

# LEARNING TO FOLLOW

## A STARTING POINT FOR NON-INDIGENOUS COUNSELLORS WHO SINCERELY AND RESPECTFULLY WANT TO INCREASE THEIR AWARENESS OF INDIGENOUS WELLNESS PRACTICES

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

**A**fter a long history of repression and prohibition, Indigenous wellness practices have been undergoing a rebirth in recent years. Across the country, elders, knowledge keepers, and other community leaders are gathering traditional wisdom to pass on to younger generations. Practices have been better retained in some communities, while in others, only fragments of knowledge remain, and in others yet, there is only an awareness that much has been lost.

Mainstream society has also taken an interest in Indigenous healing, a shift noted in “Traditional Indigenous Approaches to Healing and the Modern Welfare of Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands: A critical reflection on practices and policies taken from the Canadian Indigenous Example” by Julian A. Robbins and Jonathan Dewar: “There appears to be a historical progression of perceptions or attitudes towards Indigenous traditional healing in North America, from one of disfavour (and something that does not have a place in modern society) to one of favour (and one that has a place in contemporary Indigenous communities and mainstream society).”

An increasing number of non-Indigenous counsellors are expressing a sincere interest in learning more, not only to better serve their clients but also to increase their awareness as human beings who share this country with Indigenous people.

In most cases, Indigenous healing is not part of a counsellor’s institutional education. Robbins and Dewar offer some insight as to why: “Often, there are mainstream misconceptions and false labelling associated with Indigenous traditional healing because of a general disagreement as to where exactly it should be placed on the broad spectrum of Western sciences and religions.” Many mainstream institutions have examined traditional healing “through the lenses of their own disciplines.... Relatively speaking, these institutions represent external lenses of interpretation that alter how traditional Indigenous healing is both perceived and interpreted.”

Laura Rhodes, RCC, says, “Many Indigenous therapies are not evidence-based. It has only been recently that Indigenous therapists are using the practices without prejudice.”

And Rhodes didn’t learn those therapies in university.

A photograph of Steve Basil, a Cultural Liaison, kneeling in a dirt pit. He is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a purple and white patterned shirt, and blue jeans. He is holding a wooden stick and appears to be working on a wooden structure. There are several piles of cut wood around him. The background shows a natural outdoor setting with dirt and some vegetation.

**Steve Basil, Cultural Liaison at St'at'imc Outreach Health Services, preparing for ceremonies at a Knowledge Keepers' Gathering.**

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“Most of what I know was learned from elders in the communities, knowledge keepers,” says Rhodes. “We are taught as we are growing up why we smudge, sweat, and swim. We are taught when and how each of these activities can keep us healthy.”

While these Indigenous practices don't fit Western institutional concepts, they can be used very effectively alongside Western health services. Rhodes is a mental wellness outreach clinician with St'at'imc Outreach Health Services (SOHS), which provides culturally safe primary health care services on and off reserve in the Northern St'at'imc Territory and support services by distance to St'at'imc living away from home. SOHS also has a Cultural Liaison, whose primary role is to create linkages between St'at'imc traditional helpers and Western health service providers.

The Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council (NTC) is another example where traditional wellness is provided in conjunction with Western health services. Simon Read, the NTC's director of health services, says the integrated program goes back to perceived inequality of First Nations counsellors and mainstream counsellors.

“Our organization identified this as an issue in about 1990, and so we did some work, which identified that each group brought important competencies to the work,” says Read. “This culminated in an intense two-year diploma course, which was offered at the Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo [in 1998 and 1999].”

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the NTC delivered residential school healing for five years while

funding lasted. Then there was a gap until 2008, when a Health Canada pilot project led to the launch of Quu'asa.

Vina Robinson, manager of Teechuktl, the mental health branch of the NTC, explains: “Quu'asa is incorporating culture into healing. It is recognized as Indigenous best practice and has begun to receive sustained funding due to its success. And now more people want to incorporate culture into healing,” Robinson says. “They want to bring culture into their programs because culture is powerful.”



JANICE KNIGHTON, MENTAL WELLNESS NAVIGATOR, ST'AT'IMC HEALTH

Steve Basil, Cultural Liaison for St'at'imc Outreach Health Services

## They want to bring culture into their programs because culture is powerful.

It's powerful and it works. But how can non-Indigenous counsellors respectfully gain an understanding about what it is and why it works?

### UNDERSTANDING THE TRUTH OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Alanaise Goodwill, an assistant professor in counselling psychology

in SFU's faculty of education and one of the few Indigenous registered psychologists, says the most powerful tool counsellors have is the ability to form a relationship.

