



## Indigenous Knowledge Key Terms

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2018

### Introduction

The terms included in this document have been defined from the foundation of Indigenous Knowledge accessed through sanctioned knowledge holders, Elders, and cultural practitioners. The process for developing the key terms parallels a conventional literature review process.

### Cultural Practitioners

The term *cultural practitioner* was created to identify those who have community sanctioned rights to lead, conduct, facilitate, or teach certain cultural practices and are not yet identified as an *Elder* by the community who would give such sanction to the rights to practice. A *cultural practitioner* is not simply someone who lives a *traditional lifestyle* or someone who participates in cultural activities, customs or ceremonies. What gives credibility to a *cultural practitioner* is their knowledge and skills as identified, defined, and sanctioned by the community, and understood as *spiritually endowed gifts*. The process of sanctioning relies upon close observation, teaching, mentoring and accountability of the development of the cultural practitioners sacred Indigenous knowledge, observation of cultural protocols, and care towards the interpretation of sacred knowledge, the application of such knowledge and practice. These individuals must have the sanctioning of community, and that community sanctioning influences recognition of rights and the level of engagement with the cultural practitioner. Indigenous communities, sacred and cultural societies are the source of sanctioned rights, credibility, protocols for and scope of practice. Cultural practitioners are often apprenticing to Elders, work closely alongside Elders and Ceremonialists, or may come into their roles through inheritance of sacred bundles held within their families.

The following are some examples of the roles of a cultural practitioner:

1. Counsellor
2. Leading land-based camps
3. Teaching Indigenous language, knowledge, and skills
4. Conducting ceremony within a sanctioned scope of practice
5. Use of natural medicines (retrieving, preparing, mixing, storage, prescribing/administering)
6. Is being mentored in spiritual healing
7. Community development and advocacy
8. Leadership and governance
9. Facilitators of the life promoting practices that support the spirit journey of human beings through the stages of life/life path
10. Other

## Elder

In Indigenous terms, an Elder is also a specialist in ceremonies, traditional teachings, language, culture-based customs, connection to land and heritage as it applies to mind, body, emotions, and spirit of person, family and community. As each individual Elder is unique in their spirit identity, experience, learning, personality and knowledge of Indigenous culture, each potentially has something different to offer. Some individuals may be specialists in certain teachings, ceremonies or healing practices, while others have another expertise as teachers and in other leadership roles. While age is a part of this, it is not the only criteria. Recognition as an Elder is determined as the individual's spiritual gifts are recognized, sanctioned by community or sacred/culture societies, and when the Elder has experienced enough of the stages of life to look back and reflect on their experience and translate this experience from the foundation of sacred and culture-based knowledge.

General competencies of an Elder:

1. Knowledgeable about culture-based tradition including ceremonies, teachings, and the spirit journey through life
2. Ideally, is a speaker of a First Nations language
3. Lives with cultural life ways through a healthy lifestyle
4. Old enough to have reached a stage of experience at which it is appropriate for them to communicate what they have learned from life and Indigenous culture and knowledge
5. Recognized and respected by the community for their wisdom and ability to help
6. Has varying knowledge and skills
7. Committed to their own continued learning as an Elder
8. Can interpret Indigenous culture, language, and knowledge to the needs of the people
9. Often asked to represent First Nation views and symbols of the culture or through active involvement with specific issues related to their life work, for example, substance use issues, and mental health

## Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous Knowledge is grounded in the original languages of Indigenous people, informed by spirit, and translated through cultural practices that transcend generations and time. Indigenous Knowledge can therefore be traced to its original source and meaning as it is applied within contemporary contexts. Acting from Indigenous centredness means that one affirms, asserts, and advances Indigenous seeing, relating, thinking, and doing as being inherent and central to the Indigenous ways of knowing.

