



# PATHWAYS TO RECONCILIATION

WORKING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS ISSUES IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

To even begin to understand the magnitude of the issues Indigenous communities are facing, you need some framework.

"In B.C., we have over 200 First Nations within our province, so there's an incredible diversity," says Jeffrey Schiffer, PhD, program director for the Office of Indigenization at the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JI) and faculty at the JI's Centre for Counselling and Community Safety. "Given that diversity, there's still a shared history of colonization and residential schooling and dispossession of land and attack on language."

That shared history extends across every province and territory in Canada,

and from it comes the devastation that has affected Indigenous people for the last 150 years and which continues today.

"Most Indigenous communities have a high degree of intergenerational trauma and are still dealing with colonization because, really, often we think about colonization as something that happened in the past, forgetting that there are still systems and structures operating today that are essentially doing many of the same things," says Schiffer.

For example, child apprehension into foster care is a continuing colonization and frequently results in the same problems as residential school.

"Dealing with intergenerational trauma but also lived and vicarious

trauma is really important in Indigenous communities," says Schiffer. Because it is really, really bad.

Lawrence Sheppard, RCC, is of Cree Métis heritage. He has worked extensively with First Nations, including Squamish Nation, the Burns Lake Band, Nlaka'pamux Health and Healing in the Lytton area, and Heskw'en'scutxe Health Services. He explains what the highly disturbing and violent results of intergenerational trauma look like. "In all of my work with Indigenous people over the last decade, I never had a female client who hadn't been sexually assaulted — not a single client. I had two who I thought had not been assaulted, but in the course of our work together, it came out. So every single female client had been sexually



assaulted, and, of course, a lot of the male clients as well," says Sheppard. "So you talk about intergenerational violence, you talk about trauma within communities, but they're living it."

The sexual violence is almost epidemic — and almost expected. Sheppard says one of his young female clients told him she had been sexually assaulted at a party. When she told her parents, they told her, "Well, suck it up. That's what happened to us, too."

"I don't have many First Nations people I work with who don't have trauma of some sort," he says.

Sheppard says there is not going to be a singular response to addressing the trauma, but there has to be an emphasis — a hub in the wheel — and for him, it's attachment-based therapy. "But there are other pieces. We have to continue to work with trauma. We have to help people to treat each other better. We have to make sure children are safe and protect them," he says. "If we want to look at the long game, we have to teach people how to treat each other respectfully."

Despite the grim reality, Sheppard and Schiffer are hopeful and see signs of progress, provided forward steps are taken carefully and thoughtfully.

### BUILDING BRIDGES

So how do you build bridges and repair relationships when trust has been shattered in so many communities and in so many ways over 150 years? Schiffer says part of it is breathing life back into these relationships and starting them over in a good way — but it has to be sincere.

### Indigenous approaches to counselling, trauma, psychotherapy, and wellness have so much to add to the wellness of Canada as a nation and to all people.

"It's very difficult, quite frankly, for Indigenous people to know when someone comes in talking about truth and reconciliation whether they're paying lip service to those ideas, or if they have a genuine interest in moving those initiatives forward," he says.

For example, book-ending has become commonplace: acknowledging territory at the beginning of an event, making a show of having an Indigenous person present or having done an

Indigenous consultation, and then closing with a prayer by an elder. But how meaningful was that throughout the process and how much Indigenous voice and decision-making was actually included in that process?

"Right now, a lot of it, unfortunately, comes down to power dynamics and how much we're willing to share power, because that's what really meaningful inclusion comes down to," says Schiffer. "It's fine to have somebody in a circle sharing their opinions, but if those opinions don't have the same gravity as others in the circle and don't play the same role in moving that conversation into action, then we're not going to achieve the type of change that we proclaim we're all after through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action."

So often, when we think about issues in Indigenous communities, we focus on the Indigenous side of the equation, creating a dichotomy.

"It's a really old dichotomy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous," says Schiffer. "The standard for everything is the mainstream, which is basically the white Canadian Western tradition, and we assume that it works for everybody. Everybody can go to a dentist; that's a



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## THE GORDON DOWNIE EFFECT

Gordon Downie made it his final mission in life to raise awareness about Indigenous circumstances — circumstances that non-Indigenous Canadians were, as he said, "trained our entire lives to ignore." And millions of Canadians listened to him — and watched as National Chief Perry Bellegarde presented Downie with an eagle feather and gave

him the Lakota spirit name, Wicapi Omani — "Man who walks among the stars" — at the Assembly of First Nations. Witnessing Downie's passion is not only incredibly moving, but also motivating, and it is critical to maintain that momentum. As Chief Dr. Robert Joseph says, "Everyone in the country needs to know that they

have a role to play and that there is always something they can do within their own lives and communities to make a difference."

