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Indigenous Peoples and Trauma

Workplaces are trying hard to be diverse, inclusive, respectful, and safe for everyone. Both employers and employees recognize that racialized people and members of equity-deserving groups experience challenges that significantly affect their lives. Colonial trauma has been part of Indigenous peoples' lives since the first Europeans arrived and established permanent settlements in Turtle Island, the area now known as Canada. Unfortunately, Indigenous Peoples experience discrimination such as microaggressions that surface in any number of daily routine interactions, including with coworkers. In many cases, empathy and understanding are overshadowed by stereotyping, myths, misinformation, cultural appropriation, and insensitivity.

This article will briefly touch on some of the effects that many of us aren't aware of regarding Indigenous Peoples, such as how the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma affect mental health. We must note that we are using the term Indigenous, which includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. We know that there is a rich diversity within each group, especially concerning identities, traditional lands, history, language, and culture. While we can't address everything within a single article, we can touch on what we believe are some important catalysts tied to the colonization experiences that all these groups share that have affected their overall health and well-being. We aim to help individuals begin to develop an understanding of the issues and start to navigate through the complexities. We believe that workplaces need to demonstrate sincerity and provide supportive tools that meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples. It's a way to start walking together on a path towards reconciliation and healing.

A brief history

Indigenous Peoples are the original inhabitants of the lands within a geographic region. Before the arrival of European settlers, their distinct cultures, traditions, languages, spirituality, economies, and politics had flourished for tens of thousands of years.[1]

Arrival of Europeans

Norse explorers landed in the 11th century, though they did not stay more than a few years.[2] European settlers arrived in the 15th and 16th centuries and began early trade and commerce with Indigenous Peoples.[3]

The European explorers travelled under the Doctrine of Discovery; an international law issued by Roman Popes in 1455 that effectively authorized them to lay claim to what they perceived to be vacant land in the name of their sovereign. Upon arrival, the lands certainly weren't vacant. But one other article within the Doctrine permitted explorers to determine lands used "properly," meaning running under Euro-centric laws. If they decided that wasn't the case, they believed that God had brought them to the land to make a claim for the Crown based on their obligation to "civilize" the people. It was the beginning of colonialization where explorers took ownership of the lands and followed through on their perceived obligation to provide all non-Christians with education and religion. The Doctrine of Discovery has never been renounced. Instead, it served as the foundation for the Indian Act.[4]

The Indian Act

The Indian Act (1876) established governmental control over nearly all aspects of First Nations people's lives to force them to assimilate into the Dominion of Canada as quickly as possible.[5] The Indian Act consolidated many pre-Confederation laws and created reserved land (reserves) and the promise to deliver food, supplies and medicines to these communities. Indian Agents maintained enforcement. The Act was intentionally restrictive and destructive to Indigenous culture and people. While there have been some amendments to the Act, overwhelmingly, the legislation is still highly paternalistic and continues to affect people today.[6]

This legislation has created many hardships because of its restrictiveness. Two significant aspects are rooted in much of the trauma Indigenous Peoples have experienced in the 21st century.[6]

- Determining an Indigenous Person's "status" or "non-status" dictates the government's obligation to care for them. The Indian Act includes information for First Nations people who are registered under the Act. Inuit or Métis people are not included under the Indian Act. Amendments to The Act have been attempting to rectify unjust practices. For example, Bill S-3, enacted on August 15, 2019, has attempted to eliminate "all known sex-based inequities."[7] For example, in The Act, women who had married non-Indigenous men were denied status.[8]
- School-age children were forced to attend residential schools under the pretense of obtaining their "proper" education. The schools were designed to intentionally sever ties between Indigenous children and their families, language, identity, and culture.[9]

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Alarming and frightening experiences can result in someone developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The response to memories or associations with harmful events such as images, sounds, smells and emotions, causes them to react with a debilitating stress response. For Indigenous Peoples, "repeated exposure to trauma, family instability, and childhood adversities such as separation from parents, poverty and family dysfunction" presents an increased risk of developing PTSD.[10] Extreme stress can result in behavioural and, in some cases, even genetic changes as our bodies and minds try to cope with what has happened. We may not even be aware of the effect of the trauma until years later.[11]

The reality is that Indigenous communities are "dealing with higher rates of mental and social distress (trauma)" that can be "traced back to abuses experienced by…children who were forced to attend residential schools."[12] There are generations of people who were disconnected from their families, communities, and culture for generations, to no fault of their own.