## Intergenerational Trauma

The intergenerational effects of historical traumatic events can occur through multiple routes and have multiple impacts spiritual, emotionally, mentally, and physically on individuals, families, and collectively as Indigenous community. Indigenous people exposed to discrete or chronic collective trauma experiences; for example: disconnection from original language, homelands, and lineage through forced relocation, residential schools, child welfare and justice systems pass on the impact of these experiences in many ways to the next generation, including genetically, psychologically, and behaviourally. Intergenerational trauma experience cannot erase identity because identity is gifted by the great spirit. What is given by the great spirit cannot be erased by any behavior, legislation or policy of any person, experience or event, including an individual's efforts to deny one's own identity.

## Land-based Healing

The land has always been fundamental for health, wellbeing and cultural identity of Indigenous peoples. A commonly held belief from Indigenous evidence is the interconnectedness of all life, which includes human persons and other-than-human persons known as *relatives* in Creation (animals, plants, rocks, visible and unseen forces of nature, the universe) that coexist in balance, harmony, respect, and care. Indigenous evidence is derived from knowledge and the unfolding and repetitive patterns of Creation and often referred to Creation stories. Creation stories are the foundation and source of evidence. Living on the land for generations has enabled Indigenous peoples to develop an understanding of wellness that is more expansive than the western concept of health (as absence of disease), including physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Good living, or wellness, is similarly understood by many Indigenous peoples. The land is thus viewed as a living, breathing, conscious being that heals and teaches, and is therefore the source of a positive cultural identity and balanced wellbeing. Land provides for all life and nurtures all life and is recognized as *mother* of Indigenous people.

## Traditional Healing / Culture Interventions

Traditional Healing or cultural practices used as interventions are common ways of talking about the use of Indigenous Knowledge and practices for supporting wellness. Cultural practices such as ceremonies attend to the whole person, while other interventions may have more specific focus. Cultural healing practices or interventions are facilitated by individuals who have sanctioning of their skills and knowledge in culture because they live the culture and have been recognized by both the cultural teachers/community and the Great Spirit to lead or facilitate a certain cultural activity. However, some cultural interventions, those that are not ceremonial, do not require this level of expertise. An example is the use of sacred medicines for smudge, although this differs across cultures. All cultural interventions require a level of cultural competency that follows the culture of the people on that land. Critically important is to know that there is not *one* culture because culture is defined by the land, language and nation of people. There is a diverse range of traditional healing practices that have roots in Indigenous languages and cultures. There are various types of practices that are common across cultures, while others are uniquely rooted in local culture and traditions. There is a consistent and common thread of *meaning* across cultural differences. Common across cultural difference is the understanding that all stories of creation are true, and comparison or judgement of differences are futile since the vehicle for transmission is the original language gifted by the Great Spirit.

## Cultural Competency

Cultural competence requires that service providers, are aware of their own worldviews and attitudes towards cultural differences (cultural humility); and include both knowledge of, and openness to, the cultural realities and environments of the First Nations. To achieve this, it is also necessary for Indigenous knowledge to be translated into current realities to meaningfully inform and guide design, direction and delivery of health services and supports on an ongoing basis. (HOS, 2011)

[Resource: Thunderbird's Stepping Stones for Cultural Safety](#)

## Cultural Safety

Cultural safety extends beyond cultural awareness and sensitivity within services and includes reflecting upon cultural, historical, and structural differences and power relationships within the care that is provided. It involves a process of ongoing self-reflection and organizational growth for service providers and the system as a whole to respond effectively to First Nations people. (HOS 2011) Application of cultural safety is facilitated through policy, procedures, and workflow processes.

**Toolkit:** A Cultural Safety Toolkit for Mental Health and Addiction Workers In-Service with First Nations People by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (<http://thunderbirdpf.org/nnapf-document-library/>)

**Note:** Cultural competency and cultural safety are not replacements for the efforts required for anti-racism.

## Culture

Although there are many ways by which culture is expressed amongst the various First Nations, there are principal, foundational beliefs and concepts that are commonly held that support a unified definition of *Indigenous culture*. In what follows are these primary concepts of the Indigenous worldview.

