



SHARING POWER & HEALING ALONGSIDE:

INDIGENOUS TRAUMA AND EQUITY INFORMED PRACTICE COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

In the world of trauma and equity informed practice, we know that language matters. Adopting new language can be impactful in terms of cultural safety, but this approach alone lacks the deep, relational qualities required to sustainably transform relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Focusing on finding the 'right' words can leave people feeling anxious about getting it wrong and underprepared for the complexity of our day-to-day lives. **When we focus instead on adopting a relational approach to communicating grounded in cultural safety, we open ourselves up to new opportunities for healing and connection.**

Applying a trauma and equity-informed lens, this communications guide provides some foundational knowledge, practical tools and guiding principles for those interested in building more culturally safe ways of communicating with Indigenous peoples. Applying LPC's core Indigenous values of respect, reciprocity and relatedness, we unpack the skills required to iteratively build cultural safety into the way we communicate.

Trauma & equity informed communication means changing how we communicate, in addition to some of the language we use.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

From a western illness model, trauma is used to describe the psychological wounds inscribed in our nervous system through a diversity of acute or prolonged traumatic experiences. Trauma expert, Dr. Gabor Maté, has described trauma as:

...a psychic wound that hardens you psychologically that then interferes with your ability to grow and develop. It pains you and now you're acting out of pain. It induces fear and now you're acting out of fear. Trauma is not what happens to you, it's what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you. Trauma is that scarring that makes you less flexible, more rigid, less feeling and more defended (2020).

The limitation of this definition is that it causes us to locate the "problem" within the person or people we are working with, failing to recognize that the root cause of trauma exists in relationships.

This includes relationships:

- between people(s);
- between people and events (i.e. natural disasters, colonization), or;
- between people and systems (ie. public education, health care, police, government).

In absence of appropriate care and tools (i.e. trauma informed practice), traumatic events can continue to live on, or re-activate, in our relationships. This relational quality of trauma means that in order to be trauma informed, we must be attentive to the systems, events and histories that structure our lives in relation to others. A relational view of trauma is especially important when we are working across the different experiences that are produced under a structure of colonialism.

COLONIALISM AND TRAUMA

Colonialism is a violent system of power that continues to traumatise Indigenous peoples and other oppressed groups. This includes various forms of ongoing targeted trauma (i.e. Residential schools, the sixties scope, housing discrimination), and intergenerational trauma that is passed down as a result of targeted trauma (Pierre 2021).

One of the ways colonialism effectively maintains its power is by invisibilizing its violence and destruction. As a result, settlers and other non-Indigenous people are often largely unaware of the true impacts of colonization on Indigenous people. This manifests as a lack of adequate support, accountability or reparations from settler societies for colonial harms.

The health disparities observed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island (North America) are a result of targeted colonial trauma, intergenerational colonial trauma, as well as the lack of accountability that is characteristic of relationships structured by colonialism.

Trauma is often described as a loss of power; the loss of power over what happens to our bodies, culture, community or land can all cause trauma (Pierre 2021). As such, healing trauma is about regaining power. **To be trauma-informed is to participate in a relational process of sharing power, including supporting people in regaining the power that has been taken away from them. Indigenous trauma-informed practice is a grounded, relational practice.** It is attentive to the histories that we all inhabit and asks us to support the re-empowerment of Indigenous peoples, nations and communities. For non-Indigenous people, Indigenous trauma-informed practice is a critical component of the work of reconciliation.

Trauma serves to protect us from losses of power. It is a set of responses that our bodies develop to prevent further harms from individuals, situations, organisations or structures. These learned methods of survival are called trauma responses and include:

- Flight - removing yourself from a threatening situation;
- Fight - escalating to protect from a threatening situation (i.e. yelling);
- Freeze - shutting down to protect from a threatening situation (i.e. getting quiet, difficulty communicating);
- Flop - hopelessness, pulling away from a threatening situation;
- Friend - low confidence, overreliance on others around you to cope with perceived threats (Sexual Assault Crisis Centre 2022; Porges 2018).

Oftentimes, trauma responses are protecting us from real danger or threats to our autonomy, including ongoing colonial oppression.

Triggers are experiences that remind us of a loss of power or threat to our safety, causing a protective trauma response. We are triggered by things that resemble a threat to our safety or autonomy, but that do not present the same threat to our safety or autonomy in the present moment.

When someone is triggered by an experience, the individual undergoes a physical and psychological trauma response that can be harmful in itself, due to the stress it places on the body and mind. Triggers are additionally harmful when they are not attended to with appropriate care, leading to further disconnection and feelings of unsafety in a particular situation. For example, when a client accessing a service is triggered and that event is not met with appropriate attention, this service may become inaccessible to the client.

