



Circles for Reconciliation Gathering Theme

The Psychological and Intergenerational Impacts of the Indian Residential School

(This theme is derived and adapted from the article “the Soul Wounds of the Anishinabek People,” Written by Dr. Brenda M. Restoule, C.Psych (Waub-Zhe-Kwens, Migizi dodem), Dokis First Nation, Anishinabek Nation)

Facilitator:

I am going to introduce our theme in the Psychological and Intergenerational Impacts of the Indian Residential Schools, and then I am going to ask each of you to read a short section about these effects. By all means if you are not comfortable or shy reading aloud, please feel free to pass. There is no obligation to read. If you don't have your reading glasses, just pass, not a problem. So let's begin.

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At the heart of the Indian Residential School system was the intent to “kill the Indian in the child” (Campbell Scott, 1920) by attacking Anishinabek culture, language and practices and replacing it with Euro-Canadian languages and practices. It is known that First Nation children were forcibly removed from their parents, families and communities and placed in schools thousands of miles away from all that was familiar to them. During their stays at the schools many suffered neglect and physical, sexual and psychological abuse while enduring harsh living conditions under the pretence of gaining an education. As a result many children experienced personal and cultural degradation that lasted a lifetime for many of them.

The survivors often believed these experiences to be traumatic and resulted in long-term negative impacts across many areas of their lives such as relationships, parenting, health, mental health, beliefs and coping. Many of the survivors were left without any supports or help to heal from the traumas they experienced in the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. In some cases, the survivors didn't recognize some of their problems as being connected to the Indian Residential School experience. As the survivors had families of their own, they unintentionally placed their children at risk of being exposed to these same long-term negative impacts. In doing so, they transmitted their trauma and its effects to their children who were often unaware of their parents' experiences in the Indian Residential School system. This transmission of trauma is known as intergenerational trauma transmission and it has negative long-term impacts across the generations.

Today there is more awareness of the serious negative experiences that the survivors of the Indian Residential Schools were exposed to, trauma and its impacts, and the ability to transmit trauma across generations. As survivors and their families speak out about the trauma there are opportunities available using cultural and counselling supports to heal from their soul wounds.

Participant 1:

Residential schools were established in 1892. Most closed in the 1970s but the last closed in 1996. There were about 80 schools in total.

About 150 thousand children attended these schools.

Some parents voluntarily sent their children to these schools believing they would provide their children with an education. However, many children were forcibly removed from their parents, homes and communities and placed in these schools often thousands of miles away. If parents objected there was a risk that they would be placed in jail. In 1933 residential school principals were made legal guardians, causing parents to forcibly give up legal custody of their children.

What happened to the children while at the school?

- Forcible removal of their cultural identity such as cutting of hair, stripped of traditional clothing and possessions
- Renamed with ‘Christian’ names or known only by a number
- Unsanitary and overcrowded conditions
- Exposure to illnesses such as tuberculosis with lack of effective and immediate health care
- Inadequate food and clothing
- Physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse
- Forced replacement of spiritual beliefs by religious teaching
- Physical and emotional separation from parents, grandparents, extended family, siblings and the opposite sex
- Death due to violence, suicide, malnourishment, disease, exposure to extreme weather conditions
- Loss of language
- Loss of cultural practices and customs

Participant 2:

What are the long-term impacts to survivors of the Indian Residential School system?

- Inability to express feelings about the abuse they suffered in the schools
- Internalized feelings of anger, fear, grief, shame and guilt ·
- Substance abuse, addictions ·
- Self-sabotaging behaviours
- Violence directed toward others or self (i.e., suicide, self-harm)
- Risk taking behaviours
- Avoidance
- Mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Cultural alienation
- Poor or no interpersonal and relationship skills ·
- Lack of trust or belief in others or of a safe and predictable world
- Lack of loving and effective parenting skills ·
- Inability to effectively handle conflict in healthy ways
- Continuation of abuse others
- Anger

Participant 3:

What is trauma?

There are different types of trauma. Physical trauma is the result of a physical wound or injury. Psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that break a person's sense of security and predictability, leaving one feeling helpless and vulnerable. It does not require a physical injury to be considered traumatic.

What are some causes of psychological trauma?

- It happens unexpectedly
- The person is unprepared for it
- The person feels powerless to prevent it
- It happens repeatedly
- Someone was intentionally cruel
- It happened in childhood

How does trauma happen?

- A single, one-time event (i.e., car accident, unexpected loss, assault)
- A prolonged or repeat experience (i.e., apprehension, abuse)
- A cumulative effect (i.e., violence + abuse + racism/discrimination)
- A historical event with prolonged impact (i.e., relocation)
- It can take weeks, months or years before the impacts of trauma are noticeable.

Participant 4:

We are going to reflect on the spiritual, emotional, mental, social and physical impacts of trauma.

Spiritual impacts of trauma

- Persons may describe a lack of belief or faith in others, including a higher power.

Emotional impacts of trauma

- Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- Feeling shocked, numb and not able to feel love or joy
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Avoiding people, places and things related to the event
- Being irritable or having outbursts of anger and aggressive behaviour
- Becoming easily upset or agitated
- Being withdrawn, feeling rejected or abandoned
- Loss of intimacy or feeling detached
- Feeling detached or unconcerned about others
- Confusion
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours

What are the mental impacts to trauma?

