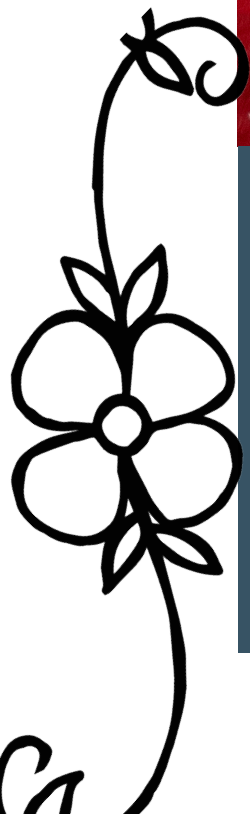


Best Practices Manual

Ahcahk Maskwa



Holding Space with Care





INTRODUCTION

This 18-month initiative, led by Dr. Lana Whiskeyjack at the University of Alberta, was designed to develop and implement a decolonial, intersectional, and arts-based program. At its core, this work supports Indigenous populations impacted by Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through a community-based methodology rooted in decolonial and Indigenous research.

The GBV sector has lacked systemic supports that honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This project prioritizes Indigenous cultural perspectives, traditions, language, and protocols to create a space specifically for Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ kin, including those who are or have been criminalized.

The methodology of circle dialogue grounded "wâhkôhtowin" (kinship law and connection), the project followed a reciprocal path:

Indigenous-led arts-based sessions focused on self-determination, gathering direct stories and wisdom from women and the 2S community.

The knowledge shared in the circles will inform a future series of workshops for Indigenous men and boys, addressing GBV holistically by revitalizing grandmother cultural resources and teachings.

The art creations, best practices of facilitation strategies and evaluation developed during this time are intended to be shared across the GBV sector and with Indigenous communities, allowing others to adapt these tools for their own kinship networks.

This best practices manual is an outline of some of the valuable lessons we as a team learned along the way of things that can be changed in order to move forward in a good way.

Approach

Our team includes Grandmothers, Educational facilitators, and our university and financial partners.

We began in ceremony, receiving a Cree name "ahcahk maskwa" to guide our work with Indigenous women and Two-Spirit kin. This name reminds us we carry the medicine we need to move forward in a good way.

Over four months, we partnered with two organizations that support relatives who have experienced the prison system, sex work, and being unhoused. We began with the women and 2S kin on land for 3 days to build a Moon Lodge. Together, we held over 16 workshops and 4 circle dialogues, finishing with an art exhibition and a closing pipe ceremony.

In these spaces, we practice "kinship care". If a relative arrives in crisis, we stop our plans to offer a place to breathe and heal. We believe that to truly respect body sovereignty, we must lead with kindness, choosing to be gentle even when the world around us is harsh.

Navigating "Research" within an Indigenous Context

Because of colonial history, the word "research" can be painful and triggering. While we use that term for funding and paperwork, we choose different relational words when we are together.

For us, this work is a ceremony of kinship. We strive to use mindful, decolonial language to make sure our time together is about connection and restoration, not just "taking" information. We chose "research kin" instead of "participants" to reflect our belief that we are all related and that our relationships are the most important part of this relational work.

Time/Duration

We learned the necessity of a **spacious schedule**.

Make Room to Breathe: We learned that we shouldn't try to do too much at once. Rushing can feel like the stressful "hurry up" of colonial systems, which makes it hard to stay mindful and care for one another.

Focus on Just a Few Things: Instead of doing many small tasks, we need to focus on 2-3 core projects over our sessions. This allows for a much deeper and more meaningful creative journey.

Let the Art Do the Talking: Making art helps us discuss hard topics like violence. If we rush the process, we miss the chance to sit with and talk about what we made, which is where the real sharing and healing happen.

Plan for Extra Time From the Beginning: Having "buffer" time for finishing projects or reflecting isn't an "extra" or an afterthought; it needs to be a main part of the plan from day one.

Create Space for Quiet and Connection: When we aren't rushed, our kin don't feel pressured to "perform" or meet a deadline. This allows everyone to settle into the teachings and connect with each other in a calm, natural way.



Decolonizing Research

A significant lesson learned was the need to actively unlearn the conditioned belief that kin must give for support or participation. In colonial systems, such as prisons or social services, personal pain is often the only "currency" recognized to access help. To counter this, we established clear language of research engagement to ensure community kin knew that they had autonomy. We explicitly communicated that they have the right to share as much or as little as they choose. They have the medicine they need to take care of themselves and we were there for support. We supported without expectations. We reminded our kin that the intention of this work is to support and educate Indigenous men and boys, as well as to share best practices with our Indigenous communities in GBV prevention.