**The Spirit:** The most fundamental feature of the Indigenous worldview is the Spirit. Within this reality the spirit is housed within an inclusive concept of body-mind-heart-spirit. In our life within this earth realm these work together in such a way as to be inseparably functioning as a whole. The spirit is always central and always works in relationship to the other levels of being. Spirit is in all things and throughout all things. In the Indigenous worldview, we live in a spiritual universe and within a spiritual relationship.

**The Circle:** The circle, more than any other symbol, is most expressive of the Indigenous view of the world. The circle is primary to all of life and life process, and, is also of primary significance in relating to and understanding life itself in all its dimensions and diversity. Human beings, amongst other beings, are in harmony with the life flow and grow to their greatest fulfillment when they too operate in a circular fashion. The Circle, then, being primary, influences, in every way, how we see the world. The Circle is synonymous with Wholeness. Wholeness is the perception of the undivided entirety of things. To see in a circular manner is to envision the interconnectedness and the interdependence within life. The Wholeness of life is the Circle of life.

**Harmony and Balance:** Desire for harmony is the pre-disposition of all of the created world. Harmony is a central value of the Indigenous worldview, which pre-supposes that all of life consciously cares for one another, and while respecting the individual's autonomy, strives to achieve and maintain an interrelationship that assures quality of life for the collective whole. Balance is a fundamental principle within the way that harmony in interrelationship works. A worldview that presumes a disposition toward balance causes people to see the dynamic character of their *real world* as always striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry in all aspects of the total economy of its ecology. Simply put: the Indigenous person sees the world as always and naturally striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry – everything will ultimately try to achieve a balanced solution. The value of harmony works well within such a worldview because it assumes that people lean toward this same balance, and therefore, desire to be in harmony with one another.

**All My Relations:** All that is created consciously cares about the harmony and well-being of life; all things are regarded as *persons* and as *relatives*. Personhood not only applies to human persons, but plants, trees, animals, rocks, and visible and unseen forces of nature are also considered as *persons*. Because they are persons, they have the range and qualities of personhood that are commonly attributed in

western ideology exclusively to human persons. Once this is accepted, it elevates the prevailing view of other-than-human beings to a higher quality of being and moves the nature of relationship to an all-inclusive ethical level. We are all related to one another as persons and are responsible for maintaining good and harmonious relationships within the *extended family* of persons.

Kindness/Caring/Respect: Another key to understanding the Indigenous worldview is the recognition of the fundamental precept: the universe cares. The Creator cares for his creation. The Earth cares about her off-spring and all of earth-life. The beings within creation care about each other and about how they relate to one another within the interconnectedness and interdependence of the web of life. In that the creation originated in this way, it sustains itself and thrives by means of an underlying orientation toward kindness. The key to harmony in a life that is conceived as *all my relations* is respect. Respect is understood as the honouring of the harmonious interconnectedness of all of life, which is a relationship that is reciprocal and interpersonal. The Indigenous person is predisposed to have in his or her interest both the greatest good for the Individual as well as the collective good.

Earth Connection: We are all relatives because we have the same Mother. In the Indigenous mind, the human person is of the earth and from the earth. Like all of the created world, the human being is part of the balance of nature and must find a special yet interconnected place within the created whole. The human person is a relative to all other *persons* of the Earth, and, along with all creatures calls the Earth, Mother. The Earth herself is a living, breathing, conscious being, complete with heart/ feeling, soul/spirit, and physical/organic life, as it is with all the relatives of creation. Indigenous identity and relationship is defined by the land and the connection the natural world.

Path of Life Continuum: The experience of living in this world is understood as a journey of the spirit moving progressively through stages that are interconnected and continuous. In the same way, lives are connected inter-generationally as *strings of lives* connecting us to our ancestors and to those yet unborn.

Language: The original language is the most expressive communication of the spirit, emotions, thinking, behaviour and actions of the people. Language is the *voice* of the culture and therefore the true and most expressive means for the transmission of the original way of life and way of being in the world.