- Blaming yourself or having negative views of yourself or the world
- Distrust of others, getting into conflicts, being over controlling
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling on guard and constantly alert
- Having disturbing dreams, memories or flashbacks
- Having work or school problems
- Short term memory loss

- Loss of interest in activities
- Decreased performance levels
- Increased difficulty in relating to others
- Sadness or depression
- Anxiety Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Participant 5:

What are the social impacts to trauma?

- Inability to relate to others
- Distrust in others
- Problems with parenting and intimacy

What are the physical effects of trauma?

- Headaches, aches and pains—including chronic pain
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Bowel problems
- Skin problems
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, feeling edgy
- Vomiting
- Ongoing medical problems getting worse
- Sleep problems such as nightmares, sleeping too much or not being able to fall or stay asleep
- Addictions such as alcohol or drug abuse including prescription drug abuse

Participant 6:

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

- An anxiety disorder that involves reliving psychologically traumatic situations long after the physical danger involved has passed, through flashbacks, nightmares and other physical responses (i.e., poor eating and sleep)

Can trauma be transmitted to others?

- Yes, impacts or reactions may be transmitted to the offspring (and subsequent generations) of victims of collective emotional or psychological trauma. This is known as intergenerational, historical or multigenerational trauma.

Why does intergenerational trauma happen?

Victims of trauma such as survivors of the Indian Residential School system display various behaviours and (negative) coping strategies that increase the likelihood of trauma transmission.

- Troubled with traumatic memories, behaviours and negative coping strategies they pass on to their children through modeling
- Limited ability and/or lack of knowledge and skills to assist their children in coping with difficult situations.
- Limited ability and/or lack of knowledge and skills to support their children in dealing with developmental transitions and milestones (i.e., moving from childhood to adolescence).
- Overprotective or neglectful of children and their needs

Participant 7:

What are the impacts of intergenerational trauma?

- Addictions, alcohol or drug abuse
- Abuses: physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, mental, spiritual
- Low self-esteem
- Dysfunctional families and interpersonal relationships
- Poor parenting such as rigidity, neglect, abandonment, emotional coldness
- Suicide acts, thoughts and behaviours
- Teen pregnancy
- Depression, particularly chronic to individuals and widespread across the community
- Chronic and widespread anger and rage
- Eating and sleeping problems that are significant and chronic
- Chronic physical illness
- Chronic unresolved grief and loss
- Fear of personal growth, transformation and healing
- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol effect (FAE)
- Unconscious internalization of residential school behaviours such as false politeness, not speaking out, passive compliance, excessive neatness, obedience without thought
- School based learning problems like fear of failure, avoiding learning that seems ‘too much like school’, learning disabilities with a psychological basis
- Spiritual confusion and alienation that doesn’t allow for growth
- Internalized sense of inferiority or avoidance of non-First Nation people
- Becoming abusers and oppressors of others
- Denial or refusal of cultural background, cultural identity confusion, fear of learning or practising culture

- Disconnection from the natural world as an important part of daily life and spiritual beliefs
- Passiveness or having no voice
- High-risk behaviours (i.e., sexual promiscuity)
- Early death
- Poor attachment to caregivers

Participant 8:

Is it possible to see intergenerational trauma transmitted at the community level?

Yes, many of the social, economic and political challenges in First Nation communities are directly or indirectly related to the residential school experience and other colonial factors. These may include:

- Paternalistic authority
- Passive dependency
- Patterns of misuse of power to control others
- Community social patterns that foster gossip and rumours but failure to support and stand with those who speak out or challenge the status quo
- Breakdown of ‘social glue’ that binds families and communities together such as trust, common ground, shared purpose and direction, a strong community life of giving and sharing, lack of volunteerism, cooperative groups/neighbourhoods working together for the benefit of all
- Conflict and lack of unity between individuals and families including factions within the community
- Conflicts and confusion over religious and spiritual based practices
- Toxic communication: gossip, criticism, personal attacks, sarcasm, secrets, put downs, etc.
- Destruction of social support network
- Passive acceptance of powerlessness with community life and/or governance
- Loss of traditional governance processes that gave people a sense of influence in shaping the community
- Joblessness and poverty
- Family violence
- Family breakdown
- Homelessness
- High rates of imprisonment

Participant 9: **Healing**

Healing can occur at an individual level and requires the survivor to learn strategies to cope with the anxiety and negative emotions or behavioural reactions to the trauma. Seeking counselling from a counsellor trained in trauma therapy or a cultural support person/elder is often recommended. Some helpful coping skills are:

- Muscle relaxation and deep breathing
- Thought stopping
- Pleasant imagery
- Positive self-talk
- Recognizing triggers and reminders
- Family and social support
- Creating a story that empowers one to survive and see strengths

As trauma and intergenerational trauma was the result of attacks to the culture and spirit of the children, addressing these soul wounds often requires cultural interventions and supports. Cultural ceremonies and practice allow one to reclaim their cultural identity and pride while learning strategies to cope with the impacts of the trauma. Healing from intergenerational trauma has 4 critical components:

1. Confront our trauma and embrace our history by learning Anishinabek history and what happened. Knowledge is power!
2. Understand the trauma by learning about trauma reactions and cultural practices to address grief and loss.
3. Release the pain; usually through cultural ceremonies/practices that creates a sense of belonging and connection to land, culture and others with a shared history.
4. Transcend the trauma by moving to healing that allows us to define ourselves in ways that move beyond the trauma.

The Elders have shared that we have all the teachings within us to be well and live a good life — (‘mno-biimaadzawin’). Reclaiming culture and language have the ability to set us free from the soul wounds inflicted on our people and community. We are thankful to all those survivors who spoke out and demanded healing and brought about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.