ADDRESSING INDIGENOUS MENTAL HEALTH: A JOURNEY TO RECONCILIATION
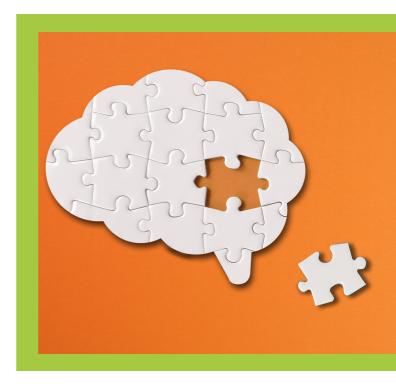
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Stephani Montesanti, health policy and systems researcher, Kayla Fitzpatrick, senior research associate at the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta (UofA), Bryan Fayant, Disaster Recovery Strategist for McMurray Métis, and Callie Pritchard, former Research Assistant in the School of Public Health Health at the UofA, came together for the piece "Identifying priorities, directions and a vision for Indigenous mental health using a collaborative and consensus-based facilitation approach", published by BMC Health Services Research in 2022.

The article draws attention to how economic, social, and political differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, which are a result of colonization, contribute to the mental health of indigenous communities in Canada. The authors highlight that past and current colonial traditions such as stealing of land, placing Indigenous children in residential schools, and systemic racism are an essential part of the context in which Indigenous mental health must be analyzed and understood. With that in mind, they organized a two-day mental health forum in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) to examine mental health needs and gaps within this Indigenous community. The forum intended to collect primary information from stakeholders in order to identify mental health issues and develop strategies for creating and improving programs that would benefit the community. The participants included "Indigenous leadership, community service providers, mental health professionals, schoolteachers, representatives from the Fort McMurray School District, Indigenous Elders, youth residing in the urban and rural communities, representatives from provincial and local organizations with mandates for Indigenous Health and Wellness, and non-Indigenous health care, academic, and research organizations" (p. 5).

The forum examined three main areas of concern within Indigenous communities: discussing the challenges and opportunities in addressing mental health, networking stakeholders in a cross-sectoral manner to identify collaborative possibilities to provide mental health services, and brainstorming resources that could support mental health wellness. After a presentation about the research on the topic, participants were involved in roundtable group discussions and voted on what should be prioritized when dealing with Indigenous mental health. From their insights, four key themes were identified to set directions to be followed: 1) understand the realities of mental health experiences; 2) design a holistic and culturally rooted mental health system; 3) foster cross-sectoral engagement and collaboration on mental health service delivery; and 4) focus on children and youth.

The first theme is based on the premise that for mental health services to be appropriate and effective, the history of Indigenous Peoples must be embedded when developing programs, because when the intergenerational trauma dealt with by Indigenous communities is not taken into consideration, there would be important factors particular to their experience left aside. The participants also mention that living conditions in Indigenous communities are, many times, not what non-Indigenous Canadians face in their daily lives. Often, the infrastructure and health care systems are less than ideal in these communities, which means mental health services, and hiring and transportation of professionals, are not as available as one might think. The second theme speaks to training professionals within an Indigenous context of learning, with cultural support as an essential part of creating a mental health system in which Indigenous communities feel understood

and can receive trauma-informed care. The third theme involves understanding how the holistic way of providing care should consider cross-sectoral factors that negatively impact Indigenous lives in Canada, which means services and programs should strive to coordinate food security, safe shelters, and community and individual-based support as well as mental health services. Finally, the fourth theme points to increasing support for children and youth to hopefully bring light to the issues before they are become worse. The forum considers healthy childhood development to be crucial for the long-term well being of Indigenous Peoples, and therefore should be prioritized.

The authors believe the forum serves to demonstrate how mental health services for Indigenous communities should be mainly Indigenous-led, preserving their right of self-determination while also providing a service that engages their unique experience in its creation and application. They mention that "the provincial Alberta Government's 2020–2023 fiscal plan commits $100 M for a new mental health and addiction strategy, which is intended to address the ongoing

challenges of mental health and addictions in Alberta. However, there is no mention of how (or if) funding for mental health services or supports will be allocated to Indigenous communities" (p. 14). Although the article does not consider realities in other provinces, which makes it difficult to understand whether their findings could be generalized, and admits to a lack of youth participation in the forum, it still provides insightful opportunities for future research and policies that will focus on Indigenous mental health and provide communities with services they deserve. This strategy could potentially be an opportunity to apply what was discussed at the forum to hopefully improve mental health services and, consequently, Indigenous lives.

Danielle Madeiros moved to Canada from Brazil in 2020 to pursue a master's degree in political science. She is passionate about helping vulnerable children and youth—her goal is to one day work as a public policy social worker and develop policies to protect this important part of the community.

REFERENCES

Montesanti, S., A Fitzpatrick, K., Fayant, B., & Pritchard, C. (2022). Identifying priorities, directions and a vision for Indigenous mental health using a collaborative and consensus-based facilitation approach. BMC Health Services Research. https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-022-07682-3