We framed the circle as a space where support is offered for big feelings out of kinship, not as a transaction for data or services. Trauma- and violence-informed practices helped to guide our team. We gave language to patterns in English but also Cree to help kin recognize that their past experiences had roots to systemic racism. We engaged in smudge ceremony, circle check-ins, and art practices to help process what we could not put into language and words. Decolonize research must center care and kinship.



Relationship Building with Participants

Center "family feeling." Our relatives have carried heavy burdens and deserve a place that feels like home. Root yourself deeply in the space and in one another. When we sit as kin, connected to the land and each other, we create the soft ground needed for healing. Trust those roots, they will hold you when the stories get heavy.

Moving at the Rhythm of Trust

- **Grounding in Ceremony:** We start by centering Spirit. Using smudge and prayer creates a calm, shared and intentional space for everyone. When a Grandmother leads us in prayer, she shows us what it means to be a "good relative." This helps guide everyone on how to be in ceremony, an invitation to feel they belong and are cared for, no matter where they come from.
- **Making Sure Everyone is Seen:** To move from being strangers to being kin, every person needs to be heard. We start every circle with time for introductions to each kin relations, nations, and where they are at emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. We also close every circle by checking in one last time, making sure no one leaves carrying a heavy heart or unspoken words.
- **Building Purpose by Helping Out:** One of the best ways to feel confident and connected is to have a role in the group. We invite our kin to help with things like preparing for teachings or setting up the art show. This builds real-life skills and helps people move from just "getting a service" to being an active part of the community's health.
- **Moving at the Pace of the Heart:** We've learned that you cannot rush the heart. By slowing down our schedule, starting with ceremony, and giving everyone a meaningful way to help, we aren't just running a workshop, we are bringing back a culture of care that takes consistent practice and reminders.
- **Supporting the Team Behind the Scenes:** It's just as important to care for the facilitators as it is the participants. Make sure to have regular team talks (debriefs) to check in on one another and share what was learned. Clearly identify everyone's roles and responsibilities. When we all know our part and how we contribute, we can support the community more effectively and ensure no one person is carrying too much of the weight alone.

When Participants Feel Activated

In one of our gatherings, a participant shared that they felt triggered by a male presence. This reminded us that we cannot promise a completely "safe" space for everyone. We looked to the Cree language, where there is no word for "safe," but there is a word for courage. We encourage our kin to take care of themselves first, and then return to the circle so we can help look after them. When big feelings come up, we ask everyone to hold space for that courage. As a team, we stay calm and steady so that we can support a person in their pain without it pulling the whole circle off track.

When someone is upset in the circle, we offer:

Professional Support: We have a counselor or therapist who knows how to work with the body and help name big feelings as they happen.

A Comfort Basket: We keep a basket of sensory tools to help people get grounded, like nice-smelling lotions, squeeze balls, and soft things to touch.

One-on-One Care: We have a team member ready to go for a walk or smudge with someone who needs a break, ensuring they are cared for while the rest of the group continues.

Techniques for Shifting Heavy Energy

Because our kin often face heavy personal challenges, staying focused on the circle's work can sometimes be difficult. Every group is different, and we can't always predict the energy or the needs that people will bring with them. Sometimes, one relative needs extra one-on-one care while the rest of the group is working; in those moments, we remind everyone that learning how to be served and supported is a deep and necessary part of the restorative work we do together.

- Introducing a simple art exercise like the gratitude writing exercise as shared by Lana can help to shift the energy within the room if there is a general heaviness and sadness.
- Smudge or finding a quiet space.
- The singing, humming, and drumming is so powerful to learning how to come into your voice and be present.





wâhkôhtowin

wâhkôhtowin is a Cree teaching about how we are all related. It is the deep understanding that everything is connected, from the relationship we have with ourselves and other people to our connection with the earth and all living spirits. This way of knowing reminds us that we all have a place and a purpose in the circle of life, and that we are never truly alone.

Honouring Our Traditions, the Circle, and Each Other

Honouring Sacred Protocols

- **Guidance for Pipe Ceremonies:** Since Pipe Ceremonies are such a sacred part of our opening and closing, we want to make sure the "why" and "how" are clear. We recommend to provide simple instructions on what to expect so that everyone can participate with a clear heart and feel at ease.
- **Ceremonial Roles:** Within these sacred spaces, recommend to identify Pipe Leads (who hold the protocols) and Helpers (who support the physical needs of the ceremony). This clarity helps the ceremony flow naturally and respectfully.

Deepening Our Care

- **Sensory Mindfulness:** We stay extra sensitive to small things that can be "activating" for kin, such as a sharp tone of voice or sudden loud noises. We work to keep the environment as gentle as possible.
- **Checking in with Ourselves:** As a team, we need to go beyond just listening to others. We are learning how to check in with our own bodies and reactions in real-time. By identifying when we feel stressed or reactive, we can find our own calm and stay centered for the kin who need us.

