



Wiingushk Okaadenige

*The Sweetgrass Braid*

**A BRAIDED MENTAL HEALTH APPROACH  
FOR SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS YOUTH**

Miigwetch (thank you) for registering for our online webinar!

We will get started at 1:10 to allow participants to enter the space.

In the meantime, please use the chat function to introduce yourself! Feel free to share:

- Your name
- Your social location/identity
- Your professional or academic position
- What you are hoping to get out of the session today

**\*\*Please note: This session will be recorded.**

**PRESENTED BY: NICOLE INEESÉ-NASH & MAGGIE STEIN  
MODERATED BY: KRUTI PATEL**



# Agenda

**1:10 WELCOME & LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

**1:20 INTRODUCTIONS**

**1:30 RATIONALE & CONTEXT – PROJECT OVERVIEW**

**1:40 RESEARCH FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS**

**2:00 BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS**

**2:15 NOTES FROM THE FIELD**

**2:30 Q&A**

# AUTHORS

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# ABOUT FOPT

Finding Our Power Together is an Indigenous-led non-profit organization supporting Indigenous youth to access resources and relationships that enable them to thrive.

FOPT offers a variety of therapeutic and educational programs designed to develop community, increase capacity, and promote wholistic wellbeing and a life worth living.

FOPT is an interdisciplinary team of Indigenous and allied individuals from across various disciplines who work collaboratively to support young people through meaningful relationships.

## ABOUT THE TITLE

# Wiingushk Okaadenige

Wiingushk is the Anishinaabemowin word for Sweetgrass, a traditional medicine that is often referred to as the hair of our mother the earth. Sweetgrass is used for purification and for healing. However, blades of sweetgrass in their own are easily broken. It is when we weave sweetgrass into braids or bundles (Okaadinige) that the medicine can be stronger.

The sweetgrass braid reminds us of the strength that comes from working together, of weaving various perspectives together for the purpose of a stronger path. In this toolkit we describe an approach to mental health that integrates best practices from three different disciplines, which we believe to be a stronger, more balanced way of supporting young people on their healing journeys.



"Nookomis Wiingushk" by Nyle Miigizi Johnston

# THE NEED FOR INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

- The legacy of colonialism and systemic oppression continues to impact mental and spiritual wellness in Indigenous communities
- Infrastructure and access issues in northern Indigenous communities create gaps in service
- Disconnection in worldviews and approaches offered by non-Indigenous practitioners fosters cultural dissonance and assimilation
- Indigenous youth face disproportionately high rates of suicide, mental illness, and disability as compared to non-Indigenous Canadians
- COVID-19 exacerbates ongoing social conditions contributing to ill-health and mental health issues
- There is a lack of data of the efficacy of clinical approaches in Indigenous contexts, and Indigenous methods as intervention methods yet both show promise in advancing optimal outcomes in their respective fields.
- There is a need to develop mental health strategies and research approaches that address the unique needs and goals of Indigenous young people which are culturally safe and evidence-driven