To get you started, check out 150 Acts of Reconciliation for Canada's 150th, a list of ideas for learning about Indigenous culture, history, and people. [www.activehistory.ca](http://www.activehistory.ca)

Western tradition; dentistry works on everyone. Anyone can get their arm set by a Western medical doctor; that works for everyone. But we don't do the reverse. We don't actually make the assumption that Indigenous tools and approaches can be useful to non-Indigenous Canadians."

For example, in the courses Schiffer is involved with across the country, a majority of the students are Indigenous, but there are always a few others, he says. They talk about the Indigenous perspective on health, which is holistic, with mental, physical, emotional, and

spiritual aspects to wellness. "That doesn't just click with our Indigenous students; it clicks with our non-Indigenous students, too, because, ultimately, we're all human beings," says Schiffer. "We've gotten into this very individual mental-enlightenment positivist way of understanding what it means to be. A lot of that can be supported for good through consideration of Indigenous tools and approaches and the relevance of those for supporting non-Indigenous people who want to do the work of truth and reconciliation."

"WE MUST WALK DOWN A PATH OF RECONCILIATION. TOGETHER, AND FOREVER."

GORDON DOWNIE, 1964-2017

Some concepts overlap — for example, a circle is often thought of as an Indigenous methodology for engagement. "I like to remind people Stonehenge was built in a circle. Before the cultures in Northern Europe were Christianized, those were all Pagan people, and they were all very land based, and they all did everything in a circle," says Schiffer. "There actually is a deeper common history there. When we find some of those threads, it's easier for us to get to a common place."

Perhaps the strongest point is recognizing the diversity of the population. "When I talk to most Indigenous people in the world today, they don't say, 'Oh, I'm Haida,' or, 'I'm Mohawk.' They say, 'I'm Haida and Cree and Dutch,' says Schiffer. "Increasingly people have blended histories and blended identities."

Including Schiffer himself: his mother is Métis from Manitoba, and his father was born in Germany.

So the focus, for good reason, continues to be on intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous people, because, as Schiffer stresses, it's really traumatic to be colonized. However, he also points out that it's really traumatic to be a colonizer and that there is a lot of white guilt.

"It's important to understand that we're not all simply Indigenous or non-Indigenous and also to understand that, if we want to innovate our practices and approaches, we need as many tools as

possible in our tool kit, and Indigenous approaches to counselling, trauma, psychotherapy, and wellness have so much to add to the wellness of Canada as a nation and to all people."

Sheppard concurs. "It's not just inclusion of Aboriginal people in the process of government and the institutions within the larger community, but vice versa as well. To welcome people into Indigenous communities and embrace them and educate them."

As for the antagonism that has existed for so long on both sides, Sheppard says, we've got to change that to move forward. "Only through collaboration do things get better. If we isolate, then I think there's little hope."

Chief Dr. Robert Joseph, Gwawaenuk elder and founder of Reconciliation Canada, says it begins with dialogue. "Dialogue creates mutual understanding and changes relationships. It is also important for Canadians to know the history of Indigenous peoples in this country so we can begin to create a new narrative."

For counsellors to be part of the new narrative, they need training from an Indigenous perspective, or else counselling is just another white Canadian Western tradition being forcibly imposed.

### SEND IN THE COUNSELLORS... NO, WAIT.

Sheppard tells a story about when he started counselling at Nlaka'pamux Health and Healing. "We were doing a group about two months after I started. I'd said to one group, 'I haven't had a lot of women coming to see me in my first couple of months here, and then, just last week, things started to pick up. Anybody have any insights?'

"One woman looked at me, smiled,

and said, 'We needed to know we could trust you. We needed to know you were the real deal. We needed to know you weren't going to be gone in six months. A couple of people confirmed that you were, number one, First Nations and number two, a reputable, trusted male and that we could come and see you. You're going to see lots of us.'

"And sure enough, it picked up. I was booked chock-a-block after that."

But while being First Nations is vitally important in building trust, Sheppard says there is more to it — counsellors need Indigenous training.

Schiffer wholeheartedly agrees. "It's important to have Indigenous counsellors, but perhaps even more importantly, we need Indigenous counsellors who have trauma training from an Indigenous perspective," says Schiffer. "If we have Indigenous folk going into Indigenous communities peddling approaches to trauma that aren't congruent with the folks they're trying to support, we don't always get the outcomes we're hoping for."

