

"Reconciliation is about forging and maintaining respectful relationships. There are no shortcuts."

-Justice Murray Sinclair



# TOWARDS A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Toolkit for Reconciliation/Decolonization of Social Work  
Practice at the Individual, Workplace, and Community Level



BC ASSOCIATION *of*  
SOCIAL WORKERS

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Prepared by the Indigenous Working Group of the  
British Columbia Association of Social Workers

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## INTRODUCTION

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In late 2015, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, the Executive Summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) final report, was released. In response, the Canadian Association of Social Workers pledged to move Canada forward from recognition of truth, to reconciliation, acknowledging this with the statement: "the profession of social work recognizes the very specific role and responsibility it has in supporting the implementation of the TRC recommendations with emphasis on those specific to Child Welfare." The BC Association of Social Workers (BCASW) also announced its support for the 94 Calls to Action in the report, and it is now up to us to take meaningful action as the agents of change.

As part of our commitment to social justice, we all have a responsibility to be part of the reconciliation process. This will not be an easy process, nor will it happen overnight. It will require our commitment and active participation over the coming years to move forward towards a respectful and collaborative relationship with First Nations communities. BCASW is committed to supporting its members through this process, and providing tools and resources to help social workers take concrete steps towards reconciliation.

This toolkit was produced to encourage and facilitate reflexivity and dialogue about reconciliation within the social work profession. We are hoping that each of you will participate in a reconciliation activity in quiet reflection or group dialogue, regardless of size, in a way that is most meaningful to you and your community. We are hoping that you, our members, can spread the word and help organize reconciliation circles in your community involving local social workers and stakeholders. The focus will be on respectful dialogue with colleagues and First Nations communities exploring pathways to restoring our relationships and new ways of working together.

*About the cover image: The spindle whorl entitled Balance and designed for BCASW depicts "four people participating in a collection, all contributing to the centre, to create balance in the community." Artist Qwul'thilum, Dylan Thomas is from the Lyackson First Nation, traditionally from Valdes Island, on BC's northwest coast.*

## OBJECTIVES OF THIS TOOLKIT

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- ❖ Encourage meaningful and purposeful dialogues about Truth and Reconciliation in the profession of social work.
- ❖ Raise individual, professional, and community awareness regarding the history and the future of the First Nations peoples in Canada by connecting to individual history, social location, and relationship through reflexivity.
- ❖ Recognize the impacts of colonization including the residential school system, *60s Scoop*, discriminatory laws and policies and the banning of culture, language and ceremonies.
- ❖ Draw attention to the effects of globalization and the universalization of social work theories and practices, which often fail to embrace and recognize Indigenous and non-Western worldviews, knowledge, and practice.
- ❖ Work towards respectful and meaningful relationships with both non-Indigenous and Indigenous people.
- ❖ Promote the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations to collectively advocate for systemic change at local, community, and societal levels.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

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This toolkit was designed to be a flexible tool to meet individual needs. You can choose to work through the whole document, or choose parts of the toolkit that work for your particular context. Further, this document can be used both individually as a self-reflective and professional development exercise, and with groups to assist in engaging others in dialogue. There is a suggested reading list at the end to help enhance your learning and engagement.

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## SECTION 1: SELF REFLECTION

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Social justice work involves recognizing and actively opposing the interlocking and intersecting relations of power that pervade our society. The first step in this work is to explore the historical context of our profession, our own social location, and assumptions, in relation to Indigenous communities and worldviews. We also encourage your engagement with Indigenous worldviews and perspectives towards the goal to decolonizing and reconciling your social work practice.

The following are some questions to help you enhance personal reflexivity which then assist you in your reconciliation journey.