“But that relationship doesn't happen in a vacuum,” she says. “There is a lot that enters the counselling room when you have a cross-cultural relationship between an Indigenous client and a non-Indigenous counsellor.”

Goodwill says the very first step is understanding the historical relationships. “If we're blind to the dynamics of those relationships and how they shape us before we even get into the therapy room, we'll never, ever understand one another's approaches to mental health.”

The therapy relationship becomes a microcosm of the greater relationship. “Because to understand an approach to healing also means we have to understand where the pathology came from,” says Goodwill. “And I think all of us can do that.”

Clinical supervisor for the Teechuktl mental health team, Margaret Bird, RCC, is a non-Indigenous counsellor who has been with the NTC for more than 30 years. She echoes the importance of understanding the history of Indigenous people in Canada.

“This history should include what Indigenous life was like before contact, impact of contact, colonization and how it impacted and continues to impact Indigenous life today,” says Bird. “This includes the disease that was brought to the communities, the residential school system, the Indian Act, the outlawing of cultural practices, the relocation of communities, the day-school system, the Sixties Scoop and the impact that has had on identity culture, parenting, attachment, family life, and connection

A Cedar Ceremony was used for the Nuu-chah-nulth families of Murdered and Missing Women and Girls. The ceremony was performed to uplift the families and prepare them for the next three days at a gathering hosted in Port Alberni in fall 2017. Cedar was used to empower the families.

to the land, economic development, and education.”

Of course, this is in addition to knowledge acquired in formal education, which Bird lists as an understanding of complex trauma, historical trauma, attachment theory, and social determinants of health.

The emphasis on the “truth” component of truth and reconciliation is necessary, as Goodwill explains: “A lot of people want to work the reconciliation side. I see that written probably nine or 10 times as often as the truth side, but you can’t. It’s dialectic. You can’t have one side of the dialectic worked too heavily. You need the other. That’s just a part of the process.”

To understand that means respecting an Indigenous worldview.

### RESPECTING THE SPIRITUALITY

Asked about Indigenous approaches to counselling, Bird replies, “To me, an approach means a ceremony or practice grounded in worldview and spiritual beliefs.”

Robinson adds, “It’s a way of being rather than a set of practices.”

Bird recalls when she first began working as a counsellor with the NTC.

“I was really lucky to have really, really great leadership when I started here,” says Bird. “We had a meeting at our clinical supervisor’s place, and some of the chiefs were there, and they were very welcoming,



HA-SHILITH-SA NEWSPAPER, NUU-CHAH-NULTH TRIBAL COUNCIL

## TIPS TO INCREASE YOUR INDIGENOUS AWARENESS

- ▶ “Non-Indigenous counsellors can start by building a relationship with an elder who will mentor them,” says Rhodes. “The challenge may be time. It takes time to build trust and the elder must feel the counsellor is sincere.”
- ▶ “Go online to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and go into the archives, watch some of the gatherings that were held, and listen to what people said about how their experience at the residential schools and how the policies of the government of Canada affected them, because you can see people. You can listen, and they’re speaking their truths,” says Bird.
- ▶ Both Goodwill and Bird suggest reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. “It’s a huge report,” says Bird. “But then there are also recommendations. Read the recommendations and think: How can I bring those truths that we’ve learned into my life as a person and then as a practitioner? Look at the recommendations and really take them to heart.”
- ▶ Unpack your own knapsack. Look at your own family history and where it is in the processes of the TRC. What beliefs do you hold and what biases might you have that you’re unaware of? “Sometimes, we have to look at some hard truths about our families and what we believed and the biases,” says Bird. “So really doing some self-reflection and exploration, and really embracing what you can do from the teachings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”
- ▶ “Just as we’re here in Port Alberni, [counsellors] have got resources in the communities they’re living in. Reach out and get to know where you are. Attend events. Be aware of what’s going on around you,” says Robinson. “If you live in Vancouver, for example, what’s going on at the Vancouver Aboriginal Centre? Go out to the Musqueam First Nation and find out who they are. Go to Tsleil-Waututh. Go to Squamish Nation. There are tons of good resources all across this country.”

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but they also said, ‘We’re welcoming you with your Western ways, but you need to know that what is important to us is our culture and our traditional ways, and if you don’t respect that, then maybe we’re not going to be a good match.’

“I was grounded in my own spiritual beliefs, and I am grateful when people respect them, and I respect other people’s, and so I think I just came from a place of respect,” says Bird. “And I think that’s the biggest thing: respect and wanting to know what I didn’t know — and knowing I didn’t know.”

Disrespect for and dismissal of Indigenous spirituality in Canada is traced back to the 1600s. Goodwill says the Jesuits were the early scholars and researchers of Indigenous approaches to healing. Their documents have become of great interest to counselling psychology, medicine, and other health-related disciplines.