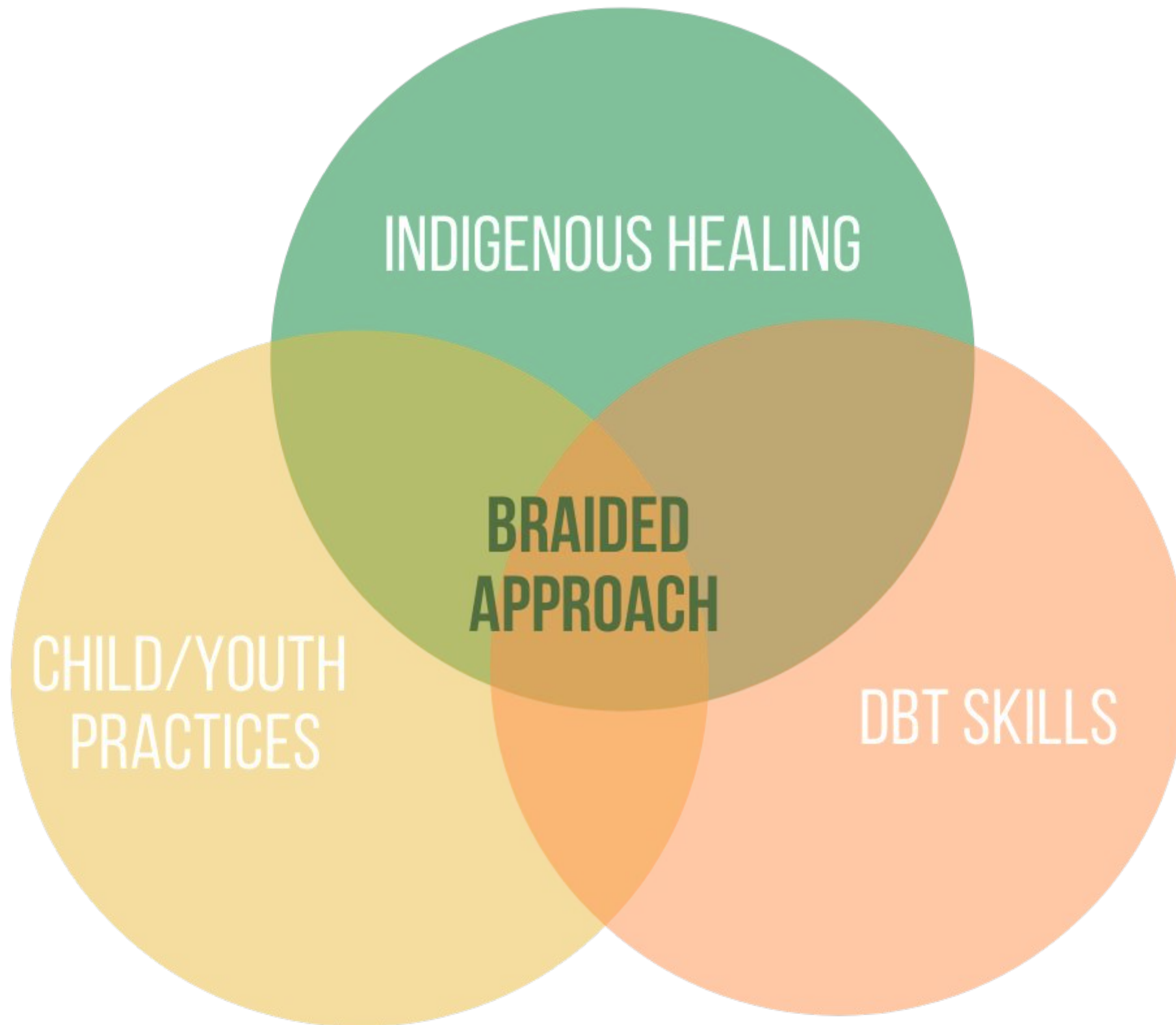
This project seeks to develop a theoretical grounding for approaching mental health service delivery with Indigenous youth in remote First Nations communities in Northern Canada. The braided approach detailed in this report was developed through a systemic research strategy, involving systematic literature reviews of three approaches to youth mental health (DBT, CYC care, and Indigenous methods of healing) to support the development of an integrated approach that may be applied by clinicians and youth workers working with First Nations youth in the context of COVID-19. The project also involved community consultations with practitioners in the above mentioned fields. Data collection through literature review and consultations are synthesized and adapted into the development of this approach.



ORIENTING RESEARCH QUESTION:

**WHAT ARE THE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF  
EFFECTIVE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES WITH  
INDIGENOUS YOUTH?**

# PROJECT OVERVIEW



- **Purpose:** Design an integrative approach to mental health services for Indigenous youth based on evidence-based practice
- **Method:** Systematic literature reviews and key informant interviews – thematic analysis and synthesis
- **Findings:** Limited evidence-based strategies for Indigenous youth – 7 principles of “best practice”
- **Implications:** Implementation of an Indigenous youth program during COVID-19



# METHODS

**Phase 1: Systematic Literature Reviews**

**Phase 2: Key Informant Consultations**

**Phase 3: Program Design and Implementation**

**Phase 4: Synthesis**



# FINDINGS: DATA FROM THE LITERATURE

<b>Approach/Practice</b>	<b># of Articles Reviewed</b>	<b>Emerging Themes from the Literature</b>
<b>Indigenous Healing (IH)</b>	26	Culture, identity, interconnectedness, two-eyed seeing, relationships, land, mindfulness, strengths-based approaches, wholism, balance
<b>Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)</b>	19	Mindfulness, culture, identifying and understanding emotions, physical regulation, coping skills, positive relationships
<b>Child and Youth Care (CYC)</b>	33	Relational practice, trauma-informed practice, meaning-making, youth-centeredness, strengths-based approaches