### SELF-LOCATION

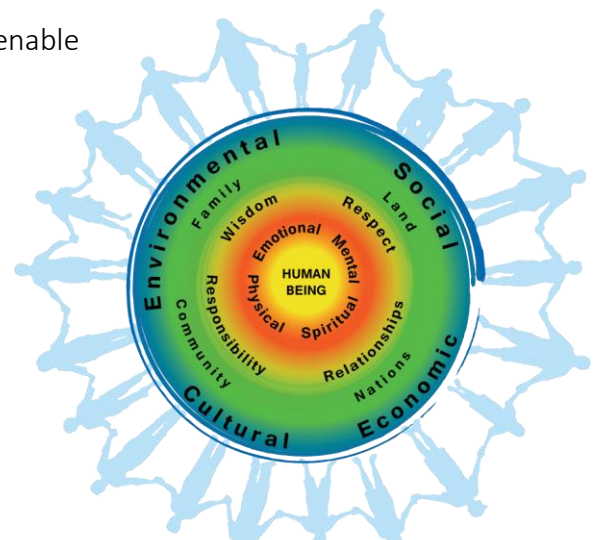
- What is your personal and family history that brought you to this land?
- Are you aware of the history of the land you live and work on? What sources have you drawn on for this information?
- Were your family or ancestors impacted by colonization, oppression, structural violence, or war?
- What is your understanding of the impacts of colonial violence against Indigenous communities?
- What is your understanding of the role played by the social work profession in colonization and residential schools?
- What does reconciliation mean to you? What does reconciliation look like to you?

### PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

- What guides your own practice framework? What traditional teachings, systems of knowledge, or worldviews, inform your own philosophy of practice?
- Have you had the opportunity to learn Indigenous teachings? Are you able to practice these teachings in your profession? Why or why not?
- What is the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of your personal and professional community?
- What are some things you are doing, or can do in future, to decolonize your personal practice?

## UNDERSTANDING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

- Most First Nations communities view health and wellness from a holistic perspective. When physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellness are in balance, an individual is in harmony with the world around them. There is also a strong emphasis on the interconnectedness between the First Nations people with each other and with Mother Earth.
- Many First Nations communities are taking the lead in healing the grief and loss in their communities. When working with First Nations communities, it is important to listen to their vision, priorities and needs, and respect their self-determination.
- In many communities, Elders play a significant role in passing on the knowledge about culture and traditional healing methods. When considering programs for First Nations clients, it is helpful to consult an elder to ensure culturally safe practices.
- While there are some similarities across First Nations cultures, each culture has unique belief systems, languages, cultural practices, and protocols. Some First Nations people do not practice traditional ways, and some practice other faiths and alternative healing modalities.
- Many First Nations families, particularly in rural settings, do not have access to funding, community supports, transportation, nutrition, and other basic needs that are often required to implement a care plan.
- In health settings, it is important to respect and incorporate traditional healing practices to make it readily available and more accessible to community members. The following are some practices identified as being helpful:
  - Creating space for traditional practice within health settings such as a sacred gathering/prayer space and a sweat lodge.
  - Ensure fire safety measures are in place to enable smudging and other practices that involve smoke.
  - Linking clients with appropriate elders or healers.
  - Making available frequently requested traditional medicine items such as the medicine wheel, cedar bark, sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco. Take direction from the patient or elder/healer on how to use this items appropriately.
  - Opening and closing prayers at events.



First Nations Health Authority [www.fnha.ca](http://www.fnha.ca)

## PRACTICING CULTURAL SAFETY

Below are some practical ways to provide culturally safe care:

### CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

- Practice sensitivity and attunement to the client's comfort level with eye contact, touch, personal space, body language, and pace of conversation.
- In some First Nations cultures eye contact, touching, and certain body languages are considered rude.
- Speaking about illness may also be considered taboo in some cultures.
- There may be a variety of interpretations of what causes illness, what constitutes treatment, and who may be considered "next of kin."
- Historical and intergenerational trauma may result in certain triggers and feelings of fear, mistrust, anger, shame, loneliness, and abandonment. In many cases it will take time, patience, authenticity, humbleness, and a willingness to learn and honor cultural protocols to develop a relationship of trust.

### COMMUNICATION

- Speak slowly and use silence to allow space for clients to speak. It may appear that a client is listening passively, but it does not mean that they are unengaged.
- In some cultures, those who are in a lower position or less experienced are expected to listen quietly and speak last.
- It may be helpful to ask clients to tell their story instead of a formal intake or assessment. Using visual tools such as pictures may be helpful in communicating important information to a client or their family.

