Hub Tool: An Indigenous Inclusion Lens for Mental Health Promotion

Tool overview

Suggested use: By individuals and teams who are seeking to advance mental health promotion in Canada that is sensitive to the cultural contexts, histories, experiences and needs of Indigenous communities (urban and rural). The goal of this tool is to foster conversations, planning and actions toward inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge in ways that are respectful and culturally appropriate.

Tool content: This tool starts with an overview of an Indigenous inclusion lens, with an emphasis on its wholistic approach. The tool then offers suggestions for how to use the lens and a quick competency quiz as an informal self-assessment. The main tool follows, which is a set of guiding questions for the four inter-dependent elements of spirit, heart, mental and physical. References and a few additional resources complete the tool.

Tool format: 11-page document

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Currently, Kathy is the Director of the Centre for Indigegogy and a faculty member in the Indigenous Field of Study in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her life-long passion of healing and wellness among her peoples has been informed by her experiences of growing up on the land. She is a knowledge carrier, critical Indigenous author and educator on decolonizing from colonial violence and it’s impacts on all peoples in Canada. She has been a helper and social worker for 35 years working in Indigenous mental health, child welfare, community wellness and education.

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AN INDIGENOUS INCLUSION LENS

What is it?
A lens is another set of eyes or perspectives to help us see what we normally do not. An Indigenous inclusion lens is a guide to seeing something inclusively of Indigenous peoples.

Colonial systems and structures often do not include Indigenous peoples’ experiences, needs or locations. Colonization, in fact, has been instrumental in erasing Indigenous peoples’ presence of spiritual, social, intellectual, political and economical knowledge and power. An Indigenous inclusion lens helps to counter this erasure and bring Indigenous knowledges, lands, people and perspectives into all aspects of project planning, development and evaluation.

The goal of the lens in this tool is to foster conversations, relationship building, planning and development toward inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge in a respectful manner. It is for teams across Canada who are seeking to advance mental health and wellness promotion with Indigenous peoples and communities.

The lens is not a prescription, but a guide. It is not overly specific to peoples or places because contexts across the country vary so much and Indigenous territories, languages, cultures and peoples are diverse. There needs to be room to accommodate this diversity within the lens and within teams across Canada.

An Indigenous inclusion lens is wholistic.

Wholistic frameworks are useful in fostering social inclusion. This wholistic framework is comprised of four interconnected and interrelated elements: spirit and vision; emotional and relationship; mental and knowledge; and physical presence. Social inclusion of Indigenous peoples ought to be wholistic in perspective, approach and application. I begin with spirit and move around the circle to emotional / relationships, then mental / knowledge and finally physical / presence. All are interdependent and interconnected. Balance is achieved by being mindful of all elements which together create a wholistic and ethical approach. (Absolon, 2016: 48)

The following diagram shows the four inter-dependent elements of an Indigenous wholistic approach and the elements used to organize the lens in this tool.
A wholistic Indigenous approach

Wholistically, the lens in this tool offers questions organized in the four elements of the spirit, heart, mind, and physical. While each element is described separately, they are interrelated, interdependent and interconnected. The following quote gives an example,

*Land and spirit are intrinsically connected. Being on the land is being in relationship with spirit. Indigenous people generally love being on the land. I encourage large land holders to share land space and places by invitation. Work with Indigenous peoples toward restoration of relationships with the original stewards of the land and Creation. On a purely idealistic level, I believe land must be returned to Indigenous peoples in order for the inclusion of Indigenous ceremonial practices to occur without permission or apology. Our ceremonies require a land base. The land is where the medicines, animals, helpers exist: this is where our life source is. We know the land will be our salvation for life and spaces and places are essential. Indigenous knowledge and learning doesn’t happen in classrooms or inside buildings; it happens on the land and in Creation. Creation is comprised of our relatives and in order to enact spiritual practices, the Spirit of the land is central.* (Absolon, 2016: 49)
When will teams use this Indigenous inclusion lens?
The short answer is: **All the time until inclusion of Indigenous peoples and perspectives is automatic.**

Like many Indigenous knowledge keepers, I too believe wholistic frameworks will create lenses to facilitate wholistic thinking in development, planning and action toward comprehensive responses for complex and multifaceted issues and problems. Medicine Wheel frameworks, the Oolichan fishing, whole petal flowers, whole trees, stitching and sewing and other countless examples can facilitate balance and considerations of all aspects within the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements; and all those elements in relationship with and to the whole environment, past, present and future (Graveline, 1998; Green, 2009; Hart, 2002; Jackson, Coleman, Strikes with a Gun & Sweet Grass, 2015). Additionally, wholistic frameworks based on the hand drum and sacred circle teachings with all its elemental directions have guided a lens for considerations and movement toward inclusion (Goudreau, Cote-Meek, Madill, & Wilson, 2008; Hart, 1996, 2002; Nabigon, 2006). (Absolon, 2016: 48)

Colonialism has attempted to erode Indigenous knowledge, peoples and places. Much of your education has omitted important truths about colonial violence and Indigenous peoples. This is not your fault, except that you now have a responsibility to change this. One of the impacts of colonial education has been erasing awareness of the impact of colonization on organizational planning and development. What this means is that you don’t know what you don’t know until you are made aware. The questions in this lens are to facilitate awareness. The answers are in the process once you begin to address the questions through individual or team conversations.