# INDIGENOUS HEALING



- Ecological-interconnected relational model
- Diverse practices that are culturally and place-specific
- Emphasis on relationality, spirituality, and experiential healing
- Illness as imbalance
- Healing is ceremonial in nature, involving the use of traditional medicines, rituals, and cultural teachings.
- Healing as individual and collective: individual wellbeing is a reflection of the wellbeing of the community
- Lack of empirical evidence for Indigenous practices - but much evidence supports the use of cultural models

Results: 26

Themes: *Culture, identity, interconnectedness, two-eyed seeing, relationships, land, mindfulness, strengths-based approaches, wholism, balance*

# DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOUR THERAPY (DBT)



- Biosocial Theory
- Dialectics: Understanding that two extremes or contradictions exist as a whole
  - Emphasizes acceptance and change
  - Development of strong, supportive, and positive relationships
  - Voluntary participation in building a life worth living
- DBT Skills Modules: Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, Interpersonal Effectiveness, and Walking the Middle Path
- Empirical evidence suggests efficacy; lack of results from Indigenous contexts

Results: 19

*Mindfulness, culture, identifying and understanding emotions, physical regulation, coping skills, positive relationships*



# CHILD AND YOUTH CENTERED APPROACH

- Child/Youth focused approach focused on supporting the needs of young people and their families in their life-space - where they are
- Relational practice founded on professionally based characteristics organized into a three-part framework: Being, Interpreting, and Doing
- Therapeutic relationships promote personal growth, change, and learning
- Therapeutic relationships occur through meaningfully co-created spaces
- Focus on advocacy and informed decision making through knowledge and access to support systems
- Research focuses on non-Indigenous practitioner approaches; minimal focus on Indigenous populations

Results: 33

Relational practice, trauma-informed practice, meaning-making, youth-centeredness, strengths-based approaches



*"The relationship is the intervention"*

## KEY INFORMANT PERSPECTIVES

- Key-informants (4): Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth workers
- Semi-structured interviews on professional experience, personal principles, and examination of literature findings
- Consultations confirmed/formulated approach principles as well as offering additional findings

### **ADDITIONAL FINDINGS**

- Consult Teams and Professional Communities
  - Dialogue re: suicidality
  - Burnout re: suicidality
- Rootedness in Practitioner Positionality
- Non-hierarchical exchanges: Self-disclosure
- Practitioner Adaptability and Flexibility