Understanding intergenerational trauma

Colonization events (the process of colonization), have led to "losses of culture, traditional values, and family stability… [because] in many cases, [opportunities] for parents and Elders to pass along vital cultural knowledge and resilience to children" were taken away.[13] It has created trauma that has been passed from one generation to the next. One researcher indicated that children and grandchildren of residential school survivors show an increased risk of anxiety and depression because they have experienced threats to their psychological health early on in their lives.[14]

It is helpful to have a fundamental understanding of Indigenous culture to realize how being disconnected from their communities' left generations of Indigenous Peoples unsupported. Indigenous culture teaches how everything in our world is interconnected. In life, you are part of a community that cares for and shows respect to everyone and everything. In addition, there is recognition and appreciation for all relationships that exist: past, present, and future. Your family and Elders in the community would show you the importance of understanding, acknowledging, appreciating, and protecting humans; animals; plants (especially sacred medicines); air and wind; water; the sky; and the earth.[15] You would learn about the care of bundles that "can include sacred items such as feathers, drums, pipes, medicines, talking sticks and many other sacred items" that hold knowledge of their culture as "all that we are, all that we can be, and all that helps us to be holistic helpers."[16]

When children were taken from their communities and sent to residential schools, they lost their families, communities, language, culture, and traditions. They experienced violence, starvation, abuse, and neglect.

If they survived the experiences, they could not quickly re-integrate into their communities when they returned home and they had difficulty fitting in. They were unable to recognize their families including their parents and extended families. Instead, they showed signs of isolation and trauma as well as a loss of identity and belonging. They were fearful to disclose their experiences to anyone, because they were concerned about retribution from administrators. Further, if they were courageous enough to share what they had experienced or witnessed, their family members were doubtful because the truth contradicted what they had been told.[17]

Residential school survivors experienced a great deal of trauma which impacted their relationships. The trauma lead to a tremendous amount of pain and they were not provided with any support to learn how to deal with the pain they had endured. This led to utilizing unhealthy coping strategies such as substance use, self-harm including suicidal ideation and this also made them more prone to mental illness.

One of the many impacts of colonization on the Indigenous communities is intergenerational trauma. This continues to affect the Indigenous Peoples today. This is perpetuated in their parenting style which is often influenced by their experiences with the residential school system. Sometimes they resorted to what they had learned in residential schools, resulting in a new generation experiencing abuse, neglect, and violence.[18] Other times, they found themselves in the predicament of sending their own children to attend residential schools.

Then, the government stepped in again to try and fix these problems through social services. The Scoop (sometimes referred to as the 60s Scoop) was a practice of removing Indigenous children from their families to have them placed in foster care with non-Indigenous families, this happened to children between 1960 and 1990. There were more children removed from their culture, traditions, and families.[19] At the same time, residential schools continued. The last residential school closed in 1996.[20]

The Seven Generations Principle

Indigenous culture traditionally looked at the effects of a decision for the next seven generations. This principle is sometimes applied to how much work is ahead for Indigenous People's to heal from the atrocities they have experienced. The first steps were sharing stories during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings and the government's formal apology for creating and maintaining the residential school system. However, there is a long road ahead because Indigenous Peoples still experience injustices and racism daily. International events where the world comes together to support people experiencing conflict or for a common cause can be triggering and painful to observe because the same attention and dedication have not ever been displayed for Indigenous Peoples.

Healing from trauma

Indigenous Peoples may begin the healing process by:

1. Expressing a desire to heal and move forward.
2. Sharing truths and experiences with professionals and loved ones who want to help.
3. Accepting support, reconnecting, and reclaiming culture, language, traditions, spirituality, and values.
4. Using traditional medicines, sweat lodges and healing circles.
5. Embracing traditional ways of dealing with criminal acts and changing the experience of incarceration.
6. Learning from knowledge keepers.

What can non-indigenous people do to help?

The best things that non-indigenous people can do include:

1. Taking time to learn about Canada's hidden colonial history.
2. Reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations.
3. Learning about Indigenous customs, culture, history with a view of appreciation, not appropriation.
   a. Attend pow wows and other educational events.
   b. Read books and view films by indigenous authors about indigenous experiences.
   c. Visit archeological sites.
4. Recognize your own biases and investigate myths and misinformation about taxes, housing, and education. Correct information when it is inaccurate.
5. Learn about and develop an awareness of discrimination such as microaggressions in language that perpetuate stereotypes and racialized beliefs.

The path forward

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have a shared responsibility to listen, learn, and heal to promote decolonization. Together, we need to understand how traumatic events can bring up unintended feelings, frustration, and anger. At the same time, we need to work towards appreciation, respect, and understanding. Perhaps most importantly, non-Indigenous Peoples should not transfer the accountability for learning and sharing to an indigenous person. Remember that it's not an Indigenous Persons role to educate you.

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