to consult with them when they were going on a hunt, a war, or something like that. They always consulted with the grandmothers to get permission and blessings from them.”

Mae Louise Campbell, member of the EKCC



Indigenous voices: Reclaiming our ceremonies for grieving

Ceremonies and traditions have guided generations of communities through grief. Supporting the revitalization and reengagement of these practices contributes to healing for Indigenous communities and the Land after the disruption of traditional ways caused by colonization. Elders and Knowledge Carriers reconnect us to traditional teachings and show us how to carry these ways of knowing and being forward.

“*Death itself is a ceremony.*”

Betty McKenna, member of the EKCC

The *Indigenous voices: Reclaiming our ceremonies for grieving* video features the perspectives and experiences of Elders and Knowledge Carriers from across Turtle Island. Scan the QR code to watch the video. After watching, reflect on the following questions:



- ✓ What is something shared by the Elders and Knowledge Carriers that stood out to you? Why did it resonate?
- ✓ How does learning about the role of traditional practices in grieving affect your body, mind, heart, or Spirit?
- ✓ What is your understanding of the role of Land in the grieving process? In what ways might strengthening this connection support healing?
- ✓ What is one teaching you will carry forward into your personal or professional practice?
- ✓ What responsibility do we hold to honour and carry these teachings forward in our work with Indigenous communities?



Activity: Opening conversations about grief

As discussed earlier in this guide, grief among Indigenous Peoples is deeply shaped by colonial history and ongoing systemic harms. Loss is not only personal but also cultural, communal, and intergenerational. Health and social service providers play a crucial role in supporting Indigenous clients through grief, but this requires sensitivity, humility, and a willingness to move beyond conventional (often colonial) approaches.

Discomfort and stigma

Grief is often accompanied by discomfort, shame, stigma, and silence, especially when it relates to losses caused by colonial violence, racism, or systemic neglect.

Indigenous clients may feel unsafe, be misunderstood, or recognize it is not safe to express their feelings or experiences in clinical settings, carrying wounds that are not always visible or a direct result of the grief source that brought them to you. For example, if one of their relatives died from systemic neglect in a Canadian institution, they know bringing that up may be experienced as criticism, disrespect, or ‘failure to comply’ with their current caregivers, an act which could result in being treated less well.

Doing grief work with Indigenous communities includes:

- ✓ Acknowledging discomfort: It is normal for grief to bring up difficult feelings, including anger, shame, or mistrust.
- ✓ As a care provider (regardless of whether you are Indigenous or not), you likely represent a system that has caused ongoing harm to communities.
- ✓ Validating experiences: Recognize grief may be connected to historical trauma or loss of language, culture, and family. These wounds can be passed down through generations.
- ✓ Creating safe(r) spaces: Encourage open conversations about grief and the supports that are provided to the community, even when they feel uncomfortable. Let clients know their feelings and perspectives are valid and welcome.

“*I’m thinking about young people, about adults, about Elders, about babies. So, I wrote down those two words, lost generations, and those are the ones that have never heard even the word for Spirit in the language or for Creator in the language. They’ve not even been instructed in the Bible or any spiritual practice. So, I call them the lost generations because they don’t know how to nourish their spirit or what happens.*”

Gerry Oleman, member of the EKCC



Use language that invites, not diagnoses

The words we use matter. Clinical language can feel alienating, patronizing, and suspect, especially when the communities we work with may not have the same level of understanding of these topics. For example, in a previous section of this guide, several definitions of grief are provided. While these may help provide more language to describe experiences of grief, they could also feel intrusive or limiting when presented in an unsupportive way.

To combat this challenge, you can:

- ✓ **Invite sharing:** Use open-ended questions and gentle prompts, such as “Would you like to talk about what you are feeling today?” or “What does grief mean to you?”
- ✓ **Avoid labels:** Do not immediately categorize grief as a disorder or a problem to fix. Focus on understanding the client’s story and context.
- ✓ **Honour cultural perspectives:** Ask about cultural practices, ceremonies, or community support that may help in healing. Respect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and grieving.
- ✓ **Listen deeply:** Let clients lead the conversation, being prepared to hear their stories many times as you build a relationship. Prioritize listening over fixing.
- ✓ **Reflect on your role:** Consider how your position or organization may benefit from colonial systems, and seek ways to challenge these practices, making sure to minimize/eliminate the potential harms of your workplace policies or practices on your Indigenous clients.
- ✓ **Build trust:** Be transparent, consistent, and respectful. Trust is earned over time.
- ✓ **Support self-determination:** Empower clients to make decisions about their own healing journey.

Supporting Indigenous clients through grief is not just about clinical skills; it is about relationship, respect, and a commitment to justice. By normalizing discomfort and using inviting language, providers can help create spaces where healing is possible.

Activity: Creating safe(r) spaces

Creating a safe(r) space means more than providing comfort—it means fostering an environment where Indigenous people feel culturally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually secure in expressing grief, connecting with tradition, and accessing support on their own terms. Care provider spaces can look different depending on their function, whether they are shared spaces, and as they adapt to community needs. While no space can be entirely ‘safe,’ we can take steps to make a space feel more supportive to the community members we work with.



Cultural practices are essential to the grieving process for Indigenous communities. Safe spaces should allow for, and actively support, access to:

- ✓ Smudging and other traditional medicines
- ✓ Lighting the qulliq
- ✓ Prayer and ceremony
- ✓ Offerings and memorial items (such as photos, moccasins, feathers, drums, other bundle items)
- ✓ Elder or Knowledge Carrier visits

Consider asking in advance: Does this person or family want cultural supports? If so, review potential sources of barriers, such as building policies that restrict the use of fire/smoke or institutional hesitation around the ceremony.

Recognizing the importance of place and time in sharing grief

Grief does not follow a schedule. Many Indigenous communities grieve in connection with:

- ✓ The Land (a lake, forest, tundra, a family home, or gathering space)
- ✓ Time-honoured traditions (e.g., a ceremony four days after a death, seasonal cycles, annual traditions)
- ✓ Family or community presence (travel time, scheduling limitations)

When possible, offer flexibility in time and location—can you meet outdoors, in homes, or in another neutral environment? Can you offer time before or after a session for prayer or quiet reflection (for yourself and/or the service recipient)? What might your role be in supporting traditions and togetherness in your community?

“*No matter where you live,
you’re by the river somewhere.
So, we’re connected to that river.*”

Diane Boots, member of the EKCC

What are some things you could do to create a safe(r) space?

.....

.....



Activity: Examining your space

Take a few minutes to reflect on, or walk through, your physical space or virtual care environment:

- ✓ Do you believe it is welcoming to the clients and families who use the space? How could it become more welcoming?
- ✓ Is there a space where someone could use traditional medicines or sit quietly?
- ✓ Do your intake forms or questions allow people to indicate cultural needs?
- ✓ Can the space accommodate family, ceremony, or items like bundles and drums?
- ✓ What can be adjusted based on individual preferences? (e.g., lighting, privacy, access to tissues or tea, resources in Indigenous languages, or space for communal grieving)
- ✓ If you are an Indigenous care provider, how does the space honour your mind, body, heart, and Spirit?
- ✓ If you are a non-Indigenous care provider, how does the space honour the perspectives and beliefs you use within your role?

While we often do not have full control over our physical environment, considering these components allows us to change the parts within our control. Safe(r) spaces are not static—they evolve based on who is in the space, what they need, and how they grieve. Centre the voices of the community members you support in shaping these environments and remain open to learning, unlearning, and adapting your approach. No two environments will be exactly alike, and flexibility is a meaningful way to support a community-centred practice.

“*Cedar tea was the other thing that my uncle taught me, you know, he said when somebody’s in grief, make a pot of cedar tea, and they’ll drink that.*”

Rosella Kinoshameg,
member of the EKCC

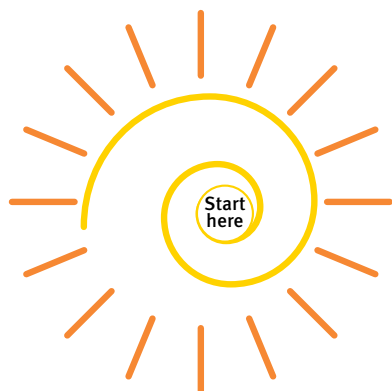
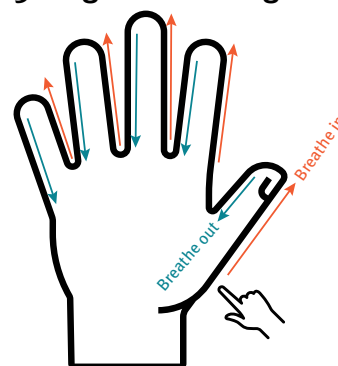


Breath is good medicine: Checking in with ourselves

As we come to the end of this section, you are invited to take a pause to reflect. Support your mind, body, heart, and Spirit with a moment of intentional breathing. Below are three breathing exercises that can be used at any time, particularly when someone is overwhelmed. Take a moment to try these exercises or return to them when they may be helpful.