# PRINCIPLES OF A BRAIDED APPROACH



**CULTURE**



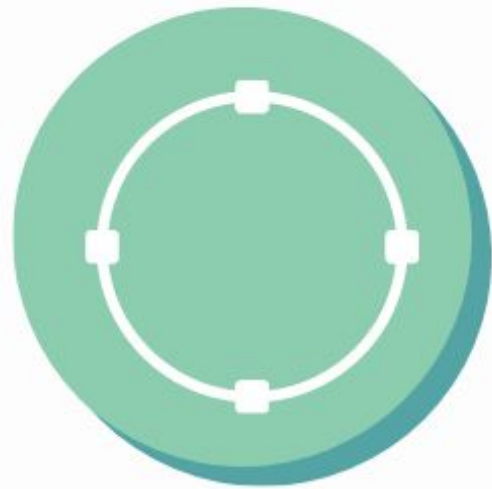
**INTERCONNECTION**



**RELATIONALITY**



**SELF-DISCOVERY &  
DETERMINATION**



**WHOLISM**



**BALANCE**



**SPECIFICITY**



# THEMES

Theme/Principle	Description	In Practice:
<b>Culture</b>	Culture refers broadly to the customs, practices, and beliefs of a particular nation, people, or social group. Includes cultural connectedness, cultural safety, and culturally-based interventions	We promote culture by incorporating Indigenous teachings, values, and languages
<b>Interconnection</b>	Interconnection refers to the understanding that human beings are connected to one another, to the earth, and to non-human entities	We encourage interconnection by welcoming relationships with land, ancestors, and spirit into our mental health practice
<b>Relationality</b>	Relationality refers to how one understands, communicates, and conceptualizes relationships with the self and others, both internally and externally within their immediate life-space and beyond	We foster caring, reciprocal, and respectful relationships with the self, individuals and communities in order to nurture the connections we have with all things in creation
<b>Self-Discovery &amp; Determination</b>	Self-discovery refers to the process of learning about one's self; self-determination is the ability to make wise decisions on one's own behalf	We support youth to better understand themselves, their emotions, and their reactions in order to provide appropriate options for their healing
<b>Wholism</b>	Wholism refers to the consideration of the entirety of a person, including not only their mental state, but also their physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects.	We support wholism through honouring individuals in all facets of the self and promoting self-acceptance
<b>Balance Restoration</b>	Balance restoration refers to the process of rebalancing the different aspects of one's life to be able to live more harmoniously	We encourage the exploration of balanced living through reflection and practice of care within all aspects of the self
<b>Context Specificity</b>	Context specificity is the adaptation of approaches to address different contexts and lived realities	We actively acknowledge environmental and historical factors that have and continue to impact each individual and their lived-reality and adapt to suit the specific needs of individuals and communities

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## **Culture**

Respecting the customs, practices, and beliefs of Indigenous nations, peoples, or social groups.

*We promote culture by incorporating Indigenous teachings, values, and languages into our mental health practice where appropriate.*

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# Culture

- Culture refers broadly to the customs, practices, and beliefs of a particular nation, people, or social group.
- Culture is regarded as the most important principle in mental health service provision with Indigenous youth.
- *Principle in Practice: We promote culture by incorporating Indigenous teachings, values, and languages into our mental health practice where appropriate.*
- Active Practice: Engaging in conversations with youth and families regarding how they see themselves within their culture, if at all? Investigate this conceptualization collaboratively and transparently. Encourage knowledge sharing - they are the expert of their own lives and identities.

## Cultural Connectedness

Cultural connectedness is the degree to which an individual feels connected and a part of a cultural group. Cultural connectedness is considered across disciplines as a substantial protective factor for Indigenous youth. Increased feelings of connectedness to one's culture supports youth in developing resiliency in the face of challenging circumstances. Culture connectedness supports Indigenous youth in developing an understanding of their identity which brings about feelings of rootedness and increased resiliency.

## Cultural Safety

Mental health interventions, regardless of theoretical approach, need to be compatible with Indigenous cultural understandings and practices. Historically, mental health strategies have invalidated the experiences and lifeways of Indigenous peoples, which have produced negative mental health outcomes and a disinclination to participate in mental health service systems. Cultural safety requires practitioners to develop culturally responsive practices in which Indigenous ways of being are validated and honoured in the therapeutic process. This means practitioners working with Indigenous populations should approach discussions of culture with humility, responsiveness, and respect. Cultural safety is a practice where we work to co-create environments that are safe with and for Indigenous young people so that they are able to engage as their whole selves.

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## **Interconnection**

Understanding that human beings are connected to one another, to the earth, and to non-human entities

*We encourage interconnection by welcoming relationships with land, ancestors, and spirit into our mental health practice.*

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# Interconnection

- Interconnection refers to the understanding that human beings are connected to one another, to the earth, and to non-human entities. Interconnection is a core concept to Indigenous value systems which shape the ways Indigenous people live, think, and respond to their environment. This principle can guide mental health strategies through the understanding and reference to the complex relationships Indigenous young people hold in their immediate and external environments. Ancestry, community, land, and spirit all impact mental health and healing and should be acknowledged and honoured as integral to positive mental health outcomes.
- *Principle in Practice: We encourage interconnection by welcoming relationships with land, ancestors, and spirit into our mental health practice.*
- Active Practice: Asking youth how they define their own community; how they relate to others; how they define family; spiritual beliefs and coping strategies. This may mean asking youth if they would like to involve a close other (i.e., caregiver, auntie, parents, siblings, or an Elder in a session).