Culture is the expression, the lifeways, and the spiritual, psychological, social, material practice of this Indigenous worldview. (J. Dumont, NNAPF 2014)

***Example: Honouring Our Strengths: Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment Reference Guide***  
<http://thunderbirdpf.org/nnapf-document-library/>

**Thunderbird Partnership Foundation Workbook:** HOS Culture as Intervention

- Definition of wellness
- Definition of culture
- Common cultural intervention
- Indigenous wellness framework
- NWA™

For youth-specific resources visit our culture for life website: <http://www.cultureforlife.ca/>

### Strengths-based Approaches

Strength-based or asset-based approaches recognize and build on existing strengths and assets in an individual, group or community. This respects individual, group, and community resilience. A strength-based approach sees potential, rather than need, and encourages a positive relationship based on hope for the future. Cultural continuity is a foundation of strengths. While culture may not be often

recognizable within First Nations communities it is critical to recognize that culture is a way of life rather than a host of practices or way of doing things. Inherent in a culture-based strengths approach is the recognition of the natural ways First Nations communities continue to thrive as distinct people, despite the challenges they face. This is based on a fundamental belief across Indigenous cultures that the Creator or Great Spirit gave Indigenous people their identities and despite forces of colonization and assimilation, the inherent gift of identity remains.

A core Indigenous value is the belief in strengths over weaknesses and assets over deficits and this - comes from Indigenous Creations stories that teach about the *inherent* gifts given to Indigenous peoples by the Creator, commonly known as *kindness, caring, honesty and strength*. In a practical sense then, a strength-based approach facilitates shared learning and support between community services and across the social determinants of health sectors. Most essential to a strength-based approach is the belief that when engaged to do so, people are resourceful and can solve their own problems. The promotion of collaborative relationships with the client based is also essential. Strength-based approaches typically facilitate a manner of doing things that starts from belief:

1. That people (clients, communities, partners) have existing competencies
2. First Nations have important cultural resources and with a rights-based approach and support can translate Indigenous Knowledge for application within community services.
3. People are capable of learning new skills and knowledge and capacity to act on knowledge and skills is conditioned by an individual's attitude, values and beliefs.
4. First Nations must lead and be involved in the process of discovery and learning.
5. Indigenous Knowledge, that even at their weakest moments First Nations are resilient

First Nations community health planning should convey principles and standards from an Indigenous lens while ensuring cultural protocols and integrity are valued with the same integrity as *conventional evidence-based* standards of practice. For example, a standard of practice might be rights, responsibilities, and client safety. From a western or mainstream lens on service delivery, *rights* may be defined by license or other credentials that verify knowledge, skill, and scope of practice. From an Indigenous lens, *rights* of practice may be sanctioned by Elders, or Indigenous Knowledge holders, sacred societies, or by a First Nation government that also has formal systems of accountability and supervision on scope of practice.

Elders, kinship relationships, clan families/cultural societies, and community are the primary facilitators of strengths, inherent strengths and strengths-based approaches to facilitate outcomes of Hope, Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose.

#### Resources

1. Brun, C., & Rapp, R. C. (2001). Strengths-based case management: Individuals' perspectives on strengths and the case manager relationship. *Social Work, 46*(3), 278-88.
2. Cwik, M., Tingey, L., Maschino, A., Goklish, N., Larzelere-Hinton, F., Walkup, J., & Barlow, A. (2016). Decreases in suicide deaths and attempts linked to the white mountain apache suicide surveillance and prevention system, 2001-2012. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(12), 2183-2189.
3. Dell, C. A., Dell, D. E., & Hopkins, C. (2005). Resiliency and holistic inhalant abuse treatment. *Journal of Aboriginal Health, 2*(1), 4.