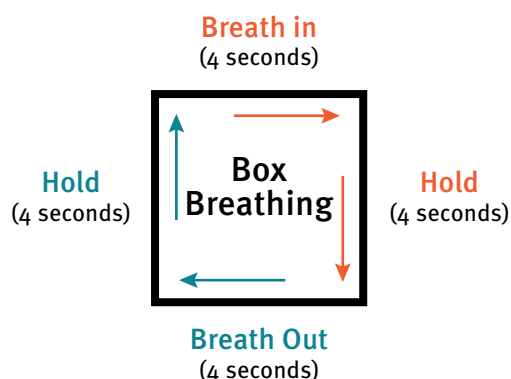
Five finger breathing: Using your own hand or this image, trace your fingers, breathing in as you trace up each finger and breathing out as you trace down each finger. Follow along at a comfortable pace, slowing your breath if desired.

5 Finger Breathing



Spiral breathing: Place your finger at one end of the spiral, breathing in as you trace to the other end. Pause briefly, and exhale as you trace your finger back to the start. Repeat as many times as would be helpful, continuing to check in with yourself and your body.

Box breathing: Begin by breathing in for four seconds, pausing for four seconds with your lungs full, breathing out for four seconds, and holding for four seconds with all your breath out. Adjust the speed to be comfortable for you, potentially making each step shorter or longer, depending on what your body needs right now.





Branches: Reaching for support and resources



Branches stretch outward, seeking light and connection. In this guide, they represent the ways we reach for support, extend care, and share what we have learned. Healing is not a solitary path; it is one we must walk in relationship with others, with the Land, and with Spirit.



The *Branches* section aligns with the tools, practices, and resources in the three *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss* guides for Indigenous Peoples, providing a general overview and considerations of the key themes in these guides. Like branches that intertwine and shelter, these supports remind us that while our journeys are individual, we are not walking them alone. Reaching out is not a sign of weakness, but a return to the collective strength that has always held us.

The *Branches* section provides an overview of the four sections in the three guides for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, along with companion reflection activities for health and social care providers that align with these topics.

About the guides

The First Nations, Inuit and Métis guides are grounded in Indigenous Knowledges and the Indigenous Wellness Framework.¹⁷ This framework describes health and wellness as a balance between the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of self, grounded in connection to culture. The resurgence of Traditional Knowledge is central to the grief guides. Traditional Knowledge varies across Turtle Island, and these guides aim to help empower communities to incorporate their unique traditions and practices into grief support.

They also emphasize the reawakening and reconnection to our Spirit, recognizing Spirit as central to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. As a support provider, you are encouraged to use any practices that support your spiritual well-being. These practices may be grounded in Indigenous spirituality or any religious belief system. You may choose to combine these belief systems and adapt them to meet your needs. Trust that your Spirit will guide you to the practices that are right for your journey.

“*Ceremony made me stronger, but it also made me more connected to the people, made me able to see more.*”

Ella Paul, member of the EKCC

¹⁷ Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2015).



Overview of spiritual wellness creates hope—an invitation to begin healing

Grief touches every part of who we are—our bodies, minds, emotions, and Spirits. This section invites individuals to reflect on spiritual wellness as a foundation for hope and healing, both for themselves and for those they support.

Hope lives within the Spirit. It is an enduring presence that reminds us healing is possible, even when pain feels too heavy to carry. Hope can bring comfort by showing us that we are never truly alone—our Ancestors, the Land, the beings that share it with us, and the generations yet to come all walk alongside us on this journey.

For many Indigenous Peoples, hope can be found and nurtured through:

- ✓ Dreams and prayer
- ✓ Ceremony and song
- ✓ Time on the Land and in the community
- ✓ Connection, creativity, and storytelling

The listed practices are reflected within the activities of this section. Each of these practices allows us to express, create, or release something meaningful. Even in moments when grief feels overwhelming, these practices offer a reminder that we are still here, still connected to tradition, and still capable of healing.

The “Overview of spiritual wellness creates hope—an invitation to begin healing” section is an opening to reconnect with Spirit, with hope, and with the Land. As someone moves through these teachings, they create space for reflection and curiosity. Intention is a meaningful first step, and it is especially important for you, as a care provider, to demonstrate reliability, knowledge, and readiness to provide support. This section creates space for someone to establish a connection with you as a support provider and to commit to change.

To hear more about Spirit and the reclamation of teachings as a key component of Indigenous grief care, begin [here](#).



“*Because that Spirit has never ceased to be, your Spirit has been eternal and always will be.*”

Betty McKenna, member of the EKCC



Spiritual wellness

Dumont shares, “Our spirit is at the centre of our being and wants us to live life to the fullest. We connect with our spirit by learning about our identity as Indigenous people. When we have spiritual wellness, we have hope.”¹⁸

Spiritual wellness is a central component of Indigenous well-being. Without Spirit, emotional, mental, and physical wellness cannot be achieved, as they are equal parts of wholistic wellness. This balance was taken away from Indigenous Peoples through colonization and is being restored through the resurgence of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of being. As we support Indigenous communities, we must recognize that spirituality is an individual journey. Each person will move at their own pace and follow their own path. Spiritual wellness connects us to our purpose, identity, and culture through relationships with the Land, our Ancestors, and our communities.

Healing through grief involves recognizing the spiritual and wholistic nature of well-being. As you move through this section:

Reflect on your own relationship with Spirit and what spirituality means to you.

- ✓ Consider how you might honour a diversity of beliefs, teachings, and practices that come with supporting a connection to Spirit.
- ✓ Use the space below to write or draw. Alternatively, you can discuss these concepts with a trusted person.

¹⁸ Dumont (2014), p. 5.



Key components of this section

Connection to Land and medicines

The Land holds our stories and offers grounding in times of loss. Connecting to the Land and traditional medicines can bring calm and clarity. As you review this section in one of the three *Supporting healthy ways of living through grief & loss* guides for First Nations, Inuit or Métis Peoples, consider:

- ✓ Am I aware of how someone can connect with the Land around us?
- ✓ Are there any barriers I am aware of? How might I address them?
- ✓ As an Indigenous or non-Indigenous care provider, how do I navigate my own relationship with Land and traditional medicines?

Safety planning

Supporting someone through grief sometimes means helping them stay safe when emotions feel overwhelming. The safety planning section of the guide includes an opportunity to develop a grief support safety plan. The following activity can be completed by the support recipient independently or with the support of a health or social care provider, such as yourself.

Inviting conversations about grief

People may express a need to talk about their grief in many ways—through words, silence, or action. While this section does not explicitly address grief, it is the first opportunity to invite sharing and reflection on it.

Consider:

- ✓ How might someone show you they want to talk about their loss?
- ✓ What helps you recognize when a person is ready for that conversation?
- ✓ How can you create space for this conversation gently, with respect and care?

Sample conversation prompts:

- ✓ “Would you like to share a memory or story about your family member or friend?”
- ✓ “I was spending some time by the water today, and it reminded me of ...”
- ✓ “What helps you feel close to them when you are missing them?”
- ✓ “Has your community or culture helped you through times of loss before?”
- ✓ “What could I do to support you in this moment?”

Take some time to reflect on your role and relationship with this topic, and how you might address it going forward.



Overview of emotional wellness creates belonging—understanding your grief

In this section of the guide, the focus is on finding a sense of belonging through grief education. Grief is not only an individual experience—it is shared among families, communities, and Nations. Being able to put words to the experience of grief can allow individuals to recognize their grief more comprehensively, providing context to the layers of loss that have been carried across generations. Understanding grief and the factors that influence it (as outlined in the section “Strengthening understanding through education”) is a central component.

Despite these profound losses, Indigenous Peoples continue to demonstrate strength, resilience, and love. As you move through this section alongside the service recipients you support, remember to continue reflecting on the connections to Land, Spirit, and colonization that influence and contextualize grief.

Emotional wellness

Emotional wellness does not mean the absence of pain or sadness—it means allowing all emotions to exist, move, and find expression in a good way. Grief can bring a variety of emotions, each carrying meaning and guidance.