The impacts of colonization have omitted and erased Indigenous peoples and their knowledge for centuries. The ongoing erasure is violence in spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical forms. We cannot deny or ignore the significance of how Indigenous peoples have been targets of extermination policies. More than ever, this history is present today. Internalization of colonialism means that through omissions of Canadian history on and about Indigenous peoples, many people do not instinctively think about or consider Indigenous peoples in project or organizational planning and development. So much knowledge and history has been erased from our minds and consciousness. This means that unless you have worked to consciously consider Indigenous peoples in your planning, the probability of forgetting them or omitting them is high. Therefore, we have included this lens as a tool to help remind you of facets and elements in your planning for Indigenous mental health promotion. **You will use this lens all the time in your practice until considering Indigenous peoples, lands, knowledge becomes automatic.**

### Start now to use this lens

Begin to think about the work your project is engaged in or embarking upon. In what you’re doing or planning, have you and your team intentionally included Indigenous peoples, perspectives and contexts? Whether you have or not, ask yourselves the questions in this tool to ensure you are being as inclusive as possible. A first step is to use the competency quiz that comes next to help orient you and your team to Indigenous inclusion.
QUICK COMPETENCY QUIZ

Use the quiz to identify areas for strengthening inclusion of Indigenous peoples’ presence and voice in your project planning process. Consider the questions individually and as a team.

a) What do you already know about Indigenous mental health and wellness promotion specifically?
b) What do you think contributes to Indigenous mental wellness?
c) Is there an existing plan for inclusion of Indigenous voices in project planning?
d) Do you know whose traditional territory you are on and Treaty territory you are on? What is the language(s) within this territory?
e) On a scale from 1 – 10 what would you say you know about Canada’s history of the Indigenous peoples and its impact?
f) What culturally relevant services are in your area? Can you name two?
g) Is there an organization nearby that supports Indigenous people? If so which one? What types of interventions and supports exist for Indigenous mental health and wellness?
h) How does your project involve Indigenous people, voices, contexts? Is it sufficient, insufficient or otherwise?
i) Has training to build knowledge and understanding about determinants of Indigenous mental health and wellness been done? Can you identify impacts of colonial violence and trauma on Indigenous mental health and wellness?
j) How will you begin to include diverse Indigenous people (e.g., children, families, 2-spirit)?
k) What is your project doing to support the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous people in your area?
l) What do you know about Indigenous peoples’ relationship to the land in fostering healing and wellness?
m) Is there anything else you can add before moving forward?
GUIDING QUESTIONS: Spirit, Heart, Mental, Physical

Why questions?
✓ Questions are good for Indigenous mental health promotion
✓ Questions guide a pathway
✓ Questions promote critical thinking
✓ Questions fuel thoughtfulness
✓ Questions promote dialogue
✓ Questions foster individual and collective knowledge building

Moving through the questions

Move through the elements systematically identifying the ones that you want to discuss and begin integrating into your project. Each element of the whole: spirit, heart, mind and physical is briefly described and followed with some guiding questions. The questions are by no means exhaustive and are meant to be a guide to consider aspects that may be relevant to mental health and wellness promotion projects.

As you move through each element, track where your strengths exist and where your project can work at building in inclusion. Perhaps your project is already well on its way and Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and experiences are foundational to your project. This is wonderful. If your project requires more development our hope is that this lens will guide you through the process. Building inclusion is a process and can happen methodically one step at a time. The first step is to review the lens and become familiar with the components that make up a wholistic lens for inclusion of Indigenous peoples in your work. Remember to acknowledge your strengths and practice humility in recognizing where shifts and development are necessary for inclusion. Take breaks from time to time to allow ideas and reflections to settle.

