

FROM ADVOCATE TO ACTIVIST

THE BEAUTY OF LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH A NEURODIVERSITY LENS



Natascha Lawrence, MA, RCC, BCRPT, is founder of FASD Counselling and The FASD Institute.

The path to Natascha Lawrence's career as a counsellor and activist is not direct, but it is very personal.

She grew up in Richmond as a child of immigrants. Her siblings were born in Hong Kong, and her family immigrated in the '70s prior to the immigration waves of the following two decades. She experienced racism herself and witnessed racism and violence towards her brothers and family.

"I've always been aware of race and racism," she says. "Growing up in Canada during the '80s and '90s, we talked a lot about Canada being diverse and multicultural and a tolerant society, but I felt the incongruence of that with being one of the few multiracial kids in school."

Her original career plan was to be a human rights lawyer, and she was accepted into Washington State University on a swimming scholarship. While studying pre-law, she got sick — so sick, she was in a wheelchair for two years and could not swim or physically manage law school. However, her desire to help people remained strong, which

led her to counselling and play therapy.

"I've always been attracted to movement or somatic-based modalities because specializing in neurodiversity, I found that language-based therapies just didn't work," she says. "I am a Synergetic Play Therapy (SPT) Supervisor and I do play therapy with children, youth, and adults. What I learned as a play therapist is to have curiosity. To let it be client-led. That discovery happens through play, and play means many different things. It is not just playing with toys. It can be music, dance, art, stories, being out in nature, and it can be cultural connection."

Her reason for specializing in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is also very personal: "I am a caregiver to an amazing teenager — 16 years old! — with FASD. She has been my greatest teacher and has guided me to see the beauty of looking at the world through a neurodiversity lens."

She and her husband, Kyle Lawrence, who is Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation), founded The FASD Institute to provide education for professionals.



Tell us something about your experience as a BIPOC counsellor.

As a clinician, I was aware of systemic racism and oppression and tried to bring it up, but these conversations were not well received. In some therapeutic modalities, and in play therapy, particularly, there are fewer BIPOC clinicians. Then, as you look at the creators of play therapy modalities, and as you go up the ranks within any clinical organization, it becomes more white and more male-centred.

How have you addressed that “whiteness” in play therapy?

I am focused on decolonizing mental health and practice racial transparency in sessions. I name it. I also name the link

between ableism and racism. I honour all my teachers. The more I study, the more I realize that SPT, interpersonal neurobiology, and somatic-based modalities resonate with the teachings Indigenous Elders gifted me. As well, the concepts of movement, breath, and connection to energy align with Chi Gong, a practice my father taught me. The science is new, but the wisdom is ancient. This wisdom has also been historically criminalized and stolen. It has been a journey of self-discovery, of weaving in Western modalities with places connected with me as a person of colour, as a multiracial person of Chinese ancestry, and a mother of an Indigenous child.

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**What are you seeing in today's youth?
What worries you, and what makes you feel hopeful?**

Today's youth are more connected to the world than any previous generation. Youth have a profound capacity for change and curiosity about different ways of thought. This gives me hope; they are wise and have a lot to teach

us. What I worry about is how youth can connect to movement. Movement isn't just individual — movement is collective, and there are multiple global movements right now. Technology can make it harder to access and sustain movement.

What do youth say to you about issues such as climate change, racism, and the political situation?

Youth are not shy about naming what is going on. It can seem scary to name the places that are not working: to admit that there is systemic racism, oppression, ableism, and a climate crisis in Canada, right now. Naming it is the start. Our role as clinicians is to honour that wisdom, provide hope, and provide mechanisms for movement.

What about youth and ableism?

Systemic ableism is rooted in colonialism and internalized

capitalism. Youth have been pushing against ableism and what it means to be productive or positively contribute to society. Rather than focusing on output to define who they are, they look inwards. By celebrating their intersectionality, they honour and celebrate diversity and name starting points for where systems need to change.

You have recently shifted from advocacy to activism. How can other counsellors do that?

Affecting change one on one, counsellors can see the importance of advocating for our individual clients. I asked a supervisor, how can I be an activist and a counsellor? Their response was, "How can you not?" Counsellors need to dismantle systems of racism, oppression, ableism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia to decolonize mental health. We need to reflect on what our contributions are into these existing systems, owning our privileges and intersectionality. It takes exploration and personal work. And it's lifelong.

Can you comment on the opioid crisis? Do you see hope for change?

This summer, I lost a client and a family member to the opioid crisis. I see the link between my youth clients who struggle to feel comfortable with who they are and the use of alcohol and substances as they become adults. Without a strong sense of self, we feel disconnected from ourselves and from others. Drugs are the symptom; they are not the cause of the opioid crisis. Systemic racism and ableism have created deep divides in access to culture, employment, housing, health, and connection. Social justice activism needs to eliminate these barriers.

What keeps you going in your work?

What sustains me is activism. I have been burnt out twice. The first was within two years of becoming an RCC. That's when I discovered SPT. It taught me how to connect to myself in and out of sessions. The second time was this summer due to grief. I saw the direct correlation between systemic racism and oppression and the deaths of my client and my family member.

I believe in helping clients connect to themselves, which will allow them to connect to others, community, culture, and creation. If I see systemic barriers that deny folks that opportunity, how can I not be an activist for change? ■



THE FASD INSTITUTE™
FASD affects four to five per cent of Canada's general population across all ethnicities, yet there is limited formal FASD education for professionals.
The FASD Institute provides consultation, clinical supervision, coaching, and professional training on FASD, neurodiversity, and the END™ Model. The FASD Institute is committed to an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-ableist, and LGBTQIA2S+ affirming framework.
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