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## **Relationality**

The practical application of interconnectedness, which aims to nurture the complex relations individuals hold

*We foster caring, reciprocal, and respectful relationships with the self, individuals and communities in order to nurture the connections we have with all things in creation*

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# Rationality

- Relationality refers to how one understands, conceptualizes, and behaves in relationships with the self and others. Relationality is the practical application of interconnectedness, which aims to nurture the complex relations individuals hold in various capacities. Relationships can support positive mental health outcomes when they are based on authentic and meaningful exchanges. Practitioners must first build relationships with Indigenous youth that are caring, reciprocal, and secure in order to then address mental health concerns. This relationship can model and teach youth interpersonal skills wherein they are better able to maintain self-respecting and important relationships with themselves and others. Relationships provide the framework of change
- *Principle in Practice: We foster caring, reciprocal, and respectful relationships with the self, individuals and communities in order to nurture the connections we have with all things in creation*
- Active Practice: Leading with love and care above the desired therapeutic outcome. Our relation is the intervention. Ensuring we are able to manage our own emotions in difficult situations in speaking with youth. This may mean checking and reflecting on our own biases and judgments when hearing how youth relate to themselves and others. Listening is key. Allowing space and time when being curious about youth lives.

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## **Self-Discovery & Self-Determination**

Learning about one's self; self-determination is the ability to make wise decisions on one's own behalf.

*We support youth to better understand themselves, their emotions, and their reactions in order to provide appropriate options for their healing*

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# Self-Discovery & Self-Determination

- Self-discovery refers to the process of learning about one's self; self-determination is the ability to make wise decisions on one's own behalf. Self-discovery for Indigenous youth in particular is founded upon an understanding of identity, relations, and experiences. Self-discovery and determination involve deep reflection on all aspects of our lives, supporting us in becoming active participants in determining our futures.
- *Principle in Practice: We support youth to better understand themselves, their emotions, and their reactions in order to provide appropriate options for their healing.*
- Active Practice: This may mean assisting youth in finding words to describe emotions (name it to tame it). Providing rationale for why bodies and minds may respond in certain ways. Be willing to 'lean in' with youth in discussing past hardships - sympathy versus empathy (see video link)

## Self-Discovery

Self-discovery is an investigation of the self, critically examining our past and present realities. It involves exploring our emotions, our thoughts, our behaviours, and our coping strategies in adverse situations. Self-discovery can also support young people to identify their values, their desires, their abilities, and what they want for their future.

## Self-Determination

Self-determination is the ability to make choices on one's own behalf. Practitioners can support self-determination by regarding youth as the expert of their own lives and their associated goals, desires, needs and wants. Allowing youth to determine and select which skills work for them, supports them in becoming active participants in their healing journeys. Self-determination requires self-discovery and acceptance, as change cannot occur until we accept where we are and where we want to go.

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## **Wholism**

The consideration of the entirety of a person, including not only their mental state, but also their physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects.

*We support wholism through honoring individuals in all facets of the self and promoting self-acceptance*

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# Wholism

- Wholism refers to the consideration of the entirety of a person, including not only their mental state, but also their physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. It is important when working with Indigenous youth to consider the complex impacts that result from adverse experiences. An adverse event does not occur in isolation; rather, symptoms that are categorized as mental health concerns may be caused by or facilitate physiological, emotional, and spiritual distress. Mental health professionals therefore should support clients to explore and identify the ways in which stressors impact their wellbeing in multiple areas and promote more fulsome healing. Mindfulness is a critical tool in identifying and responding to the ways stressors impact the various facets of wellbeing moment-to-moment. From this perspective, intervention needs to account for all aspects of an individual's wellbeing, while also providing direct support for the concern identified by the client in the moment.
- *Principle in Practice: We support wholism through honouring individuals in all facets of the self and promoting self-acceptance.*
- Active Practice: Investigate with youth the different parts of the self and how they see, understand, and relate to these parts. It is important to help them get in touch with their bodies as often times mental health struggles start in the body (i.e., depression = lethargy)

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## **Balance Restoration**

Building balance within the different aspects of  
one's life to be able to live more harmoniously;  
this is Mino Bimaadiziwin

*We encourage the exploration of balanced living through  
reflection and practice of care within all aspects of the self*