Principles such a respect, reciprocity, relational accountability and responsibility are essential to guide the building of an Indigenous inclusion lens that becomes distinct to each project context. Move forward in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation enacting these principles with intention and purpose.
SPIRIT

The element of spirit is core to Indigenous peoples and helps to address aspects related to the vision, cultural protocols, team vision, inclusion of Elders, and recognition of ceremony. Some questions to guide in determining whether the spirit of Indigenous peoples is included are:

- What does cultural humility mean for Indigenous mental health and wellness promotion?
- Are Indigenous peoples invited to vision, discuss and make decisions?
- Are spiritual leaders invited to guide spiritual inclusion?
- What cultural protocols need to be considered in this project?
- Are cultural protocols informing how people are invited and related to? If you do not know the cultural protocols identify who can help.
- Are Indigenous spiritual practices present and evident?
- Is there space for Indigenous peoples’ medicine and ceremony?
- Who can provide leadership in creating space for spiritual practices?
- Are land-based spiritual practices included?
- Have we secured natural spaces for spirit and land-based ceremony?
- What languages should be included?
- Do Indigenous peoples have access to cultural resources that promote a positive cultural identity and connection? How can we facilitate this?
- Other suggestions...?
HEART

The heart element helps with relational accountability to Indigenous peoples. This element addresses inclusion of people and relationship building. Some of the following questions may guide the lens of attending to relationship building with truth and honesty:

- Are Indigenous peoples invited to participate at the onset of projects?
- How will we create an inclusive and relationship building process?
- How might we coordinate a planning session to begin relationship building with Indigenous groups, organizations and/or communities?
- Are Indigenous stakeholders engaged in all stages of Indigenous mental health promotion planning? If not: How can we make this happen?
- Who will you invite? Identify Indigenous groups or organizations and who you will call or visit. Inviting people who have interests indicates an investment in a meaningful and purposeful process.
- Is there a space that generates respect in the sharing of ideas? Creating spaces that allow people space to share, engage and be on land is helpful.
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure Indigenous people are listened to?
- How will respect be enacted? Ensure respect for service users and community members input in the planning process.
- What truths need to be shared? In other words, are planners knowledgeable about the local peoples’ history and impacts of colonial violence?
- What Indigenous process can be integrated to foster respectful sharing and listening: relationship building? Ask about the circle process.
- What activities and events can be planned that builds respectful and inclusive relationships with Indigenous peoples?
- Other suggestions...?
MENTAL

The mental element includes areas of intellect, knowledge building and critical thinking. Nurturing these areas requires truth sharing and a learning process, including educating oneself. The erosion of Indigenous knowledge systems and the presence of colonizing knowledges are critical factors in building mental wellness. The questions and suggestions in this element relate to knowledge of the peoples, community resources, territorial jurisdictions, and knowledge development:

- Build your knowledge of Indigenous mental health and wellness services in the area. For example, are there: Health Access Centres, Friendship Centres, Indigenous Children and Family Service Agencies, Mental Health Centres, Métis Nation Services, 2SLGBTQ Supports, Ontario Native Women Associations, First Nations Community Services, or any mainstream services with Indigenous-centred programming?
- What are the Federal, Provincial and Territorial jurisdictions regarding Indigenous mental health?
- What education is available on the truth and history of Canada and Indigenous people and its impact on Indigenous mental health and wellness?
- What resources and material are available and accessible to team members? Build a library for Indigenous mental health and wellness promotion.
- Where are mental health and wellness resources locally? Does the local library or educational boards have literature and wellness related to Indigenous children, youth, families and other populations of interest?
- How will education foster decolonization while restoring Indigenous peoples’ culture, traditions, language and land?
- What knowledge do members have regarding the local Indigenous peoples; their languages and land base?
- Where are learning tools, resources, teachers and educators available?
- What Indigenous languages need to be included and resourced?
- What are existing practices and research to build on?
- Any other thoughts …?
PHYSICAL

The physical realm includes movements, actions, physical resources, programs, organizations, services and planning. In considering the physical element issues of space, place, action and other physical elements are addressed. The questions in this element evoke action based on what you have discussed that is informed by spirit, heart, and mind. The physical action realm brings together all the other elements into wholistic action planning. In planning for Indigenous mental health promotion and the impact of colonial violence, you will be called to be courageous and brave in generating conversations, plans and actions. Here are a few questions and suggestions to guide inclusion of principles of bravery and courage with presence:

- Have you visited any of the services or resources within your area that respond to Indigenous mental health and wellness promotion?
- What is the Name of the Treaty territory, Indigenous Nation, land and place you are on?
- Whose traditional / ancestral territory needs to be acknowledged?
- Is it reasonable to consider meeting in Indigenous spaces?
- Is meeting in Indigenous organizations or communities a possibility? Who will reach out?
- What Indigenous services, movements or councils are within your area and who will reach out?
- What are the human resources that are accessible to ensure inclusion with Indigenous peoples?
- Hire people to research and explore Indigenous models and examples: research promising practices and provide examples.
- What funding resources are available to support inclusion efforts?
- What physical resources are available?
- Create an Action Plan based on the relevant information and conversations: A to do list including who will do what, when, where, and how.
- Is anything missing, forgotten or overlooked? Any other ideas...?

Lastly, and most importantly: Asking and inviting people to share their thoughts is a basic principle of inclusion. Inclusion begins with invitations and continues with meaningful follow-up.
References and additional resources