### AUTONOMY

- First Nations clients may feel that they do not have control over their care or may feel uncomfortable questioning authority. It is important to include the client and family in all aspects of care, decision-making, and education. As much as possible, present all options available, hold space for them to deliberate the pros and cons of each option, and respect their final decision.
- Get to know the First Nations-specific resources in your area and encourage and validate your client's effort to access these resources.
- Offer clients the choice of having a traditional healing practice or ceremony included in their care plan. Note that each band have different protocols and practices, and some practices have gender-specific implications. If accommodation for traditional practices is not possible in your facility, take the time to discuss possible alternatives.

### AWARENESS

- Different protocols can exist for the removal and disposal of body parts, tissues, body fluids, fetuses, and placentas. Explain standard procedures and accommodate cultural preferences where possible.
- Many communities have specific customs related to death. Discuss options with the client and family where death is expected or has occurred and provide support for the family to perform cultural and spiritual rites as required.

## SECTION 2: DECOLONIZING YOUR WORKPLACE

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Today, the majority of social work theories and workplace approaches across North America are based on Western paradigms that are not relevant to Indigenous values, beliefs, culture, and rights. Decolonizing our workplace means going beyond tokenism or the mantra of “treating everyone the same,” to one where we actively acknowledge and support the self-determination of Indigenous people, including cultural, spiritual, and land connections.

We encourage you to become actively involved in changing practices at your workplace using the following questions to assist you in dialogue with your coworkers and management.

- What could reconciliation look like for your organization?
- Can you identify service gaps (specific to your organization) that still exist for First Nations clients?
- What are some examples of specific measures taken by your organization to address these inequalities?
- What role can your organization play in the community to facilitate reconciliation?
- Does your organization currently have a relationship with First Nations organizations or communities in your local area? Are they formal or informal relationships? How do both parties benefit from this relationship?
- Do your employees have a good understanding and knowledge of Indigenous histories, diversity of Indigenous cultures and the historical impact of colonization?
- Do your employees demonstrate respect for Indigenous cultures and communities?
- Does your organization have an over or under representation of Indigenous people in terms of clients and staff? If there is under-representation, what is being done to address it?
- Is the physical space welcoming for First Nations clients and community partners?
- In what ways is your organization supportive of reconciliation discussions with staff?
- How accessible are these conversations to clients and community members? How is your organization taking the discussion further than staff training?
- How can your organizations show leadership and best practice?



## SECTION 3: RECONCILIATION IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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It is well documented that colonization and cultural eradication of generations of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities have had long lasting and devastating impacts. In particular, the *Truth and Reconciliation Report* focuses on the devastating impact of assimilation policies such as the legacy of residential schools, *60s Scoop*, and damaging practices in the child welfare system.

Assimilation policies tore apart the very fabric of First Nations society disrupting families, communities, land-connection, and culture. The damage is staggering. The suicide and domestic violence rate in First Nations communities is estimated to be six times higher than the national average. Mental health, addictions, and health problems are at epidemic levels. The legacy of historical violence and discriminatory practices continues today, compounded by intergenerational trauma, cultural alienation, and services that tend to impose Western standards and practices onto Indigenous communities. Even a promising practice that is evidence based and culturally relevant may be inadequately resourced and/or lack the long-term funding commitment needed to tackle the full range of social determinants of health.

Historically, social workers and social service providers have played a significant role as the front line faces of these assimilation policies and practices, which are now understood to have caused significant harm in Indigenous communities. As a result, our profession is still viewed by many communities as agents of the government and social workers often encounter suspicion and animosity in Indigenous communities. Even social workers of Indigenous origin often experience a negative reaction in some communities. Change will take work, and it is therefore a necessary endeavour to align our actions with reconciliation, and with our professional values and ethics.

In section 1 and 2, we focused on decolonizing our personal and professional practice. In this section, we focus on collaboration and building new relationships through respectful dialogue. We invite you to host a community gathering, regardless of size, to create space for this dialogue and work towards reconciliation in your community.