As faculty at the JI, Schiffer teaches Aboriginal Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma, a 21-day, 10.5-credit certificate program using Focusing-Oriented Therapy as a safe and effective method of working with clients who experience complex trauma (see [www.jibc.ca](http://www.jibc.ca)). One of the reasons Schiffer feels so honoured to be involved with that program is because it draws from the experience of his mother, RCC Shirley Turcotte, a Métis knowledge keeper and survivor of severe child sexual abuse and torture. Turcotte's journey is the focus of the 1987 National Film Board of Canada documentary *To A Safer Place*. Turcotte developed the program over 30 years, and for the past eight, it's been certified through the JI. Schiffer says it's a program that really

works for Indigenous people.

And there are other realities counsellors need to be prepared for. "When you go to these remote locations, you've got no opportunities for good supervision with people who have culturally relevant experience," says Sheppard. "You can't phone your colleague in the city and expect to get the help you need."

Vicarious trauma is an obvious issue, but lateral violence is also a problem. When there is little or no opportunity to express grievances and debrief difficult situations, anger and frustration can be directed laterally, which can be particularly difficult for Indigenous counsellors. "It really helps with clients if you've got some First Nations blood in your veins, but that makes you susceptible to being victimized and being a part of a chain of lateral violence," says Sheppard.

The burnout rate for counsellors in remote communities is high, and clients

## 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

By Moran, director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, says Canadians need to ask themselves these questions:

- 1 ▶ Do I know any Indigenous people? If not, why?
- 2 ▶ Have I ever participated in a ceremony? If not, why?
- 3 ▶ Am I able to name the traditional territory I stand on? If not, why?
- 4 ▶ Have I meaningfully engaged in deep conversation with Indigenous people? If not, why?
- 5 ▶ Have I read an Indigenous author? If not, why?

SOURCE: [WWW.CBC.CA/RADIO/UNRESERVED/HOW-ARE-YOU-PUTTING-RECONCILIATION-INTO-ACTION-1.4362219/WONDERING-HOW-TO-GET-INVOLVED-IN-RECONCILIATION-START-BY-ASKING-YOURSELF-THESE-5-QUESTIONS-1.4364516](http://WWW.CBC.CA/RADIO/UNRESERVED/HOW-ARE-YOU-PUTTING-RECONCILIATION-INTO-ACTION-1.4362219/WONDERING-HOW-TO-GET-INVOLVED-IN-RECONCILIATION-START-BY-ASKING-YOURSELF-THESE-5-QUESTIONS-1.4364516)

aren't well served when the counsellor-client relationship keeps changing.

"We've got to figure out how to prepare counsellors for those kinds of experiences, because it is a whole other world when you go to those small communities," says Sheppard. "You are not in Kansas anymore."

### REPAIRING DAMAGE

While colonization, including residential school and the foster care system, is the genesis of so much trauma, Sheppard has seen success by focusing on the effects of the trauma. Some years back, he realized the gross outcome of colonization and the resulting domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and loss of culture were attachment disorders: damaged relationships.

"Damaged relationships with the culture, damaged relationships between community members, and damaged relationships between family members and parenting relationships — just all of it," says Sheppard. He became especially aware of the underlying attachment disorders — the breakdown between extended family — in the parenting program he taught to help parents deal with difficult behaviours and promote more positive behaviours. He would see children particularly affected as they entered their teens. "I saw it as a problem manifesting within the family and community — those connections, and the guidance, and the attachment was damaged."

Sheppard believes repairing that damage is critical to remedying issues in the community as a whole; however, he is clear that doing so doesn't change the causal factors — the intergenerational trauma. But how do you "treat" residential school syndrome other than realize it was a very bad thing and understand the effects, he asks. You

In 2016, there were **1,673,785** Indigenous people in Canada, accounting for **4.9** per cent of the total population. This was up from **3.8** per cent in 2006 and **2.8** per cent in 1996.

SOURCE: WWW.STATCAN.GC.CA/DAILY-QUOTIDIEN/171025/DQ171025A-ENG.HTM



can only treat the effects. "Despite the fact that some of these people have experienced disorganized attachment and abusive situations within their own homes and communities, we can actually repair that. Because of neuroplasticity, there are things we can do to help re-wire how they relate to others, the partners they pick, how they parent their children. This is something we can teach people. It's therapeutically, educationally possible to do something with it."

And that's why Sheppard likes attachment-based therapy: "It is positive and hopeful and, most importantly, it's doable. If we can create secure attachment and healthy relationships in communities, I think we've got it. I think we've nailed it."