Circle Protocols

To keep our space and our hearts strong and our hearts, we must treat these protocols as sacred responsibilities. Following these suggestions ensures that we are living out the values of our ancestors.

- **The Circle is Our Heartbeat:** In a circle, no one is above or below. Everyone has a role, and we are all responsible for the safety and the energy of the room. When we follow these ways, we remind ourselves that we are all related.
- **Embodying Kinship:** We move past titles like "facilitator" and show up with Auntie and Sister energy. This is a truthful commitment to look after one another as family, not just a group.
- **Learning to Receive and Let Go:** Accepting help is a skill and a matter of integrity. We must practice letting go of heavy feelings and allowing ourselves to be cared for so no one carries the weight alone.
- **Protecting the Circle of Trust:** Trust is grown slowly and must be guarded with integrity. Once our kin have begun to share their truths, we must be very careful about bringing new people into the established circle. Adding someone new can disrupt the sacred energy and break the bond of safety we've worked so hard to build. Protecting the circle's boundaries is how we honor the courage of those who have already shared their stories.

Courage and Commitment

Courage as Vulnerability: It is the courage to say, "I don't know," or "I am hurt."

Courage as Presence: Staying in the room when things get uncomfortable, rather than checking out, being reactive or getting defensive.

Courage as Tenderness: The bravery required to be soft in a world that demands we be hard.

Courage of Connection: The strength of the circle depends on the connection of kin within.

Presence as a Gift: Our presence is our most vital contribution; a commitment to show up means honouring the collective by bringing our full selves to the space, and especially when the work feels heavy.

When we show up consistently, we build the trust necessary for deep transformation.

Food

Serving nutritious warm food to start off a session can change the entire dynamic of a group. At times, it may be the first meal that a participant has eaten that day, if not in a few days. Good warm food feeds the mind, spirit, and body that helps folk's stay present and committed.

The mental state and mood of participants can be highly impacted if they are not properly fed.