For care providers, emotional wellness involves both understanding the emotions of others and tending to your own. Creating space for emotions, without judgment or a need to change, helps people feel seen and safe in their healing process. The emotional wellness section provides knowledge, reflection, and tools to help you and those you support understand grief more fully, and to connect emotional wellness with belonging and community care.

Key components of this section

Education and learning about grief

Learning about grief helps us name and understand our experiences. Education can happen in many forms: through stories, teachings from Elders, community discussions, or formal workshops. As an Indigenous or non-Indigenous care provider, education is a great way to engage with the community you support, while also supporting the autonomy and individuality of someone’s cultural or religious needs.

“When I provide education around grief in Indigenous communities, I talk about it being like a layered cake. We must be really aware of this because, as Indigenous Peoples, we experienced so many losses that they just pile up one on top of another. And they pile up, and they pile, and people don’t have the time or the space to process that grief. And then one small thing happens that makes that cake topple over, and all that unresolved grief comes flooding through.”

Dr. Holly Prince, Project Lead



As you review this section, consider:

- ✓ How might I best engage the community I support?
- ✓ Grief and loss are collective experiences. Are there individuals in the community who can contribute to grief support efforts?

Identifying personal grief

Before supporting others, it is important to recognize your own experiences of grief and how they shape you. By identifying and honouring your own grief, you deepen your empathy and capacity to walk beside others. Remember, acknowledging grief is an act of strength—it opens the path to healing. Reflecting on your own grief also creates space to recognize ideas, stories, and feelings that activate emotions that are harder to regulate—your ‘triggers.’ While the word ‘trigger’ itself can in fact be triggering to some, it is essential to understand and address these emotions so we may be present and ready to support others through their experiences.

If you have not done so previously, consider taking some time to discuss your grief with a trusted person. This can help provide some context and perspective on how the individuals you support may feel as they navigate their own grief. This discussion also opens the door to using appropriate self-disclosure—sharing parts of your experiences with the people you support to connect with them. However, it must be done carefully and intentionally, maintaining focus on what will be most beneficial to the person you are working with.

Recognizing community needs in grief

Communities have their own ways of grieving and healing. Take time to learn what is meaningful in the communities you support:

- ✓ What ceremonies, gatherings, or traditions help people express grief?
- ✓ Am I the most appropriate, available person to provide this type of support?
- ✓ Who are the helpers (Elders, Knowledge Carriers, healers, family members, etc.) who can guide the process? How might they get involved?
- ✓ What spaces or resources might help strengthen emotional wellness and belonging?

“*We are each other’s teachers. And sometimes the biggest teachers come in the littlest of packages, you know. Sometimes it’s those little, little young ones who blow you away with what they’ve come to teach you that day, that time and place they’ve come and they’ve given you something that you need.*”

Helen Gartner, member of the EKCC



Supporting emotional wellness means helping communities access their own strengths, teachings, and relationships. Creating space for community members to gather and learn is a meaningful way to create sustainable change in a community's access to grief support.

Overview of mental wellness creates meaning—going on your healing journey

This section invites you to explore what healing looks like for you and those you support. It encourages reflection on one's own path, deepens understanding of the mental aspects of wellness, and offers ways to strengthen coping, connection, and capacity for hope.

For First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, healing and learning are intertwined. Practices such as storytelling, ceremony, self-care, and connection with Traditional Knowledge are essential parts of this journey. They remind us, even in times of loss, that we can find purpose and direction. Healing is not about forgetting pain, but about transforming it into wisdom and compassion, both for ourselves and for our communities.

Mental wellness

For care providers, fostering mental wellness means creating environments where people feel safe to learn, reflect, and grow, especially in challenging times. It also means caring for your own balance, continuing your learning, and walking your own healing journey alongside those you support. Experiencing emotions, such as feeling and showing sadness or anger in the face of one's loss, is a sign of mental wellness. To support mental wellness, we must create a space where losses can be experienced and supported in a safe and meaningful way.

Key components of this section

Working through loss and building capacity for coping

Healing takes time, patience, and compassion. Creating space for individuals to navigate this challenging work in their lives is an extremely important part of our role as care providers.

Consider:

- ✓ How might you support individuals (and communities) as they build coping skills and find balance after loss?
- ✓ How do you nurture your own mental wellness in this work?

“

*The healing is beautiful.
It's hard, but it's beautiful.
There's tears, there's anger,
there is everything.”*

Ella Paul, member of the EKCC



- ✓ Do you feel confident in supporting people through the healing activities included in the grief guide? Whom might you go to if you (or the people you support) have questions about these activities?

The value of Indigenous Knowledges and practices in grief work

Indigenous knowledge systems hold teachings about balance, harmony, decolonization, and interconnection that are vital to healing.

- ✓ Knowledge shared by Elders and Knowledge Carriers reminds us that healing is collective and rooted in relationships.
- ✓ Ceremonies and traditions connect generations and help us make meaning of experiences that exist beyond our individual experiences and abilities.
- ✓ Traditional medicines, songs, and Land-based practices restore connection to Spirit and to self.

As a care provider, honouring these knowledges means creating space for traditional practices, learning from Knowledge Carriers, and respecting the diverse ways Indigenous Peoples understand grief and healing.

“

I began to feel like I was lost. The children were growing, we do ... as women, we become responsible. And that feeling, I felt like I was out of balance, and I was missing something. And I began to, on a journey of trying to discover myself ... I was missing my culture, whatever that was, and I didn't know what that was at the time ... My spirit seemed to tell me, that's what you need to find out, that what's causing this feeling of being imbalanced and separated from something that was very important for me to realize and to understand and to practice.”

Mae Louise Campbell, member of the EKCC



Supporting individual and collective healing journeys

Healing is both personal and communal. Individual healing involves self-reflection, connection to purpose, and finding meaning in one's experiences. Collective healing involves restoring relationships with family, community, and the Land, and rebuilding what has been disrupted by colonization and loss.

As a care provider, you can help bring these together by:

- ✓ Encouraging connection to family, community, and ceremony
- ✓ Supporting the creation of safe(r) and brave(r) spaces for shared healing
- ✓ Recognizing and celebrating resilience

Healing is not linear—it is ever-changing, ongoing, and shared. Each person and community will walk their journey in their own way, at their own pace. Mental wellness reminds us, even in grief, we can find meaning. Through connection, reflection, and learning, we continue to transform pain into knowledge and loss into a renewed understanding of who we are and where we come from, while honouring those losses.

“

A lot of our communities live in crisis every day. A lot of our communities are just trying to keep their people alive. And so, we do have to do better. We must have this shift in our programs and our services and our education and our policies to better provide that support, to better acknowledge that, to find ways to look to our traditional teachings and ceremonies, to see what's there that we can go towards to support those people in that journey.”

Dr. Holly Prince, Project Lead



Overview of physical wellness creates purpose— following up with support

Grief does not simply fade with time—it becomes part of who we are. Through healing, we learn how to carry grief in ways that bring meaning, strength, and compassion. Healing is not about forgetting what has been lost; it is about growing and honouring the ways love and memory continue to guide us.

To continue healing, it is important to stay connected to available supports—community, language, culture, ceremony, and the Land. These relationships can help us stay balanced as we navigate life’s challenges. Lasting change takes time and care, growing through the daily choices we make and the connections we nurture.

“*Instead of being stuck in the grieving stage, we have to move forward to help us grow inside more too. To accept our loss, to accept our grief. So, moving forward would be a good thing to do. We don’t forget it; we’ll never forget it because it’s in our memories now.*”

Naulaq LeDrew, member of the EKCC

Physical wellness

Dumont teaches us “physical wellbeing is achieved through the activities we engage in to maintain our health while pursuing our life’s purpose.”¹⁹

Like all aspects of wellness, physical health is connected to the Land, to our Ancestors, to the beings of Creation, and to the languages and teachings that guide us. A strong body supports a strong Spirit, and vice versa. Maintaining physical wellness means honouring the body alongside the mind, heart, and Spirit. It reminds us that caring for our bodies is an act of love and respect for ourselves and those who walk beside us.

¹⁹ Dumont (2014), p. 4.



Key components of this section

Moving forward

Healing continues long after grief's first sharpness fades. Moving forward means learning how to live with grief, integrating it into our lives in ways that honour what has been lost while making room for new experiences and growth.

- ✓ How do you support others as they begin to find purpose after loss?
- ✓ What does moving forward look like for you, or for the community you support?

Encouraging small, meaningful actions, such as returning to daily routines, engaging in cultural practices, or connecting with the community, can help individuals strengthen their wellness and sense of direction going forward.

Concluding or adjusting your support relationships

As people begin to find their footing after a period of grief, the nature of your supportive role may shift. In this case, this section is the final part of the grief guide, which may create a natural end to your support relationship.