“The Jesuits were able to impose that Cartesian split: ‘We like your medicines, we like your plants, we like the physical properties of your medicine, but we don’t like your spiritual practices that accompany the use of those plants and those



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Pit cooking preparations at a St'at'imc Nation Territory gathering.

medicines,” says Goodwill.

The spiritual practices, however, are vitally important.

“In our earth-centred cosmology, we have agreements with those plants that they’re going to look after us and heal us, and we have a responsibility to uphold the laws around taking care of that knowledge,” says Goodwill. “Often, that knowledge would have been passed down orally, but because

we have so many breaks in the transmission of oral knowledge, we have to go back to more dream-centred, spirit-centred ways of obtaining knowledge, and that’s through our ceremonies.”

Goodwill says the spiritual aspect makes some counsellors uncomfortable, especially if they’re agnostic or atheist.

“But a lot of these practices in our epistemology were given to us from

creators, and they are responsibility-based practices, not rights-based practices, and that's a big difference," says Goodwill. "You don't have a right to do these practices — you have a responsibility to look after them. If we surrender our responsibility, the power of these practices goes away, because the power of these practices is held within the collective, not within the practitioner or the patient.

"Counsellors need to understand the difference," says Goodwill. "It would certainly be incumbent on the practitioner to be really self-aware about where they stand with that, just as a cultural safety piece."

## BEING OPEN TO CULTURAL VARIATIONS

Rhodes says non-Indigenous counsellors need to be sincere and empathetic.

"This is not difficult for most," says Rhodes. "It comes down to personality, character, and attitude. Some people can connect to many cultures and enjoy the experience, while others struggle with variations in mental health therapies — traditional or not. Some like to stick to the one or two processes they feel comfortable with.

"Indicating you are willing to see Indigenous clients will indicate a level of comfort with the culture," Rhodes adds. "I don't see all Indigenous clients. Some clients prefer non-Indigenous counsellors so there is opportunity for them to tell their story to a clean 'canvas.'"

In saying that, Rhodes reveals another important point of understanding: recognizing that there isn't one right way. For example, Rhodes uses a medicine wheel regularly in her practice as a tool for assessing health holistically, but not all Indigenous people use or even agree

with the use of medicine wheels.

"Like many things, like with Christianity, there are many beliefs that are used and not used," says Rhodes. "[Using a medicine wheel] is a personal preference. People practise what elders teach them. I learned about the medicine wheel from people I worked with at the Friendship Centre years ago."

And remember: there are more than 200 First Nations just in B.C. alone.

"Don't assume that all First Nations cultures or even individuals from any given First Nation are the same — that's something to really understand right away," says Robinson. "Even though I come from Ahousaht First Nation, as individuals, we all



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have different practices. As families, we all have different practices. As a community, we all have different practices. So people can't really lump us in and assume, because there are many variations across this province and our country."

Robinson adds that First Nations people may also have greatly differing understandings of their own culture.

"Some are eager to share, and others are embarrassed if they're put on the spot because not everybody knows," says Robinson. "Not all of us grew up in our communities. For the Nuuchahnulth people, the majority of us live away. We live in urban settings."

## BEING HUMAN

Goodwill talks about a course she once taught at UBC on Indigenous counselling. The course attracted a range of counsellor trainees, who were interested for a variety of reasons.

"I had them research their own creation stories," says Goodwill. "I thought it the best way to give counsellor trainees Indigenous knowledge and how to use that in practice with Indigenous clients or in mainstream work. They couldn't just stop at saying, 'I'm Canadian.' They had to go into their own history, because they're not going to want to pay attention to an 'other,' if they haven't attended to themselves."

Bird agrees counsellors need to know their history: "Where they've come from, what their family beliefs were, and what they've incorporated into their being about who they are."

In fact, it's a requirement at Teechukt.

Bird and Robinson oversee their non-insured mental health program. Counsellors from across B.C. apply to be on the list to provide services



Drumming and smudging at a St'át'imc Nation Knowledge Keepers' Gathering.

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to Nuu-chah-nulth people living away from their communities. Bird reviews the applications and Robinson conducts interviews. She starts by introducing herself culturally and then asks applicants to tell her about themselves.

"I want to know who they are as human beings, and a lot of them are really taken aback," says Robinson.

Robinson then asks more questions: What experience do you have working with First Nations people? How familiar are you working with residential school issues and working with residential school survivors and their families? How familiar are you with us as Nuu-chah-nulth people? Do you know who we are, where we're located, and where we come from? What do you know about us?

"It's not so much about learning Indigenous approaches as being able to practise with cultural safety and humility, which includes a strong awareness of your own culture and your

own education," says Robinson.