Community members have first-hand knowledge and insight into local issues and needs, making their participation and feedback invaluable to the development of effective and relevant programs and services. In particular, it is integral that in reconciliation dialogues, Indigenous values and worldviews are reflected and honoured. Furthermore, strengthening dialogue and collaboration across cultures and sectors will build community capacity and collective voice.

## RECONCILIATION EVENT THEMES

Your event may focus on the following areas, depending on the context and readiness of the group:

- ❖ Statement and discussion of intent – respectful dialogue, the creation of safe space, exploring relationships, and what can be done differently
- ❖ Sharing stories
- ❖ Better understanding of community issues today, and how we might work together to address these issues
- ❖ Developing links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous service delivery and healing models
- ❖ Consensual allyship
- ❖ Discussing collective advocacy and the role social workers can play to advocate for social justice
- ❖ Developing programs relevant to the experience of Indigenous communities today
- ❖ Building on the work of Indigenous communities and agencies to unite and heal families and communities

## TIPS FOR ORGANIZING RECONCILIATION EVENTS

- ❖ Ensure that the location is culturally safe and accessible to everyone invited.
- ❖ Ensure proper acknowledgement of the territory at the start of the event.
- ❖ Where possible, invite an Elder to open the event with a blessing and invite them to give you direction and advice to ensure proper protocol is being followed. Be sure to find out how best to honour their time and contribution.
- ❖ Where possible, explore ways to incorporate Indigenous cultural practices into the event in a respectful manner, such as singing and drumming by Indigenous community members. Make sure to honour this contribution.
- ❖ Approach guests/speakers as early as possible, and ensure that all aspects of the event including honorariums are clearly communicated in writing.
- ❖ Arrange for food and drinks. Sharing food is an essential part of the event.
- ❖ Where possible, invite participants across sectors and cultures (e.g. multicultural organizations, Indigenous organizations, faith based organizations, the justice system, restorative justice groups, Ministry of Children and Family Development, First Nations Court workers, social service workers, counsellors, health care professional, women's organizations, child and family services etc.)
- ❖ This discussion may be triggering to some participants, so make sure that supports and opportunities for debriefing are available on-site.
- ❖ Consider funding costs to cover transportation for guest speakers if required.

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## HELPFUL WEBSITES

- Aboriginal Healing Foundation [ahf.ca](http://ahf.ca)
- Aboriginal Health (University of Ottawa) [www.med.uottawa.ca/sim/aboriginal\\_health\\_e.html](http://www.med.uottawa.ca/sim/aboriginal_health_e.html)
- Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Social Work (University of Manitoba) [umanitoba.ca/faculties/social\\_work/research/crciksw/765.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/social_work/research/crciksw/765.html)
- First Nations Health Authority [fnha.ca/what-we-do/traditional-healing](http://fnha.ca/what-we-do/traditional-healing)
- First Nations University of Canada [fnuniv.ca](http://fnuniv.ca)
- Indian Residential School Survivors Society [irsss.ca](http://irsss.ca)
- Indian Residential Schools and Reconciliation Resources [fnesc.ca/irsr/](http://fnesc.ca/irsr/)
- Indigenous Foundations: An information resource on key topics relating to the histories, politics, and cultures of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (University of British Columbia) [indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca](http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca)
- Indigenous Nationhood Website [nonstatusindian.com](http://nonstatusindian.com)
- Indspire: An Indigenous-led registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people [indspire.ca](http://indspire.ca)
- Legacy of Hope Foundation [legacyofhope.ca](http://legacyofhope.ca)
- Project of Heart [projectoftheheart.ca](http://projectoftheheart.ca)
- Reconciliation Canada [reconciliationcanada.ca](http://reconciliationcanada.ca)
- The Guide to Aboriginal Organizations and Services in British Columbia [www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/first-nations/guide\\_aboriginal\\_services\\_organizations.pdf](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/first-nations/guide_aboriginal_services_organizations.pdf)
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