- ✓ You may conclude a therapeutic or supportive relationship when a person feels ready to continue independently or with community-based supports.
- ✓ Other times, it may involve adjusting your role to offer less frequent check-ins or focusing on other aspects of their wellness journey.
- ✓ In other situations, you may need to leave someone before you would like to conclude the supportive relationship. This can be a particularly difficult situation, making it even more essential to establish clear and consistent expectations for service recipients.

It is important to approach these transitions with care, transparency, and respect. Discuss what ongoing support might look like. If your relationship is going to conclude, help individuals identify who else can walk alongside them—such as family members, Elders, community healers, or counsellors.

“

When you're carrying heaviness, it gets heavier and heavier. But when you do grieving, that turns the word grief into an action, I-N-G, as an action. So, you start crying, you start doing things to let it out of your system.”

Gerry Oleman, member of the EKCC



Supporting ongoing connection and growth

Healing does not end when formal support concludes. Encourage individuals to remain connected to their sources of strength, such as family, culture, connection to the Land, or other meaningful supports.

Support them in identifying ongoing resources and practices that can help sustain their wellness, such as:

- ✓ Attending ceremonies or community gatherings
- ✓ Practicing traditional activities or crafts
- ✓ Playing cards with friends
- ✓ Engaging in physical movement (walking, dancing, drumming)
- ✓ Spending time in nature and caring for the environment
- ✓ Continuing counselling or peer support

Supporting someone through a loss and their movement through mourning also means considering how someone may be affected by secondary losses. Some secondary losses will not be prioritized as someone works through their primary loss, and their needs related to these secondary losses may emerge later. For example, financial instability resulting from a partner's income loss can be a significant source of stress. In this case, assisting someone with accessing financial support is part of supporting someone through their losses.

These connections help maintain the balance between body, mind, heart, and Spirit.

Strengths-based conversations and continuous growth

Supporting grief and healing from a strengths-based perspective means focusing on what is working well, such as resilience, knowledge, and existing relationships.

- ✓ What strengths has this person, family, or community demonstrated through their grief?
- ✓ How can you continue to honour and build on those strengths?

“*The energy of the relationship continues. You can call it love or whatever you want to call it, that energy, that relationship continues even though that person may be gone. For myself, how I see their passing is they've transformed into spirit beings, and they're no longer what we knew them to be. But that connection, that spiritual, that energy connection is still there, right? And it will always be there.*”

Albert McLeod, member of the EKCC



For care providers, this also means ongoing reflection and growth—learning from each experience, seeking guidance from Elders and Knowledge Carriers, and caring for your own wellness. Healing work requires balance, humility, and the willingness to continue walking your own path of learning. It is natural for new thoughts and feelings to arise as you move through support provision. Being supported by those around you is an important part of continuing to grow as a care provider and maintaining your wellness.

Grief will always remain part of us, but through care, connection, and purpose, it becomes a source of strength, guiding us to live in balance with ourselves, our communities, and all of Creation.

Activity: Role of the helper

This reflection activity invites you to think about your unique role as a helper—someone who walks beside others on their grief journey. This is a role you take on as you support someone moving through a grief guide. Everyone's unique role is shaped by their professional responsibilities, community relationships, and cultural teachings. Reflecting on your boundaries and responsibilities helps you provide compassionate, sustainable, and culturally respectful support.

Note: You may wish to return to this reflection over time as your role evolves or as you learn new ways of offering care.

Part 1: Understanding your role

Recognizing the scope of your role and the resources available to you is an important part of providing wholistic support, as it creates space for more in-depth and comprehensive care. This will look different for everyone, as your role, physical location, social location, and the resources around you impact it.

Confidentiality and limits

Health and social care providers will have different responsibilities regarding confidentiality, depending on their roles within the community. Confidentiality is part of informed consent, meaning it is essential to ensuring the people you support are aware and knowledgeable about the support relationship they are consenting to. For Indigenous communities, understanding confidentiality and its limitations is even more essential. Consent has not always been respected by health and social care providers, such as through harmful child removal policies and coercive sterilization.

As you move forward with this work, it is important to consider the confidentiality expectations for your work with service recipients. In some instances, confidentiality can become more complex when you are an integrated part of the community you support. Dual relationships, such as when you are providing care to a family member, friend, coworker, or community leader (e.g.,



a Band or Settlement Council member, Elder, or Senator), can make it even more important to establish clear, effective role expectations.

For most care providers, confidentiality is no longer maintained when someone appears to be a risk to themselves or others (such as suicidal thoughts, suspected abuse of a child or senior, or a mental health crisis that prevents someone from caring for themselves), or if a court order requires information for a legal proceeding. Even in these instances, we can continue to uphold service recipients' right to confidentiality by sharing only the necessary information with those who need to know. Being consistent, clear, and upfront about what confidentiality entails and its limitations is an important part of building a strong, professional relationship with the people you support.

Honouring my role

Think about your role in supporting individuals, families, or communities through grief, and consider these questions:

- ✓ What is my role when I support someone in grief?
- ✓ What responsibilities come with this role?
- ✓ How do my (and the community's) cultural teachings or values shape how I offer care?
- ✓ What strengths do I bring to this role?

Part 2: Recognizing my role

Using the space on the following page, draw a shape to represent you (and your role), such as a cloud, heart, or star. Inside that shape, include some key phrases, words, symbols, or a drawing that represents your role. Around this shape, include elements that may appear in someone's grief support that are outside your role. Recognizing the wholistic nature of Indigenous grief support, these may or may not be directly related to grief.

Remember: the purpose of this activity is reflection. How you use the space is up to you, and it does not need to be precise, polished, or clear to others.

Reflect on the following:

- ✓ What is within my role when supporting someone through grief?
- ✓ What is outside of my role?

Examples: listening, offering resources, creating a safe space, connecting someone with an Elder or healer, completing program applications, primary care, taking responsibility for someone's healing, providing counselling, filling prescriptions, facilitating family discussions, giving advice outside my training, financial supports, addressing grief, holding ceremony.



Part 3: Community support circle

After completing the above activity, take a moment to look over your map and reflect on the following:

- ✓ Are there others in the community who provide the support inside your role?
 - Can you go to them for support or case consultation?
- ✓ Are there others who provide support outside your role?
 - How does this impact you and your processes?
- ✓ How does confidentiality look for the individuals you support?
 - Are you confident in how you discuss confidentiality with the people you support?
- ✓ Who would you reach out to if you are feeling overwhelmed by a complex situation?

Some of these may not be accessible to you in your specific role. Recognizing these systemic barriers is important for being realistic with yourself and those you support. Whether you have these supports accessible in your community or not, there are individuals across Turtle Island working on this same work alongside you. Take a moment to acknowledge yourself as a helper walking a meaningful path. Remember: your role is to walk beside, not to carry the journey for someone else. By honouring your own boundaries and continuing to learn, you sustain your ability to support others with presence, respect, and heart.



Spruce Cones: Honouring, remembering, and continuing the work



Spruce cones are the visible expression of a tree's life cycle as they fall, open and release the tree's seeds, ensuring its survival. Communities across Turtle Island have different understandings of seasons and the Land's transitions over time. As we see these changes, we should prepare thoughtfully for our duties. It is important to care for ourselves, our communities, and the Land in the seasons ahead.

Similarly, grief does not end at any one time. We learn to carry it with us as we move forward.



The *Spruce Cones* section of the guide honours those who have passed, remembers their teachings, and invites us to carry their legacy forward. Just as fallen spruce cones are signs of future growth, our grief can become a source of wisdom, empathy, and action. Continuing the work means honouring those we have lost. It is about helping our community heal and supporting others on their own journeys. In this way, grief becomes a sacred act of remembrance and renewal.

The components in this section build upon the work you have been doing throughout this guide. Many of these activities or reflections do not need to happen in a specific order. Continue to use the guide in the way that best supports you and the people you care for. This section shares ideas for next steps. The next steps are for you as a provider, for the individuals and families you support, and for the community as a whole.

Next steps for you as a health and social care provider

As a health and social care provider working with Indigenous communities through grief and loss, self-care is not just beneficial; it is essential. As care providers, we see deep intergenerational trauma and systemic injustice. Community mourning can be overwhelming. Without proper support in place, it can be hard to cope. For Indigenous care providers, it is crucial to recognize our own needs. We face the same systemic grief that our service recipients do, adding another layer of grief. As you move forward, it is important to build awareness and resilience. Creating balance in your personal and professional life is key to long-term success.

