

Promising Practices



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Innovative practices & initiatives from around Ontario

Healing Trauma through a First Nation Lens

There is emerging evidence that traumatic experiences are often linked to mental health and addictions issues, and that trauma-informed approaches can assist those who are impacted. Trauma-informed approaches allow service providers to realize the impacts of trauma, recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, and respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into their practices. First Nation people have a higher likelihood of experiencing trauma than the general population, and oftentimes, the trauma can be more complex than that experienced by non-First Nation people.

The Kenora-Rainy River Youth Justice Collaborative (KRRYJC) is one of 18 service collaboratives set up by the provincial government in regions across Ontario to reduce the burden of mental illness and addictions by ensuring all Ontarians have timely access to an integrated system of coordinated care.

The collaborative connects justice-involved youth up to the age of 17 with appropriate mental health and addiction services through coordinated efforts by agencies in the region, to give youth and their caregivers access to services and options that limit escalation in the justice system.

The collaborative recognized the need for service providers, especially those who work with justice-



(From left to right) Master of Ceremonies Colin Wasacase of Kenora City Council, and presenters Rupert Ross, Dr. Ed Connors, and Dr. Renee Linklater.

involved youth, to better understand trauma and healing from an Indigenous perspective. Their solution was to offer a trauma workshop that incorporates the views and teachings of First Nation people.

Although the workshops in Kenora-Rainy River did not originally begin with the intention to host a First Nation-specific event, the lack of knowledge of the unique trauma that many in First Nation communities have experienced, combined with the over-representation of First Nation youth in the justice system, demonstrated the need to explore Traditional trauma healing approaches while incorporating Traditional practices.



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Trauma-Informed Services

Training and education in trauma-informed practice helps service providers to understand the impacts of trauma and effectively interact with clients and their families. A series of workshops on trauma-informed care have taken place in the Kenora-Rainy River area since September 2014. The objectives of these workshops were to help service providers define trauma and its impacts, explore the neurobiology of trauma, explore how resilience relates to trauma recovery, and increase their comfort level and confidence in working with people affected by trauma.

Almost 100 service providers from youth justice, mental health, addictions, and other related sectors attended the workshops. While they touched on issues related to Aboriginal experiences of trauma, the workshops have been predominantly based on Western-perspective healing approaches.

Culturally-Relevant Trauma-Informed Services

The trauma experienced by some Aboriginal People in Canada can be understood as a distinct form of complex trauma, resulting from the impacts of colonization and trauma that has taken place across generations. For example, intergenerational trauma was the result of colonizing events such as the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families (the “Sixties Scoop”) and the use of residential schools to

assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian culture.

The demographics of Kenora-Rainy River make culturally relevant trauma-informed services a key priority in the region. In 2011, youth under 18 years made up 37.7% and 35.5% of the Aboriginal population in Kenora and Rainy River, respectively. In Ontario, five times more Aboriginal male youth and ten times more female youth are incarcerated than their counterparts in the general population. As a result, the local youth justice collaborative developed a trauma workshop that focused on Traditional First Nation practices and strategies.

Using a First Nation Lens

In June, 2015, over 170 service providers attended Healing Trauma through a First Nations Lens, a two-day interactive workshop in Kenora that aimed to increase awareness of First Nation healing practices and Traditional knowledge related to mental health and addictions. The goal was to develop this knowledge and approaches to learning, and incorporate these Traditional views into healing practices. Ultimately, the workshop deepened attendees’ understanding and awareness of Aboriginal trauma.

The workshop commenced and concluded with a Traditional drum ceremony to ensure Traditional ceremonial practices were incorporated into the event. Each day of the workshop began with a Traditional song and prayer to establish a hopeful and open environment. In addition, guest speakers with specific connections to the local First Nation communities were included in the curriculum.

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The first guest speaker of the workshop was Dr. Renee Linklater, a member of Rainy River First Nation and Director of Aboriginal Engagement and Outreach for the Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. She connected her own personal stories with decolonizing trauma work, offering purposeful and practical methods to help individuals and communities that have experienced trauma, while recognizing the resilience of Aboriginal peoples.

Rupert Ross, a former assistant Crown Attorney for the District of Kenora, was the workshop's second guest speaker. He conducted criminal prosecutions for more than 20 remote Ojibway and Cree First Nation communities in Northwestern Ontario, and has written extensively on the trauma experienced by the Aboriginal people in the area. He shared his conviction that the key to healing is a return to the Traditional Indigenous world view.

The third workshop guest speaker was Dr. Ed Connors, a psychologist from Kahnawake Mohawk Territory who was previously the director for the Sacred Circle, a suicide prevention program developed to serve First Nation communities in Northwestern Ontario. Dr. Connors shared stories relating to "Two Eyed Seeing" as a way of understanding the integration of Indigenous and Western world views of healing. He also led participants in discussion circles on the connections between the history of the territory and what service providers should consider when working with First Nation peoples.



Dr. Ed Connors explaining the Wampum Belt, a Traditional item that symbolizes the peaceful, respectful relationship between nations.

The workshop also included a roundtable discussion by local Grade 12 students who were enrolled in a class on equity and social justice. The students spoke about issues they had studied in class, such as the impact of residential schools and how learning about these issues impacted their perception of Aboriginal people. The students offered a positive outlook for the future of the community, highlighting the fact that drawing awareness to the trauma that was inflicted on Aboriginal people is the first step towards healing.

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The workshop garnered an outpouring of positive feedback, with requests to hold more events in the future. Some of the attendees' feedback is as follows:

"The student presentation was something that gave me HOPE that change is possible within our community."

"This brought together three different, but inter-related "stories" and teachers to integrate our understanding of historical trauma and ways of healing."

"I LOVED the stories – amazing stories of resilience. Incredibly humbling to hear these stories of trauma but also the hope of healing. They will stay with me and will deepen my heart's understanding of historical trauma."

"Being able to witness, experience, and participate in cultural practices, songs, and prayers was an amazing learning experience. It should be required for all people. I have learned so much and am able to reflect on my own belief systems and how they affect my outlook and practice."

"I felt like a lot of thought and care went in to both days and could feel the connection between the speakers and within the room. A very healing, moving conference."

"I would like more exposure to cultural ceremonies and elders to cultivate a deeper understanding of how to best support and help our First Nations people."

Lessons Learned

Promising components of the workshop that should be considered for future practices include guest speakers that have personal connections to the local community, story-telling presentation approaches, and discussion circles and group sharing. This is important to encourage participation and acknowledge that each participant is a teacher and learner in their healing journey.

Workshops such as this allow service providers to develop greater knowledge of First Nation cultural healing practices, provide hope for service providers and their clients, and build lasting partnerships between First Nation and mainstream organizations, no matter which culture their clients are a part of.

For more information on the Healing Trauma through a First Nation Lens workshop, please contact Gina Clark at Gina.Clark@camh.ca.

Author:
Erica Sawula
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Evidence Exchange Network (EENet; formerly OMHAKEN) actively promotes the use of research evidence in decision-making by providing an infrastructure to connect research and researchers to mental health and addictions research stakeholders across Ontario, develops targeted KT products and tools, and supports interactive exchanges. The EENet Management and Resource Centre is located in the Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).