

Learning from the Kaswenta: Contemporary Social Work, Indigenous Sovereignty and the Therapeutic Alliance



Presented by Emily Claire Blackmoon, MSW, RSW

Aanii!
Boozhoo
(Hello!!)

Biindigaan!!
(Welcome! Come in!)

Starting at the Centre of the Drum



- Settler and Indigenous – British, French and Algonquin (Descended of Weskarini First Nation, Ottawa Valley).
- Registered with the OCSWSSW in 2014.
- Graduated from Ryerson University (BSW) in 2007, MSW in 2016.
- Graduated from the Gestalt Institute of Toronto in 2014.
- Worked as an Individual, Child and Family Counsellor, as well as Group Facilitator and Case Manager, for Native Child and Family Services of Toronto from 2007 to 2016.
- Currently one of two Indigenous Social Workers for the Urban Indigenous Education Centre at the Toronto District School Board, specializing in providing training for staff on the intersections of Indigeneity, mental health and trauma. We also work one-on-one with any self-identified First Nations, Métis or Inuit child in the TDSB.
- Therapist in private practice since 2014, specializing in relational, holistic, intergenerational and experiential psychotherapy.

Acknowledging my Elders and Teachers

Elders

Dr. Joanne Dellaire
Shirley Gillis-Kendall
Marjory Noganosh
Wanda Whitebird
Pauline Shirt

Teachers

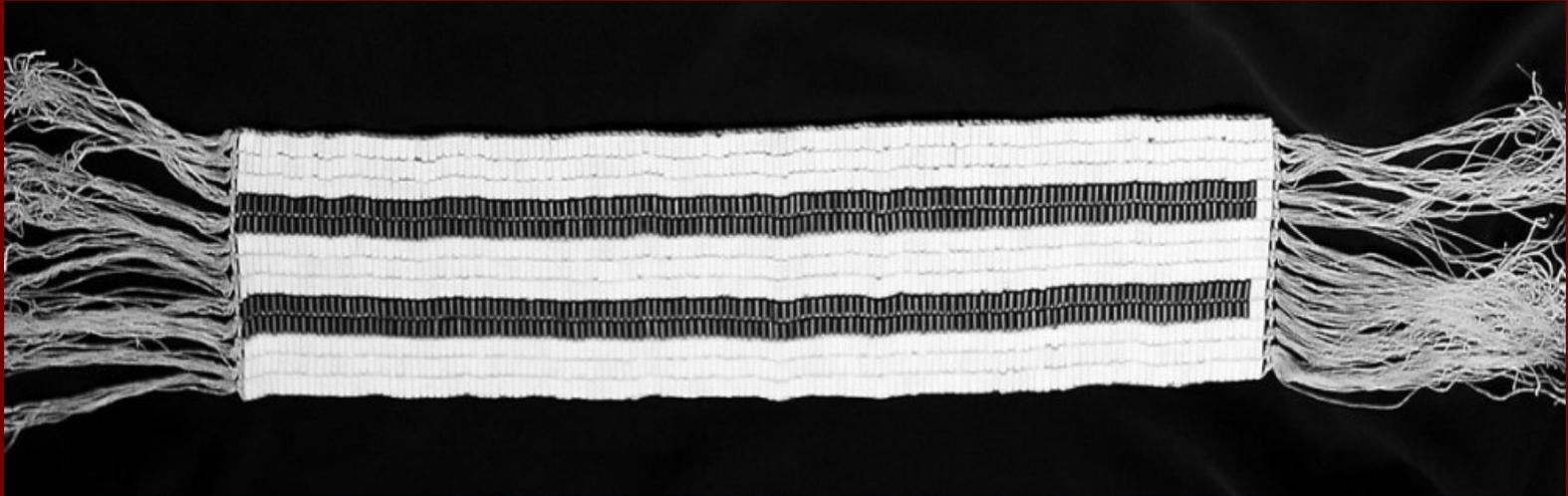
Dr. Cyndy Baskin, Ryerson
University

Dr. Suzanne Stewart,
University of Toronto

Sources

- “Strong Helpers’ Teachings: The Value of Indigenous Knowledges in the Helping Professions” by Dr. Cyndy Baskin, 2011
- “Indigenous Cultures and Mental Health Counselling: Four Directions for Integration With Counseling Psychology”. Edited by Dr. Suzanne Stewart, Roy Moodley and Ashley Hyatt, 2017.
- “Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies” by Renee Linklater, 2014
- “Aboriginal Narrative Practice: Barbara Wingard, Carolynanha Johnson and Tileah Drahm-Butler, 2010.