“*To be a good helper, you have to have your own helper. You have to make sure you’re looking after yourself too.*”

Kathy MacLeod-Beaver, member of the EKCC

Experiences and differences

It is important to recognize that your experience of grief, trauma, or healing may differ or overlap significantly with that of the communities you support. Indigenous grief often comes from more than personal loss. It is tied to collective, historical, and ongoing trauma. This trauma stems from colonial violence, residential schools, and systemic oppression. Being aware of this context, and your own emotional response, is part of ethical and trauma- and violence-informed care. Recognizing your feelings without shame helps us understand ourselves and the communities we support.



Understanding our experiences as care providers

Helping grieving individuals and families in a system with few resources can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is when your ability to feel compassion slowly decreases as you take in their pain and suffering. This can lead to vicarious trauma. When you frequently hear about others' trauma, it can change how you see the world, your sense of safety, and your emotional health. Both factors can contribute to burnout.

Burnout is a process, often characterized by emotional exhaustion and a sense that your work lacks meaning. It is a reasonable reaction to working in conditions that do not provide adequate support to workers and the communities we support. As this is a consistent reality in health and social services, it is important to be gentle with yourself and learn to identify the signs of burnout you experience. We can prevent burnout in a challenging system by using several strategies. Some strategies include debriefing with a practice supervisor, honouring the positive change you or your organization are making, and advocating for supportive policies.

Recognition of systemic impacts and colonized systems

Indigenous grief support is tied to the larger issues of colonization and ongoing systemic racism in health and social services. As a provider, you need to recognize how these systems have harmed Indigenous Peoples in the past. Also, understand how your role fits within them. Self-care in here includes reflecting on how policies, cultures, and care models can cause harm. It also involves advocating for decolonizing approaches. Aligning your work with Indigenous-led healing models helps support Indigenous sovereignty in health decisions. This approach benefits the collective well-being of clients, communities, and yourself.



Supporting regeneration: Activities to support learning, unlearning, and reflecting

Practising self-care is not a luxury; it is a must. It helps you stay present, effective, and ethically engaged. Caring for your own well-being is important. At the same time, be aware of the cultural and historical context of grief in Indigenous communities. This way, your support is sustainable, respectful, and grounded in justice. This section aims to create space for you to reflect on your own support needs as you navigate a grief support role.

Activity: Resilience toolkit

As health and social care providers, we need to know who and what we can turn to in tough times, both personally and professionally. As individuals in a helping profession, we often take on the heavy emotions of those we support. To do this work sustainably, we must avoid burnout by learning from people and activities that can support us in these situations. Consider the following prompts and reflect on the needs you may have as you move forward in this work. This can be a living document—it can be added to or edited at any time.

“*What is that you do in your journey that helps ... like you're here for a reason still, what is it that's kept you here? What are the things you draw on for support, for help?*”

Kathy MacLeod-Beaver, member of the EKCC

Physical supports

✓ Activities that help me feel grounded and safe:

Examples: Walking, practising deep breathing, cooking, engaging in physical activities (e.g., dancing, drumming, jogging, sports)



✓ Activities that connect me to my culture:

Examples: celebrating cultural festivals, participating in traditional dancing, going out on the Land, preparing recipes with family, collecting plant medicines, hunting, making beadwork, speaking my ancestral language

.....

.....

✓ Places where I feel safe and connected:

Examples: home, family member's home, community space, nature

.....

.....

Emotional supports

✓ Ways to express my emotions safely:

Examples: Talking to a trusted and safe person, journaling, creating art

.....

.....

✓ People who provide emotional support:

Examples: Elders, trusted community leaders, friends, family members, counsellor

.....

.....

✓ Comforting activities or objects:

Examples: Listening to music, playing cards or tabletop games, holding a meaningful object, laughing with my family, creative writing, participating in ceremony

.....

.....



Mental supports

✓ Positive thoughts or affirmations:

Examples: I am not alone, I honour my feelings

✓ Strategies to manage stress and anxiety:

Examples: Deep breathing, mindfulness exercises, reading, moving my body, smudging, creating art, making music

✓ People who can help me with guidance:

Examples: Family members, mentors, friends, counsellors, people from my church or community members

Spiritual supports

✓ Spiritual practices that bring me peace:

Examples: Prayer, meditation, church services, smudging, participating in ceremony, envisioning a conversation with a departed family member or friend

✓ Spiritual guides I can connect with:

Examples: Elders, Knowledge Carriers, religious leaders, cultural organizations

✓ Ways to honour my Ancestors and traditions:



Examples: Visiting with family, harvesting plant medicines, ceremony, storytelling, creating beadwork, wearing a ribbon skirt or Métis sash, cooking traditional soups and stews, using my language, maintaining a home altar or shrine, giving to charity in an ancestor's name, observing traditional periods of remembrance, visiting resting places, caring for Elders, passing down family stories

.....

.....

Emergency contacts

✓ People I can contact in an emergency:

Examples: Family, friends, crisis hotline

.....

.....

✓ Places, resources and services I can access in an emergency:

Examples: Community health centre, community organizations, mental health services, online support

.....

.....



Affirmation activity: Honouring balance and boundaries

Sustainable support work needs balance. You must separate your personal and professional life. Practice emotional regulation, and take care of your physical, mental, and spiritual health. Building resilience involves developing strategies to thrive in the face of challenges. Some strategies include getting help from colleagues or using mental health resources. Other strategies include engaging in cultural activities, practising mindfulness, and connecting with peer support networks.

Providing support to others, especially in times of loss and grief, can be emotionally and spiritually demanding. Creating healthy boundaries and nurturing self-compassion helps providers stay grounded and maintain connection with self, community, and the Land. To provide good care, it is important to keep professional boundaries. This protects your energy and honours your responsibilities to both you and those you support. The following activity aims to strengthen resilience by recognizing personal boundaries and affirming your strengths, values, and needs. Writing affirmations about your role can help you find balance, improve well-being, and keep your ability to care for others.

Part 1—Reflection

Think about what in your role helps you stay balanced, connected, and regulated, and what drains your energy.

Use the space below to write, draw, or discuss with a trusted individual, and ask yourself:

- ✓ What helps me feel safe, strong, and at peace?
- ✓ Are there elements of my job that I find particularly draining?
- ✓ What signs tell me I am reaching my limits?
- ✓ Have I ever been asked, or felt obligated to, go outside of my role to provide support?
- ✓ What do I need to say “no” to, so I can say “yes” to what truly matters?



Part 2—Affirmation building

Affirmations are positive statements that help remind us of our strengths, values, and the kind of person we want to be. They can boost our confidence, keep us focused, and provide support. Especially when we are going through something hard or need to hear something positive.

Affirmations are kind, powerful words we offer ourselves, like a pep talk. They remind us who we are, what we stand for, and the person we are becoming. You can say them out loud, write them down, repeat them in your mind, or even post them on your wall or mirror to see every day.

Consider your reflection above and brainstorm some affirmations that align with your needs, goals, or values.

Examples:

- ✓ I honour my need for relaxation after emotionally heavy days.
- ✓ My patient's emotions are not mine to take on.
- ✓ I am providing the best possible support consistent with my role and capacity.
- ✓ I am my best self when I am well rested.
- ✓ I ask for help when I need it.
- ✓ Maintaining connection with my mind, body, heart, and Spirit is essential.

My affirmations:

Remember: Caring for yourself is not separate from caring for others. Protecting your well-being allows you to be present, show compassion, and heal. This benefits not only you, but also the people and communities you serve.



Next steps for the people we support

As care providers, our role does not end once we provide the grief guide to a service recipient. In fact, this is often just the beginning of an ongoing relationship built on trust, presence, and responsive care. Grief is not linear, especially in Indigenous communities. There, it is deeply tied to intergenerational trauma, cultural loss, and collective mourning. Our role is to walk alongside people, families, and communities at their own pace. We do this in culturally respectful ways, offering continued support that meets their unique needs.

Follow-ups after sharing the guide

Once the grief guide has been shared, consider following up with a phone call, in-person visit, or other check-in. Ask how they are doing with the material and whether it resonated with their experiences. Be mindful not to assume the guide ‘covers everything.’ It is a starting point, not a solution. Some people might want to discuss their grief more deeply. Others may need help connecting with cultural supports. Some might appreciate knowing you are still available for them.

Why checking in matters

Regular check-ins show care, continuity, and reliability. These touchpoints are crucial for communities that have experienced ongoing disruptions to traditional practices and systemic harm. Brief, gentle conversations can validate grief and lead to additional support. Be guided by what the person expresses they need and always respect their readiness and comfort level. Let them lead.