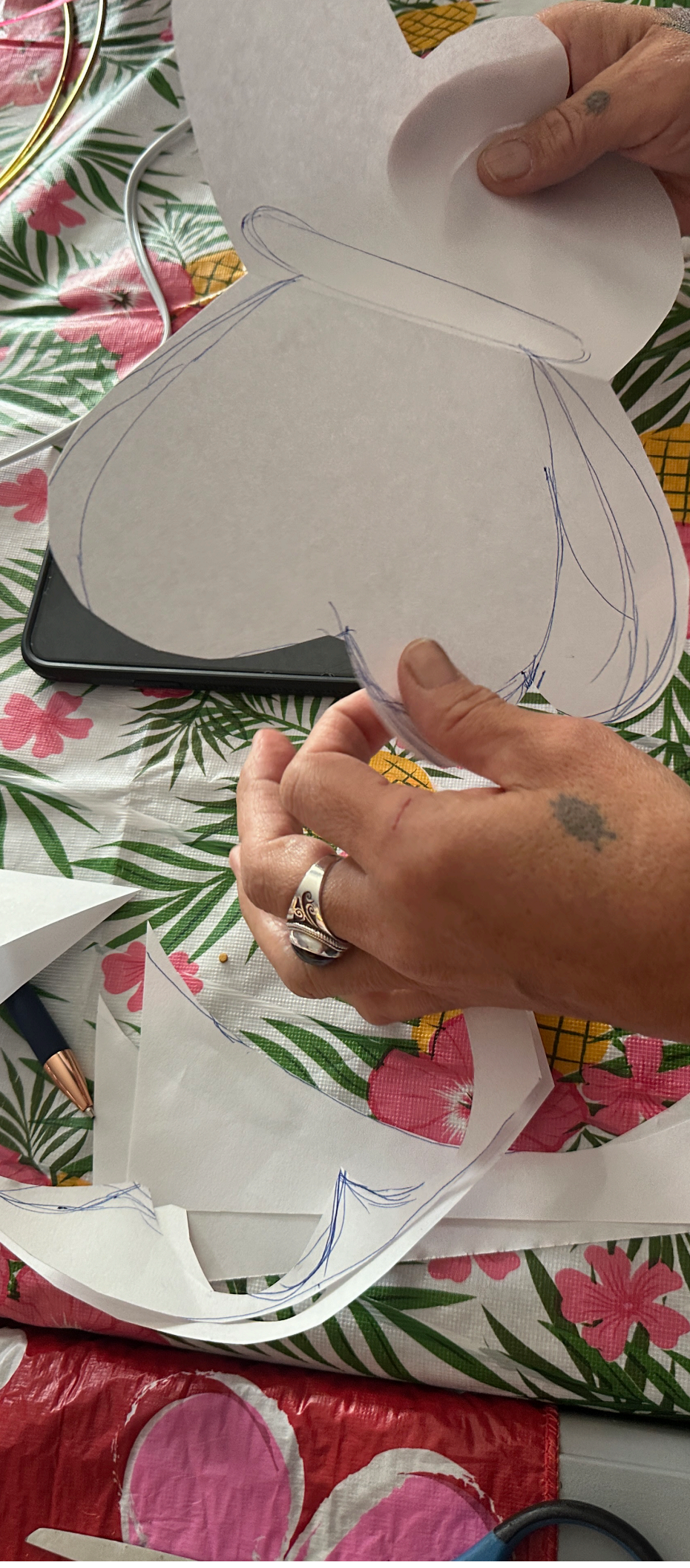
Location/Safety/Dignity

We learned a painful lesson when one of our kin was held at gunpoint by police near one of our gatherings. It was a traumatic reminder that for our relatives, safety is not an abstract idea, it is a real-life, lived threat. To truly honour the truth of body sovereignty, we know that physical safety must be the absolute foundation of everything we do. We cannot ask our kin to practice vulnerability or share their hearts if they do not feel safe simply walking to their cars or catching the bus after a session.

If a location is surrounded by systemic aggression, the space itself becomes a barrier to being present and connecting. We must carefully choose environments that offer both security and dignity. This means accessible locations that are nourishing and clean reminding our kin they are worthy of a beautiful, calm, and respectful environment.

Timing is just as important. Schedule circles to ensure no one has to travel home during times of peak risk. Be mindful of the "where" and the "when," to protect the brave space to build peacefulness together.





Building Artful Space

Building an artful space is an act of care that transforms a room into a sanctuary for connection. These recommendations focus on how our environment and shared responsibilities support the circle's deep work.

The Central Table

The physical layout dictates the energy of the gathering. We have found that a central table for both ceremony and art-making is the most effective formation. This setup creates a seamless flow, allowing for a natural transition between sharing teachings and creative expression. By remaining at one table, we stay focused on the "whole" rather disrupting energy by switching stations.

Material Stewardship and Phased Distribution

Managing our resources is an extension of our commitment to one another. Handing out full kits at the start can lead to lost materials, which strains both the budget and the collective spirit. Instead, we recommend a phased approach. Providing supplies session-by-session builds momentum and creates a rhythm of return, where the arrival of new materials marks the progression of our work. This ensures every supply is honoured and treated with the same respect we show one another.

The Paperwork of Respect

To protect both the individual and the collective, consent must be ongoing and formalized. This is vital for exhibitions, where explicit permission is required to display the Art-work. Proper labeling "Name" and "Date" must be a mandatory part of the finishing process for every piece. This paperwork of respect ensures each artist's work is honoured and their story is tracked correctly. While it eases logistics, its true purpose is to uphold the integrity of the artist's voice and celebrate the medicine they have shared with the world.

Reflection and Closing the Circle



Journaling

Journaling is a quiet moment to let the circle's teachings settle in our hearts. It's easy for this time to get lost in the rush, so we must protect it. We use simple prompts like asking about the physical sensation of the art-making to help those who find a blank page a bit scary. Sharing is always a choice, but reading from your notebook can be a helpful safety support when there are complexity of feelings in a circle of kin you are getting to know.

This leads us to closing the circle. Instead of diving straight into memory work, we talk about our art. It's often gentler to speak about the colors or shapes of a feeling than the pain itself. By taking this time to decompress, we make sure no one leaves the room feeling open or raw. We talk it through so the weight stays in the room, allowing our kin to walk home feeling light, centered, and cared for.

Completing the Circle

This project explores dignity through art, circle dialogues, and cultural teachings. At its heart is body sovereignty, the belief that safety is a physical necessity, not just an idea. By shifting to audit our spaces for dignity and timing our workshops to avoid risk, we can ensure our kin do not have to choose between finding connection and staying safe.

We've learned that this "labour of love" requires a team grounded in truth, kindness, wisdom, and courage. By building a foundation of respect and clear communication, we are better better prepared to guide our strong, courageous kin who deserve the deepest support.

We finish our journey with a final art exhibition and a pipe ceremony with the grandmothers and aunties. Through these practices and the sacred pause of journaling, we approach the heavy reality of GBV with softness and care. We talk through the medicine of our work so we can leave the weight in the circle, allowing our relatives to move through this world feeling a little more liberated, skilled, honoured, and whole. This is how we embody wâhkôhtowin.

âyihay mistahi to our team:

Lana Whiskeyjack (nêhiyaw)
Lisa Prins
Allison Sivak
Lynda Spencer
Bonny Spencer (Métis)
Carla Rae Taylor (Dene and Irish)
Elizabeth French
Lisa Gotell
Joanne McKinnon
Amanda Almond (Métis)

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