Learning From the Kaswenta: The Two-Row Wampum Treaty



The Kaswenta, or Two Row Wampum Belt

- **The Two Row Wampum Treaty, also known as *Guswenta, the Kaswentha,* or the Tawagonshi Treaty, is a mutual treaty agreement, made in 1613 between representatives of the Five Nations of the Iroquois (*Haudenosaunee*) and representatives of the Dutch government in what is now upstate New York.**

- **It is one of the oldest treaty relationships between the Onkwehonweh original people and European settlers.**

- **The belt depicts the *kaswenta* (relationship) in visual form via a long beaded belt of white wampum (shell) with two parallel lines of purple wampum along its length – the lines symbolizing a separate-but-equal relationship between two entities based on mutual benefit and mutual respect for each party's inherent freedom of movement – neither side may attempt to "steer" the vessel of the other as it travels along its own path of self-determination.**

- **The Two Row Wampum continues to play a role in defining the relationship between citizens of New York State and Haudenosaunee residents of the region.**

What is a Wampum Belt?

- Wampum belts are visual memory keepers that help record history, finalize agreements and communicate ideas. Wampum belts would be beaded with patterns represent a person, nation, event, date, invitation, shared values and understandings/agreements between two or more parties.
- Wampum belts were made and used by the Indigenous People of the Eastern Woodlands (Both Anishnaabe/Algonquin-speaking nations and Haudenosaunee/Iroquoian-speaking nations).
- Wampum belts were considered legal agreements, binding contracts and treaty documents, as well as currency.
- Wampum belts would be painstakingly made by hand using thousands of tube-like beads made from shell.

Strong Haudenosaunee Oral Tradition Continues to Inform The Spiritual, Cultural and Political Meaning of the Treaty.

“You say that you are our Father and I am your Son. We say 'We will not be like Father and Son, but like Brothers.' This wampum belt confirms our words. Neither of us will make compulsory laws or interfere in the internal affairs of the other. Neither of us will try to steer the other's vessel.” ~ Haudenosaunee oral tradition, as recorded by James Wilson, “The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America, 2007.

The spirit of the Kaswenta is an affirmation of relationship: mutual but separate, founded in respect and self-determination.

What can this teach us about modern-day social work practices in working with Indigenous families and communities?

If you know your
history,
then you will know
where you're
coming from.

-Bob Marley, "Buffalo Soldier"



Before we can discuss how social workers and social service workers can seek to create positive relationships and allyship with Indigenous communities, we must be able to acknowledge the complicity of settler Canadian social workers in the perpetuation of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada.

A Dark History Canadian Social Work, Genocide and Colonization



Silence and Complicity: The Residential School System. 1884 to 1996.

- The Residential School System was a network of boarding schools, where Indigenous children were forcibly made to attend, according to government law as stipulated in the Indian Act. Schools were funded by the Canadian government's Department of Indian Affairs and administered by Christian churches. The school system was created for the purpose of removing Indigenous children from the influence of their own culture and assimilating them into the dominant Canadian, Euro-Christian culture. Over the course of the system's more than hundred-year existence, approximately around 150,000 were placed in residential schools nationally, though historical records were often incomplete or inaccurate. The number of school-related deaths remains unknown due to an incomplete historical record, though estimates range from 3,200 upwards of 6,000.
- Indigenous children were forbidden to have contact with their parents or sibling of the opposite sex; they were verbally, physically and sexually assaulted, neglected and malnourished. Children routinely died of contagion from communicable disease, malnutrition, physical assault, or exposure from running away.
- As modern Canadian social workers begin to rise as practitioners of mental health, advocacy and community organization in the 1890s, there is deafening complicity, neglect and silence regarding the on-going human atrocities against Indigenous peoples in Residential Schools.
- Social Work as meant to solely serve and benefit the well-being of white settlers of European descent.