“*We learned that we don’t have to address it alone and that people have had similar experiences. People have learned how to deal with, you know, end of life or trauma, and we can work collectively, and we create bonds or friendships or kinship even with people who have gone through similar experiences.*”

Albert McLeod, member of the EKCC



Other supports you can offer

Depending on your role and scope, you can offer or help connect people to:

- ✓ Cultural supports (Elders, Knowledge Carriers, ceremonies, community events)
- ✓ Mental health services (trauma-informed therapy, traditional healing, land-based programs)
- ✓ Practical support (transportation, housing, food security during grieving periods)
- ✓ Advocacy (support with paperwork, referrals, navigating systems)
- ✓ Community programming (grief groups, peer support, cultural revitalization initiatives)

Make sure any referrals you make are safe, culturally appropriate, and ideally Indigenous-led or endorsed by the community. Where gaps exist, consider working with others to co-create proposals for new services or reach out to organizations already doing this work. Your role is not to “fix” grief. Instead, you should build a supportive circle grounded in respect, cultural humility, and ongoing relationship-building. The grief guide opens a door, but your presence and commitment help keep it open.

Note: See “Grief and bereavement support for Indigenous communities” for a resource list intended for community members, or the environmental scan in “Grief & loss support programs identified in environmental scan” for a more comprehensive list of community supports across Turtle Island. The list includes space for you, as a health and social care provider, to add resources specific to the community you support, such as local friendship centres, community health centres, counsellors, or cultural support providers.



Next steps for the community

As care providers, we can drive change at the community or policy level. We also provide individual support, like the grief guide. Healing often starts within a person, but focusing on collective wellness is key. Building sustainable community changes honours Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Community members are often the biggest advocates for their own needs. Learning from Elders, Knowledge Carriers, and the community is key. It ensures support addresses the current, unique needs. Welcoming feedback and adapting our support to meet the community's needs allows us to adapt and meet the community where they are.

Communities have established grief supports since time immemorial. Across Turtle Island, Indigenous communities have continued to create and implement grief support programs such as:

- ✓ Grief Support Walking Groups—a time to honour physical movement while providing a space for individuals to grieve alongside the community.
- ✓ Memorials—particularly in instances of collective loss, creating a space for people to visit, reflect, and grieve.
- ✓ Death Cafes—a dedicated time and space for people to talk or listen to others about death-related topics, in a relaxed environment.
- ✓ Peer Support Groups—a structured space dedicated to building social connections around grief.
- ✓ Grief Lending Library—a collection of resources for individuals and families to borrow that may support them through a loss.

As we discuss grief, we must remember that policies and systemic barriers affect the support available to communities. As we push for change, remember to also think about the broader changes needed. Indigenous Peoples deserve care and support that meet their whole needs.

As care providers supporting Indigenous Peoples, having productive conversations about decolonizing practices in your organization starts with grounding your approach in existing, documented Indigenous knowledge. Resources include the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action. Studies by Indigenous scholars and community frameworks also help. They provide essential guidance for systemic change.

Use the insights gathered from these resources to guide proposals that meet community needs. This may include securing funding, building partnerships with Indigenous-led organizations, or advocating for new programming. Write thoughtful letters, presentations, or grant applications rooted in Indigenous priorities. Focus on these, not just institutional goals. This can make



your organization more accountable and culturally safe. Decolonization is an ongoing process, and these steps can serve as meaningful entry points for systemic transformation and deeper community trust.

Breath is good medicine: Checking in with ourselves

Take a moment to pause. Reflect and support your mind, body, heart, and Spirit with a moment of intentional breathing. This exercise aims to connect our breathing to our body's movement in space. Move in a way that is comfortable to your body and the space you are existing in.

1. Find a comfortable place to sit or stand.
2. Stretch your arms above your head, breathing in as you raise your arms.
3. Pause briefly when your lungs are full, and your arms are stretched overhead.
4. Keeping your arms stretched, begin bringing your arms down as you breathe out.
5. Continue to exhale, stretching your arms down to your knees, feet, or wherever feels best for you at this time.
6. Pause briefly at the lowest point of your breath.
7. From there, begin again by inhaling and stretching your arms above your head.



1: Chair Mountain Pose



2: Chair Cat/Cow Pose



3: Chair Sun Salutation
Modified



4: Chair Forward Fold

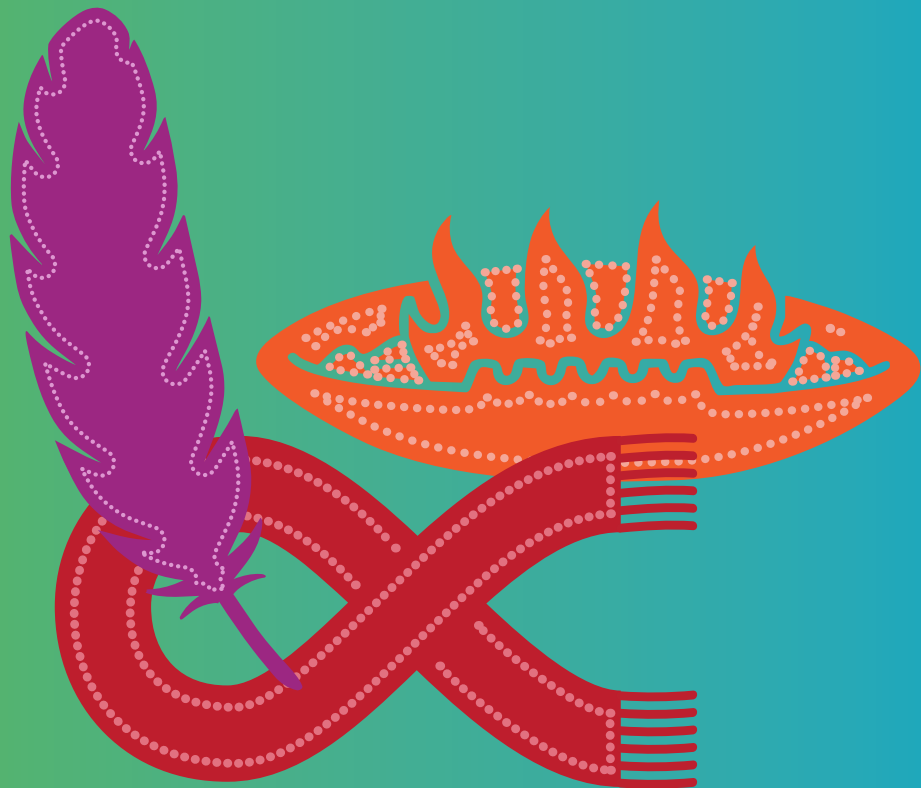




Conclusion and Appendices:

The ongoing journey

Grief is a journey without a timeline. Grief is like a tree swaying with the seasons. It comes in cycles—sometimes quiet, sometimes overwhelming. As we move forward, it can grow and change. There is no single path or pace; healing unfolds in its own time and way for every individual. Taking the time to learn and grow as a care provider is a meaningful step in your growth as an individual and as a leader in the community you support.





Take moments to pause and reflect, as reflection itself is a powerful form of healing. Every time you return to this guide, may it offer something new. It might offer another layer of understanding, compassion, or fresh insights to help you and those you walk beside.

Remember, you are not alone in this work. Across communities, Nations, and generations, many others are also on this journey of care, learning, and healing. Together, through connection with our communities, with the Land, and with Spirit, we continue to honour life, loss, and the strength that carries us forward.

Be gentle with yourself.
Honour your mind, your body,
your Spirit, and your heart.
Take breaks when needed.

Always trust your Spirit—it will lead you where you need to go.

Ch'mīgwech, "ᑕᐃ ᑕᐃ, maarsii, niá:wen, kukwstsétsemc, merci, "ᐃᑦ ᐃᑦ ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ, wela'lin, T'ooyak^siy' n'iin!, Gùnèlchīsh, nakurmiik, Kw'as hó:y, ʔimot, musi, thank you.

“*It's a legacy thing for me. I want my granddaughter and maybe someday great-great, you know, great-greats and greats, the generations to come, to still see themselves, to still see themselves represented in a very good and positive way and not to be hidden, not to be lost ... lost languages, lost traditions, but to see themselves and to be able to proudly say, I'm a Métis person.*”

Bev Cardinal, member of the EKCC



Grief & loss support programs identified in environmental scan

There are many valuable resources available to support individuals navigating their journey through grief and bereavement. Here is a list of some valuable supports available to Indigenous people across Canada that you can utilize as you carry on in your grief support journey.

Crisis support lines

For immediate support, call 9-1-1.