Moreover, Sheppard says attachment-based therapy works in both one-on-one settings and in groups, which present other opportunities, such as lessening feelings of isolation and building in constructive community activities in conjunction with chiefs and councils — for example, feasts. Sheppard talks about pit cooking a meal

of venison, wild potatoes, and wild onions. "It's always a happy experience, and people stay and participate in the whole event because of how it's constructed — you craft it in a way that is culturally attractive."

In both one-on-one sessions and workshops, Sheppard covers a range of topics. "Whether it's on parenting or trauma or intergenerational abuse, I always bring up lateral violence, because it's something that perpetuates patterns of victimization, violence, and disconnection, and it's something we can actually deal with," he says. "What we can do to support one another. How we can approach conflict and problem solve more creatively and in culturally appropriate ways, so we don't just pick up the baton that was handed to us and continue behaviours that were clearly, certainly very characteristic of treatment in residential school and colonization. There was a lot of abuse and violence. No question. But to some extent, we have to start owning it, and we have to deal with it ourselves."

### INCLUSION AND COLLABORATION

Efforts that bring the most measurable success have a key commonality: Indigenous engagement and perspective. One of the most significant examples in terms of positive influence is language revitalization; Schiffer says a number of studies support that approach. "We do know that in communities where there's a higher percentage of individuals that speak their traditional language — even if it's not completely fluent — we see lower levels of suicide, substance abuse, and domestic violence, so there's a correlation between negative impacts of colonization and language not being present," says Schiffer.

Sheppard has seen it happen. "When

we first started working in the Lytton area, it had the highest suicide rate in Canada, not just in First Nations communities, but in any community. We know that when communities invest in reviving and educating their people in language and culture, the suicide rate drops dramatically."

Providing learning opportunities and valuing and respecting elders for their knowledge help the community get stronger and healthier and build a sense of pride in identity and culture. Sheppard says many people don't have any experience of their culture. "The elders or people who have made a point

says. "Language and culture seem to be at the epicentre."

Youth is the most critical area of focus for a better future. "From my experience working with youth, they are increasingly invested in trying to figure out opportunities they can achieve that will allow them to return to their communities and work in them," says Schiffer.

Sheppard agrees and supports investment in education. "I'm adamant about this: we should be sending people out of the communities to get advanced and specialized education, to get knowledge they can meld

immigrant youth at the Indigenous Health Research and Education Garden at the UBC farm. Youth who were in the program six years ago are now in post-secondary Aboriginal youth and family work. "That demonstrates some of the success that can be achieved not only through language and culture but also through land-based practice."

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

While progress is being made, there's a long way to go — and it's important not to lose sight of that. "But I don't like that to overshadow the small leaps and bounds we're making," says Schiffer. "When I travel to different places to speak on behalf of the JI, I have the opportunity to hear about what's going on across the country, and there definitely is a lot of great work being done in terms of partnerships and engagement and inclusion that's leading to some quite innovative work."

Chief Joseph also sees progress. "You can see evidence of this by looking at the polls done by Environics to the turn-out at the recent Walk for Reconciliation [50,000 people]. There are now reconciliation initiatives underway across the country. As long as we are inclusive and keep inviting each other to the process of reconciliation, it will continue to grow out."

Sheppard also stresses inclusivity. "Sure, First Nations people need to own their own destiny and strengthen their own cultures. They need to have their own people educated. But not to the exclusion of that cooperation and connection with the larger community, because that's how people start to understand, and that's the weave, that's the texture we get in our communities, both Indigenous and mainstream. When we work together, we get that richness." ■



**"Our future and the well-being of all our children rest with the kind of relationships we build today."**

CHIEF DR. ROBERT JOSEPH, RECONCILIATION CANADA

of learning the culture are actually educating people, sometimes for the first time, about some practices."

Learning a language is a window to a cultural worldview: an understanding of the world you inhabit, yourself, and your relationships to others in the world around you. "Through bringing back Indigenous language, there's a whole host of cultural practices and understandings that come along with that," says Schiffer. He lists understanding Indigenous practices and approaches to intergenerational trauma and Indigenous medicines and wellness practices; developing identity and feeling good about cultural background; and understanding how to contribute to the health and betterment of the community. "Those things are important in terms of setting up Indigenous people for success," he

with traditional practices and their knowledge of their own specific community, and then they become the educators and problem solvers within the community. But, they need to be adequately trained and resourced."

The JI provides opportunities for youth at six provincial campuses and with programs delivered in-community and customized to suit particular needs in culture, protocol, and territory. Last July, the JI offered its first-ever Indigenous youth career camp, with 22 youths from different communities. Indigenous instructors and role models were involved wherever possible.

Another example demonstrating the value of supporting youth with Indigenous-focused programming is the Culturally Relevant Urban Wellness Program, which brings Indigenous youth in foster care together with new