When we see trauma responses happening in our work, we must remember the greater context of those actions in relation to someone's life experience. When working with Indigenous peoples, this includes the context of colonialism and the specific traumas it continues to inflict. When a trauma response occurs, we must remember that the individual is not "crazy" or "inappropriate", but rather they are exhibiting an appropriate response to protect themselves from the dangers they have experienced. They are attempting to maintain or regain their power and safety. **As trauma and equity-informed professionals, it is our responsibility to support individuals in returning to a sense of safety.**

WHY DO WE NEED EQUITY TO BE TRAUMA-INFORMED

Equity recognizes that different individuals or communities have different needs in order to access the same standard of resources. This means that when providing services as professionals through the lens of equity, we should be prepared for the way we provide services to change depending on the experiences of the people we are working with.

Trauma, including harms specific to Indigenous experiences of colonization, shape what people need to feel safe in accessing services. For this reason, we need to keep equity in mind to effectively apply Indigenous trauma-informed practice.

WHY IS TRAUMA AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION IN HOW WE COMMUNICATE?

Indigenous trauma informed communication is important to working with Indigenous peoples because:

- Not being trauma-informed in how we communicate can result in unintentionally triggering people. The impact of this can be additional harm, people not hearing/understanding each other, or services being unsafe/inaccessible to Indigenous peoples.
- When we are triggered, it is physically and emotionally more difficult to hear/understand what is being said.
- Safety and effective communication are the foundation of good relationships.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA & EQUITY INFORMED COMMUNICATION

Be mindful of triggers and their impact. This involves getting educated about the histories and experiences of Indigenous peoples, and being thoughtful about what triggers may be associated with those experiences. It also means listening to the people we are working with to understand what may be triggering in the context of their unique experience. We should observe signs of people becoming triggered, be thoughtful about what behaviours, words, or topics may be triggering them, and seek to either avoid or create safety around those conversations.

Looks like: Observing that a person starts displaying the signs of a trigger response when you use a particular word, phrasing or way of speaking (i.e. standing too close), and adjusting your communication style to support their sense of safety.

Engage people in identifying safe ways to have difficult conversations. Where triggers are a necessary part of a conversation, work collaboratively to identify other ways to support a sense of safety.

Looks like: Allowing someone to have a loved one be present with them for conversations that they will find triggering.

Looks like: “I imagine this could be difficult to talk about, I am wondering if there is anything I can do to make it easier?”

Engage in good consent practice. Since trauma is about losing power, we support people in feeling safe by ensuring they have ample space to consent to our engagements with them.

Looks like: “Would it be okay if I ask a few questions about your family history?”

Looks like: Providing content warnings where there are possible triggers. This empowers a person to decide if viewing something is safe for them at that moment.

Ensure the person feels seen, valued and empowered to participate in the conversation by:

- Slowing down and being patient
- Pausing
- Checking in on if they have questions
- Demonstrating care (i.e. smiling)
- Making eye contact
- Being clear and concise (i.e. avoid jargon and acronyms)

Be curious and use invitational language. Curiosity and the use of invitational language are ways of ensuring the person feels in control, safe and empowered.

Looks like: “Do you mind if.....Is it okay if we....how would you like to.....”

Be conscious of your own experience in relation to the people you are working with. Our own experiences or appearance relative to another person can affect their sense of safety. For example, a male body can create a sense of unsafety for people in certain settings, if they have had traumatic experiences with men.

Reflect on:

1. Am I a safe person for this person right now?
2. If not, how might I adjust my communication to be a safe person?
3. If I cannot do that today, how can I find a safe person to support our communication or deliver the necessary message?

Remember that behaviours and trauma responses have context and meet them with empathy. Learning more about the histories of other people helps us to be more trauma informed and empathetic.

Looks like: Recognizing that a behaviour feels inappropriate, but acknowledging that there are experiences in that person’s life you are not aware of or have not experienced, and choosing to react with empathy and care, instead of judgement.

Looks like: Holding space for people and supporting them in finding their way back to a sense of safety. This involves staying regulated and calm so as not to let the person’s sense of unsafety grow.

Create an environment that supports a sense of safety. This varies depending on the person and context, but can include privacy, not being alone, being in grounding place (i.e. by water), eliminating noise, symbols of safety (i.e. Indigenous artwork), etc.

Looks like: “I’m finding it kind of loud in here, would you prefer to talk outside?”

Looks like: Putting up Indigenous artwork in meeting spaces.

Practice empathy not sympathy. Sympathy involves feeling pity and places you above the other person. To be trauma-informed and support people's empowerment, we practice empathy by working to stand alongside and feel **with** people from our own experiences.

Looks like: A person shares that they have had a discriminatory experience accessing a service previously and you say "That sounds difficult. It's devastating when someone who does not value or respect our humanity stands between us and a service we need. Is there any way I can support you?".

Continue learning how to support Indigenous empowerment in how you communicate. This includes restoring dignity to Indigenous nations and people by learning how to pronounce traditional names, territories, etc. It also means adapting how we communicate and the terms we use as we continue to build relationships with individuals and communities.

Support each other in our learning.

- a. Be mindful of the overburdening of this work on Indigenous people by supporting organizational cultures of trauma and equity informed communication. Non-Indigenous people can honour the work Indigenous people have done in educating them by sharing their learning with others.
- b. For non-Indigenous people, hold space for each other to learn and center healing and growth, not shame. This is a more effective approach to support cultural safety and do the work of reconciliation.

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