Canada-wide:

- ✓ National Suicide Crisis Helpline—9-8-8 (call or text) from anywhere in Canada
- ✓ Hope for Wellness Help Line—1-855-242-3310
- ✓ Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQI+ people (MMIWG) Crisis Line—1-844-413-6649
- ✓ Kids Help Phone—1-800-668-6868
- ✓ Indian Residential School Crisis Line—1-866-925-4419

British Columbia:

- ✓ Métis-specific Crisis Line—1-833-638-4722
- ✓ Kuu-us Indigenous Crisis Line—1-800-588-8717

Alberta:

- ✓ Indigenous Support Line—1-844-944-4744

Ontario:

- ✓ Talk 4 Healing—1-855-554-HEAL

Nunavut

- ✓ Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline—1-800-265-3333

Canadian Virtual Hospice resources

✓ Living My Culture

A series of video and print resources that discuss many end-of-life, grief, and loss-related topics. It includes perspectives from different Knowledge Carriers, including Elders, family members, and health and social care providers.

<https://livingmyculture.ca/>.

✓ Canadian Healing Quilt

An online space to honour, share, and remember the legacy of a loved one who has died. It allows anyone to add a memorial square to a Star quilt- a style of quilt that offers protection in life and honours memories in death. Stitching together life stories from across Turtle Island into the Healing Quilt can be a source of comfort and community.

<https://healingquilt.ca/>.



Trauma-informed programs

- ✓ **Caring Hearts:**
Offers support and education on grief, loss, trauma, and resilience through various programs, including support groups, counselling, educational resources, camps for children and youth, and mental health support for all. For more information, call 306-523-2780 or email contactus@caringheartssk.ca.
<https://www.caringheartssk.ca/>.
- Grief & Loss Support Groups
- Healing Circles with Elders
- Suicide Loss Support Group
- Grief Support & Perinatal Loss Groups
- Loss of Child Group
- Anticipating Loss Support
- Art Therapy Workshops
- Death Café (Open Conversation Space)
- Grief Camps

Missing Persons & Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQI+ people (MMIWG2S) supports

- Healing circles
- Education sessions
- Trauma-informed care
- Self-care tools
- Family support groups
- Victim services partnerships

Indigenous-specific counselling & supports

- ✓ **Medicine Bear Counselling, Support, and Elder Services**
Supports loved ones of MMIWG2S with Elder services and counselling.
<https://kanikanichihk.ca/>.
1-888-953-KANI (5264).
- ✓ **Leading Black Wolf Program**
For youth connected to the child welfare system. Offers mentorship and support in building independence and reaching goals.
<https://kanikanichihk.ca/children-youth-and-family/leading-black-wolf/>.
(204) 594-9525.

2SLGBTQ+ support

- ✓ **2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations: Crisis Response Team (Toronto)**
Provides mental health and crisis support rooted in Indigenous Knowledge and values. <https://2spirits.org/tcss/>.
- ✓ **2 Spirits in Motion Society**
A national organization that supports 2S kin through community, ceremony, advocacy, and youth leadership across Turtle Island.
<https://www.2spiritsinmotion.com/>
- ✓ **Egale**
Canada-wide organization influencing public policy through education and advocacy. Resource topics include 2SLGBTQI experiences with dementia, mindfulness, and gender-based violence.
<https://egale.ca/>.
- ✓ **Interligne**
Listening, intervention and awareness services for the LGBTQ+ community.
<https://interligne.co/>.
Call or text 1-888-505-1010.



- ✓ **LGBT National Youth Talkline**
Confidential telephone line for youth up to 25 years old.
Call 1-800-246-7743.
- ✓ **LGBT YouthLine (Ontario)**
Peer support via chat, text, and email for 2SLGBTQ+ youth aged 16–29. Trained volunteers offer non-judgmental support.
<https://www.youthline.ca/helpline/peer-support-helpline/>.

Text 647-694-4275
- ✓ **pflag Canada**
Created by the parents of 2SLGBTQ+ people, this organization provides peer support and education and has local chapters to build community. <https://pflagcanada.ca/>.
- ✓ **Qmunity (Vancouver)**
Provides peer groups, counselling, and more for 2SLGBTQIA+ folk and allies of all ages. <https://www.qmunity.ca/>.
- ✓ **Queer Yukon**
Provides 2SLGBTQIA+ health navigation, health clinics, and harm reduction supplies and education.
<https://www.queeryukon.com/>.
- ✓ **Saskatchewan Queer Mental Health Collective**
Improving access to mental Healthcare services for Two-Spirit, queer, and/or trans people in Saskatchewan.
<https://sqmhc.ca/>.
- ✓ **Trans Lifeline**
Trans peer support run by and for trans people. Call 1-877-330-6366.
<https://translifeline.org/>.

- ✓ **Trans Support NL**
Offers peer support groups as well as free counselling on Mondays for Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary, intersex, and gender-diverse folks in Newfoundland.
<https://tsnl.org/>.

Friendship centres & health centres

- ✓ **Friendship Centres (NAFC)**
Over 100 centres across Canada offering culture, community, and wellness supports. Some centres support health, housing, justice, and youth programming.
<https://nafc.ca/>.
- ✓ **Indigenous/Tribal Health Centres**
Offer wholistic primary and mental health care, often with traditional healing, doctors, nurses, and counsellors.

Training & education programs

- ✓ **Canadian Virtual Hospice—Indigenous Cultural Safety Training**
A 5-module course focused on culturally safer experiences in healthcare. It explores the importance of traditions, barriers to care, and how Indigenous people can be better supported through advanced illness, end-of-life care, and grief. <https://www.virtualhospice.ca/learninghub>.
- ✓ **Giwiidabindimin Certificate Program**
Training in decolonized practices for grief and trauma, aimed at those working in Indigenous communities (Healthcare, education, counselling, etc.). <https://ctrinstitute.com/topic/certificate-program-in-responding-trauma-grief-indigenous/>.



✓ **Sault College—Understanding Indigenous Grief and Loss**

A 30-hour course exploring grief and loss in Indigenous communities, including coping and support methods. <https://training.saultcollege.ca/courses/indigenousgriefandloss>.

✓ **Finding Our Way Through: Facilitator's Guide**

A training workshop for frontline workers supporting First Nation individuals through grief. Developed to build community capacity. https://eolfn.lakeheadu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/1_Example_EOLFN_Grief_and_Loss_Manual.pdf.



Understanding grief—info sheet for community

Grief is a natural human response to loss. It is something we all experience in different ways—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Everyone's grief journey is unique. Your family, community, culture, and personal experiences all shape how you grieve. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel or express grief.

Grief, bereavement, and mourning

- ✓ **Grief** is what we feel inside when we lose someone or something important.
- ✓ **Bereavement** is the period of time when we are adjusting to life after that loss.
- ✓ **Mourning** is how we show our grief outwardly. This might include:
 - Crying or talking with others
 - Creating art, music, or writing
 - Taking part in ceremony or cultural practices
 - Honouring someone's memory in your own way

Mourning has always been an important part of Indigenous teachings. Ceremonies, gatherings, and community support help people express grief and find strength together.

Many kinds of loss

Grief is not only about an individual's death. You can grieve:

- ✓ The end of a relationship or friendship
- ✓ Losing a pet or a special place
- ✓ Leaving your community or home
- ✓ Missing an opportunity or a dream

Every loss matters. If it is important to you, it is okay to feel sad about it and take time to heal.



There are many types of grief:

Type of grief	What it means	Example
Ambiguous grief	A loss that feels unclear or has no closure.	When a person goes missing.
Anticipatory grief	Grief that starts before a loss happens.	Knowing someone is very sick.
Collective grief	When a community shares a loss together.	Loss of Land, language, or a respected Elder.
Secondary losses	Other changes that result from a loss.	Losing a home or community support.
Cultural loss	Losing traditions, ceremonies, or language due to colonization.	Losses caused by residential schools.
Ecological grief	Sadness about harm to the Land, water, or animals.	Seeing changes to the environment.
Spiritual grief	Feeling unsure or hurt in your beliefs or purpose.	Feeling disconnected from culture or Creator.

When grief feels more difficult

- ✓ **Delayed grief:** When emotions surface long after the loss.
- ✓ **Disenfranchised grief:** When others do not understand or accept your grief.
- ✓ **Stigmatized grief:** When a loss feels hidden or judged (for example, from addiction or suicide).
- ✓ **Traumatic grief:** When a loss is sudden, violent, or frightening.
- ✓ **Cumulative grief:** When losses build up over time or across generations.
- ✓ **Complicated or prolonged grief:** When grief lasts a long time and makes daily life hard.