A key reason for being prepared is so clients aren't responsible for educating counsellors.

"As counsellors, one of the most rich, wonderful parts of the job is the borrowed wisdom we get from our clients, but we really don't want to foreground, 'Hey, I'm learning from you,' because it's not a good use of that asymmetrical power differential in the therapy space, and it's not a great place for vulnerable people to find themselves," says Goodwill.

Robinson concurs: "The counsellor shouldn't be asking about their culture and their practices anyway. That's kind of inappropriate. You're there to help them as a human being, so it's good for the counsellor to understand where the clients are from and where their community is originally located."

Ultimately, it comes down to being a human being, says Robinson. "Introduce yourself, and tell a little bit about yourself. Don't worry about the system or that you're going to be counselling them in a moment."

Being human will help establish trust in the client-counsellor relationship.

#### **CLARIFYING YOUR ROLE**

"I consider being a counsellor service work," says Goodwill. "We serve the people in our waiting rooms, on our waiting lists, and in our offices, and that is a type of leadership style. But we're not leading from the front, and we're not imposing any kind of governance over an Indigenous approach to healing, but we do have a responsibility to understand and work with it."

Goodwill cautions that self-awareness is important. "Quite often, there's an inclination as a non-Indigenous person to want to lead,

and in this domain, in terms of the reclamation of knowledge on healing, it's very much going to be a service and a learning role. The leadership has to continue to reside with Indigenous people."

Bird makes that clear in describing her role: "These are spiritual practices that are sacred, and my job is to connect people to the people who can practise those ceremonies with them."

Rhodes recommends a resource list.

"If the counsellor does not provide the traditional services, they can create a resource list of elders or individuals who can provide sweats, smudging, and swims," says Rhodes. "The counsellor just needs to know what is available — they don't necessarily have to provide the service themselves."

Not that it is impossible for non-Indigenous counsellors to participate in ceremonies — but first, they need to work collaboratively with Indigenous people and wait to be invited by their mentors.

"When you're invited into the ceremony and to help in the ceremony, then that's witnessed by the people there, and the fact that you've been invited gives credibility to your presence there," says Bird.

## HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Being unintentionally insensitive, disrespectful, or offensive with Indigenous clients is a significant worry for many counsellors. Goodwill understands that.

"I feel like that all the time, working with clients from different backgrounds from my own," says Goodwill. "I think it's a healthy discomfort. I tell people to embrace it, because often, our clients are uncomfortable when they come to see us, so we should feel some measure of discomfort, too."

More and better training for counsellors could help. Goodwill would like to see the way we train counsellors in Canada become less centralized with institutions: more reciprocity between communities and existing institutions and more focus on recruiting Indigenous students into psychology. "I think the model has to be an

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outreach model. We expect people to come south or come to urban centres to live for five years. We need to be more innovative in terms of how we engage."

Asked about what she would like to see in the future, Rhodes says: "Agencies have been creating programs that take people back on the land, preferring not to use mainstream treatment centres. It would be evolutionary if mainstream services incorporated this practice as an option."

Robbins and Dewar write, "Something to work towards in the future might involve nurturing the presence of a certain level of trust — in policy and program implementation — that supports Indigenous peoples and communities, when they decide to learn about, maintain, and build upon the accumulated knowledge of their ancestors."

The success of such Indigenous-led programs is evident in a story Robison tells about a Nuu-chah-nulth woman in her late 60s who attended an intergenerational healing gathering to share — for the very first time ever — about her residential school past.

"It was so incredible for her," says Robison. "After this gathering and the healing she did, her language started to

come back to her. She speaks it fluently, but she didn't know she does, because it's been buried within her with the impact of residential school."

Can non-Indigenous counsellors truly understand Indigenous approaches to wellness? It depends on the individual counsellors. Robison has a story for that, too, about a mental

wellness gathering hosted by Health Canada in Victoria. One of the visiting mental health groups was from Quebec and included a First Nations woman who had gone through a traumatic experience.

"We did a cultural ceremony with her. She didn't understand a thing we were saying, because it was done in our language, but she got the ceremony as a First Nations person," says Robison. "We were able to help, even though we didn't speak their language and they didn't speak ours."

That's the same as with non-Indigenous counsellors, she says.

"They don't speak our language. They're not expected to be us, we're not expected to be them, but as human beings, we can come together." ■

### REFERENCE

Robbins, Julian A. and Dewar, Jonathan. Traditional Indigenous Approaches to Healing and the Modern Welfare of Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands: A critical reflection on practices and policies taken from the Canadian Indigenous Example. October 2011. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*. DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2011.2.4.2. Available for download at <https://ir.iib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol2/iss4/>