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# Balance Restoration

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- Balance restoration refers to the process of rebalancing the different aspects of one's life to be able to live more harmoniously. From an Indigenous perspective, distress originates from imbalance. Living in harmony, or Mino Bimaadiziwin, is a way of orienting oneself towards the ongoing pursuit of balance within ourselves, our relationships, and our environments. This mirrors the concept of 'walking the middle path' used in DBT to describe the understanding that everything in life exists along a spectrum, with polarizing extremes. By acknowledging that extremes may be harmful to wellbeing, individuals may be able to find a more balanced approach in their lives. Balance is a contextual concept, which is ever changing based on internal and external factors within an individual's life. Practitioners can support Indigenous youth to understand and identify how polarized thoughts, emotions and behaviours diminishes capacity for balance. These crucial discussions can foster spaces for acceptance and change to occur.
  - *Principle in Practice: We encourage the exploration of balanced living through reflection and practice of care within all aspects of the self*
  - Active Practice: Discuss the ways in which youth may be putting too much attention into one quadrant of their lives which creates imbalance. We may want to use the Medicine Wheel conceptualization to help youth understand this more deeply. Investigate all ways in which balance may be off (e.g., videogames, sleep, exercise, cell phone use etc...)

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## **Context Specificity**

The adaptation of approaches to address different contexts and lived realities

*We actively acknowledge environmental and historical factors that have and continue to impact each individual and their lived-reality and adapt to suit the specific needs of the individuals community*

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# Context Specificity

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- Context specificity is the adaptation of approaches to address different contexts and lived realities. At its core, context specificity is the understanding that there is not a formulaic approach to supporting Indigenous youth. Practitioners must be willing to address and discuss environmental factors openly, including Indigenous experiences of colonization and systemic oppression, as well as the unique histories, circumstances, and barriers that impact Indigenous clients. In doing so, practitioners may be able to reduce feelings of shame associated with the development and reliance on ineffective and dangerous coping styles. Operating with context in mind, practitioners must be willing to be flexible in both content and delivery format when working with Indigenous populations in order to reduce potential barriers to access and facilitate appropriate intervention. Honouring context entails the meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities who hold valuable understandings, approaches and resources to support the healing of Indigenous youth. It is essential that practitioners enter into the life-spaces of young people within their communities rather than regarding youth as isolated from these spaces, cultures, and traditions.
  - *Principle in Practice: We actively acknowledge environmental and historical factors that have and continue to impact each individual and their lived-reality and adapt to suit the specific needs of individuals and communities.*
  - Active Practice: We can remove some of the blame for youth when we help them see the ways in which their environments have played a part in their lives, relationships with others, and barriers to accessing goals. Don't shy away from naming and validating the injustices that youth may have experienced

# Implications for Practice: Breakout Discussion

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IN SMALL GROUPS, REFLECT ON HOW THESE PRINCIPLES SHOW UP IN YOUR WORK WITH

(SEE GOOGLE DOC FOR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS)

WE WILL RETURN AT 2:15 WITH A DISCUSSION ON OUR EXPERIENCES WITH IMPLEMENTATION AND Q&A



NOTES FROM THE FIELD:

# **BUILDING** **OUR BUNDLE**

## MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

- Weekly 6-week online group program with one-on-one mentorship
- Participants: Indigenous youth (age 14-29) across Canada
- Co-facilitated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners
- Integrates Indigenous teachings, DBT skills, and youth-centered practices/activities
- Premised on Indigenous understandings of a cultural bundle - or set of tools/skill one picks up and uses along their life path

## *Principles in Practice*

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- *Situate*
- *Relate*
- *Advocate*
- *Participate*
- *Evaluate*

*Your Name*

# More Tips for Supporting Indigenous Youth

Supporting Indigenous youth requires a flexible relational approach that is trauma informed and culturally safe. When approaching mental health service provision with Indigenous youth and using an integrated or braided approach, here are some additional things to consider.

1

**Make it accessible:**  
Go to where youth are at and provide services in ways that are most accessible to them in their circumstances

2

**Follow community lead:** Differ to what the community is asking for. Try to involve community in the development and implementation of your work as much as possible.

3

**Involve family:**  
Understanding your client may mean getting to know their family as well. When appropriate, invite family members to be part of the healing process.

4

**Build Capacity:**  
Provide Indigenous communities with the skills and tools to support their own community members.  
Understand your role as an outsider.

5

**Practice reciprocity:**  
Relationships are two ways. This means you may need to give something to get something. Be yourself and be candid about your experiences.

6

**Check your biases:**  
Be careful not to assume you know what is best or acceptable. Allow young people to guide the healing journey and be mindful of the cultural biases you are holding.



*Migwetch!*

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# Q&A

Please type your questions in the chat, or raise  
your hand to ask a question

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