If grief feels too heavy, you are **not alone**. Reach out for support from a:

- ✓ Counsellor or healthcare provider
- ✓ Elder or Knowledge Carrier
- ✓ Trusted friend or family member
- ✓ Support line, such as:
 - Hope for Wellness Help Line—1-855-242-3310
 - _____
 - Or 9-1-1 if you are in crisis.

Grief shows how deeply we love and care. Healing takes time, and it is okay to ask for help. By acknowledging your grief, you honour an important part of your healing journey.



Understanding systemic trauma and resilience— info sheet for community

What is trauma?

Trauma happens when something very upsetting or harmful overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Then preventing the body and mind from processing it effectively and returning to a state of safety. It can be described as something that comes at us 'too much, too fast, too soon' and can affect us **emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually**. Trauma can leave lasting marks on how we feel, think, and connect with others. This info sheet provides information on the trauma that exists in Indigenous communities. It also covers individual experiences of trauma (such as an accident or experience of violence).

Trauma affects the whole being. When trauma leads to disconnection from self, family, community, culture, Land, or Spirit, it can make daily life harder. Everyone experiences trauma differently. Things like age, gender, resources, and social location can all influence how someone responds and heals.

Types of traumas in Indigenous communities

Historic and ongoing trauma

Historic and ongoing trauma is the deep and ongoing pain caused by centuries of colonization, both past and present.

Examples of **colonial violence** include:

- ✓ Forced relocation and loss of Land
- ✓ Banning of ceremonies, language, and spiritual practices
- ✓ The Residential School system and family separation
- ✓ Systemic racism and discrimination
- ✓ Death from introduced diseases
- ✓ Missing and Murdered Indigenous women, girls, men, boys, and Two-Spirit people
- ✓ Loss of sacred items and teachings
- ✓ Generations who were not allowed to grieve

Historic and ongoing violence experiences caused deep harm but also demonstrate the strength and endurance of Indigenous Peoples.



Intergenerational trauma

Intergenerational trauma is passed from one generation to the next. Even if someone did not experience the original harm, the effects can still be felt in families and communities. Some Knowledge Carriers call this ‘blood memory,’ meaning our stories, pain, and strength live within us and are carried forward through generations.

Multigenerational trauma

Multigenerational trauma happens when trauma continues across many generations—three, four, or more—accumulating over time. While pain can pass down, so can resilience.

Indigenous communities have shown strength through:

- ✓ Family and community support
- ✓ Cultural teachings and ceremonies
- ✓ Connection to Land and Spirit
- ✓ Shared stories, laughter, and humour
- ✓ All mechanisms of survival that have kept our communities and traditions alive.

Each of these is a powerful way to heal and carry forward hope.

Race-based trauma

Also known as racial trauma, this happens when people are harmed, discriminated against, or treated unfairly because of their race or identity. It can occur through personal experiences of racism or through systemic discrimination in society. These experiences can cause lasting emotional and spiritual wounds and make it harder to feel safe or valued.



Understanding resilience

Resilience is our ability to recover, heal, and keep going, even after painful experiences. It does not mean ignoring the pain—it means finding strength through connection with Spirit, self, family, and community.

Resilience grows from:

- ✓ Supportive family and community relationships
- ✓ Strong cultural identity and connection to the Land
- ✓ Ceremony, spirituality, and language
- ✓ Self-care and emotional regulation
- ✓ Hope and humour

Trauma may leave marks, but it does not define who you are. Healing happens through connection, culture, and community. Every act of care—listening, learning, ceremony, laughter, storytelling—is a step toward balance and strength.

If you feel lost or alone in your experience of trauma, you are not alone. Reach out for support from a:

- ✓ Counsellor or Healthcare provider
- ✓ Elder or Knowledge Carrier
- ✓ Trusted friend or family member
- ✓ Support line, such as:
 - Hope for Wellness Help Line—1-855-242-3310
 - _____
 - Or 9-1-1 if you are in crisis.



Grief and bereavement support for Indigenous communities

You are not alone.

Grief is a natural part of life and connection. Many supports are available to walk beside you through your healing journey, whether you are mourning a family member or friend, supporting someone in grief, or honouring your own healing.

Below is a list of resources available to Indigenous Peoples across Canada. Use what feels right for you, your family, and your community.

Crisis support lines

If you are in danger or need immediate help, call 9-1-1.

Canada-wide supports

- ✓ National Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text 9-8-8 (24/7, anywhere in Canada)
- ✓ Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310 (Phone or online chat support from Indigenous counsellors)
- ✓ MMIWG2S+ Crisis Line: 1-844-413-6649 (For Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Men, Boys, and 2SLGBTQI+ people)
- ✓ Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 (Call or text CONNECT to 686868 for youth support)
- ✓ Indian Residential School Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419 (24/7 support for Survivors and their families)

Regional supports

- ✓ British Columbia:
 - Métis-Specific Crisis Line: 1-833-638-4722
 - Kuu-us Indigenous Crisis Line: 1-800-588-8717
- ✓ Alberta:
 - Indigenous Support Line: 1-844-944-4744
- ✓ Ontario
 - Talk 4 Healing (for Indigenous women): 1-855-554-HEAL (4325)
- ✓ Nunavut
 - Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline: 1-800-265-3333



Canadian Virtual Hospice resources

- ✓ **Living My Culture—**
Stories and videos from Indigenous Knowledge Carriers, families, and care providers sharing teachings about life, dying, and grief.
Visit: www.livingmyculture.ca
- ✓ **The Canadian Healing Quilt—**
An online Star Quilt where people can honour, remember, and share stories of loved ones who have passed on. Each square represents life, memory, and connection across Turtle Island.
Visit: www.healingquilt.ca
- ✓ **Indigenous Cultural Safety Training—**
A five-module online learning series for care providers exploring:
 - ✓ Indigenous traditions and beliefs about care
 - ✓ Systemic barriers in health
 - ✓ Supporting Indigenous people through illness, end-of-life, and griefVisit: www.virtualhospice.ca

2SLGBTQ+ supports

- ✓ **Trans Lifeline: 1-877-330-6366**
Peer support run by and for trans people.
Visit: <https://translifeline.org/>
- ✓ **Interligne: 1-888-505-1010 (call or text)**
Listening and awareness support for LGBTQ+ communities.
Visit: <https://interligne.co/>
- ✓ **LGBT YouthLine (Ontario):**
Text 647-694-4275 or visit www.youthline.ca
Peer support for 2SLGBTQ+ youth aged 16–29.
Visit: <https://www.youthline.ca/helpline/peer-support-helpline/>

- ✓ **2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations (Toronto):**
Crisis response and mental health support rooted in Indigenous Knowledge and values.
Visit: <https://2spirits.org/tcss/>

Community connections

Local support opportunities:



Remember: Healing is not a straight path. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Reach out for help when you need it—from Elders, Knowledge Carriers, counsellors, friends, or your community. You carry the strength of your Ancestors within you. Every step you take toward healing honours them.



References

- Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). Wicasa was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian boys and men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), S177–S183. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2011.300511>
- Dumont, J. (2014). *Definition of culture*. National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, Honouring Our Strengths: Indigenous Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment Project—University of Saskatchewan, Canadian Institutes of Health Research.
- Hospice Northwest. (n.d.). Grief & bereavement support. <https://www.hospicenorthwest.ca/services/grief-support-program/>
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. (n.d.). About Canadian Inuit. <https://www.itk.ca/about-canadian-inuit/70>
- Joseph, B. (2016, July 20). Indigenous Peoples terminology: Guidelines for sage. Indigenous Corporate Training Inc. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-terminology-guidelines-for-usage>
- Khawaja, M. (2021). Consequences and remedies of Indigenous language loss in Canada. *Societies* 11(3), 89. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11030089>
- Linklater, R. (2020). *Decolonizing trauma work: Indigenous stories and strategies*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]. (2025). Intersectionality and multiple identities. https://openlearninglibrary.mit.edu/courses/course-v1:MITx+7.InT+2021_Fall/courseware/oa4640cc7adb4a7bac12b1d6c4d7a205/951f3649ec6147a6acc922e776d8051f/
- Styres, S. (2019). Pathways for remembering and (re)cognizing Indigenous thought in education. In H. Tomlins-Jahnke, S. Styres, S. Lilley & D. Zinga (Eds.), *Indigenous education: New directions in theory and practice* (pp. 39–62). University of Alberta Press.
- Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, & Deleary, M. (2019). Indigenous Knowledge & Epigenetics [Slide show]. afn.ca. <https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Indigenous-Knowledge-Epigenetics.pdf>
- Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. (2015). *Indigenous wellness framework*. National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://thunderbirdpf.org/about-the-iwf/>

Special thanks to our sponsor