4. Digital Nations. About Digital Nations. Retrieved August 8, 2017 from: <http://www.digitalnations.ca/about.html>
  - This is a partnership between Aboriginal Television Network and Animki See Digital Productions that offers 75 short films and vignettes on Aboriginal art, culture and history to further your discussion on Culture and Healing and of the Strength-Based perspective. Suggested vignettes from the Vistas selection are *Little Thunder*, *Carrying Fire*, *Red Ochre*.
5. Elder Jim Dumont, National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, Honouring Our Strengths: Indigenous Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment Project. (2014). *Wellness Framework*©. Muskoday, Saskatchewan: Author. Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Funding Reference Number AHI-120535.
6. Gottlieb, L. (2014). Strengths-based Nursing: A holistic approach to care, grounded in eight core values. *American Journal of Nursing*, 114(8), 24 – 32.
7. Redko, C., Rapp, R. C., Elms, C., Snyder, M., & Carlson, R. G. (2007). Understanding the Working Alliance between Persons with Substance Abuse Problems and Strengths-based Case Managers. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 39(3), 241-250.
8. Strengths based Training, 2.5-day certified training by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation
9. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. (2016). How has Aboriginal Culture Helped. [Video]. Retrieved from: <http://www.tinyurl.com/cultureasintervention>

### Trauma Informed Care

Trauma Informed Care is an organizational structure and service framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma experienced as individuals early in life (e.g., a result of child abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, or disrupted attachment) or later in life (e.g., due to violence, accidents, sudden and unexpected loss, or other life events that are out of one’s control) and understands trauma beyond individual impact to be long-lasting, transcending generations of whole families and communities. Traumatic experiences like these can interfere with a person’s sense of safety, decision-making ability, sense of self and self-efficacy, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships as well as for whole families and whole communities. Given the number of adverse experiences and the history of trauma in First Nations communities, a trauma informed approach to care is highly recommended (FNMWC 2015).

A trauma informed care approach to addressing trauma emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety for both consumers and providers, and helps survivors (individuals, families, and communities) rebuild a sense of control and empowerment (Trauma Informed Care Project). With trauma-informed care, communities, service providers or frontline workers are equipped with a better understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of First Nations people affected by trauma. For example, understanding how trauma is an *injury* rather than a *sickness* is essential to the healing process and shifts the conversation from asking “What is wrong with you?” to “What has happened to you?” (Klinic, 2013).

Trauma-informed systems and organizations provide for everyone within that system or organization by having a basic understanding of the psychological, neurological, biological, social and spiritual impact that trauma and violence can have on individuals, and families seeking support and for communities in crisis. Trauma-informed services recognize that the core of any service is genuine, authentic and compassionate relationships (Klinic, 2013). Also essential to trauma informed care approaches is cultural



competency that puts the burden for learning about individual, family and community trauma and intergenerational trauma on the care/service provider rather than on the client be they individual, family or a whole community. Facilitating community awareness of their history of trauma is recognized most significantly as *community development*.

#### Resources

1. **Trauma Informed Practice Training.** 3-day certified training program by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and First Peoples Wellness Circle
2. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. (2012). Guidebook on Protocols for Indigenous Practitioners Specific to Substance Abuse Treatment, Cultural Interventions, and Healing. Retrieved from: <http://thunderbirdpf.org/nnapf-document-library/>
3. CCSA. (2014). Trauma-informed Care Toolkit. ISBN 978-1-77178-171-8

**Resource: Trauma Informed Practice Training.** 3-day certified training program by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and First Peoples Wellness Circle

#### First Nations Determinants of Health

Environmental Stewardship; Social Services; Justice, Education, and Lifelong Learning; Language, Heritage and Culture; Urban and Rural; Land and Resources; Economic Development; Employment; Health Care; and Housing.

Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) recognizes twelve determinants of health: culture, gender, health services, income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, social environments, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, and biology and genetic endowment. First Nations health is equally affected by a range of historical and culturally specific factors (NNADAP 2011) which include loss of language, historical conditions, and cultural identity.

The AFN recognizes the following First Nations specific determinants of health: community readiness, economic development, employment, environmental stewardship, gender, historical conditions and colonialism, housing, land and resources, language, heritage and strong cultural identity, legal and political equity, lifelong learning, on and off reserve, racism and discrimination, self-determination and non-dominance, social services and supports, and urban and rural.

**Case Study:** NNAPF. (2012). Guidebook for NNADAP Services, with a focus on Inclusion of Community, Community Development as a Cultural Practice, and Culture-specific Prevention Strategies

See Key Concept: Community Development