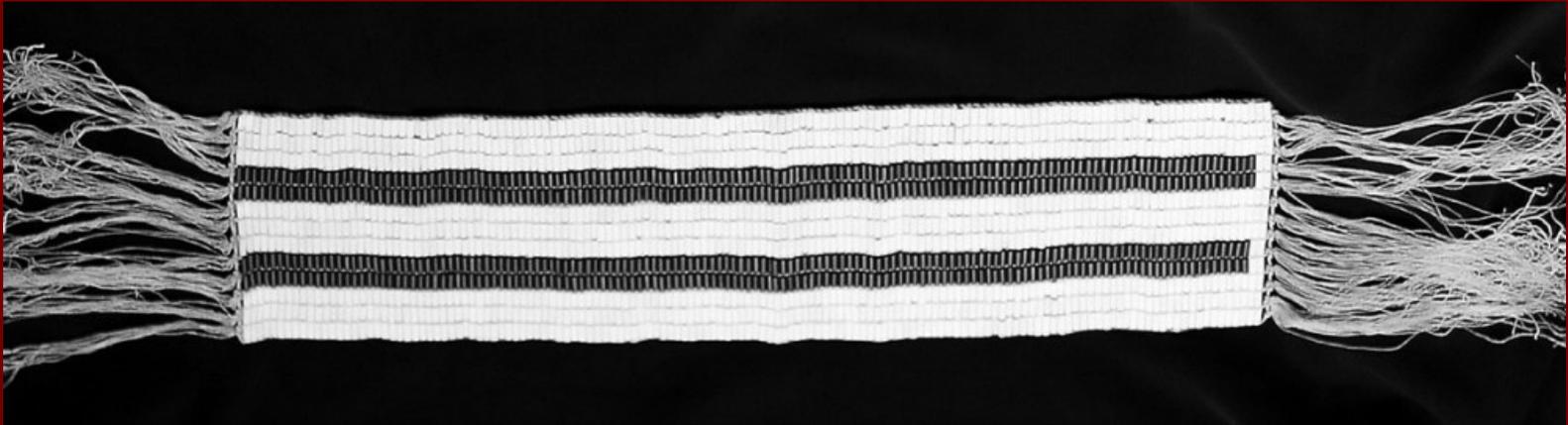
The 60s Scoop

- At the start of the 1950s, the Canadian government shifted their policy from placing Indigenous children in Residential Schools, to placing them to live permanently with white families and attend public education institutions, with little or no justification and often no contact with birth families and communities. Adoptive homes would often be out of province, and even to places like the United States and Europe. This practice, which went on from the 1950s to the 1980s, became known as the “60s scoop”.
- As Canadian social workers are organizing and mobilizing in social movements and advocacy, they are also forcibly removing Indigenous children by the thousands from their families.
- Racism and lack of cultural competency and understanding lead to social workers (specifically child welfare workers) removing children and placing them with families.

The Millennium Scoop and the Echos of Colonial Violence

- The Millennium Scoop refers to the current status of Indigenous children in care. According to statistics, there are more than double the number of First Nation children in care now, than there were at the highest point of the 60's Scoop. There is no question that Native children dominate the child welfare system, as Native children make up only 7% of the total population, however they are represented in nearly 40% of all children in care. The major factor is that First Nation children are still being separated from their families, their cultures, due to the adoption and child welfare process.
- Cultural competency training for social workers and community partnerships with Indigenous leaders are not always mandatory or enforced when making decisions around the lives of Indigenous children.
- This leads to high levels of institutional over-representation, mental health challenges, loss of language, loss of culture, family break-down, intergenerational trauma, suicidal ideation and completion, violence (especially against women and 2-Spirit peoples), addiction, poverty, shame and social isolation.

So How Do Social Workers and Social Service Workers Get Back To This?



Indigenous Sovereignty, Social Work and the Therapeutic Alliance

Cultural Competency and Humility as Restorative Practice

- Non-Indigenous SW/SSWs must remove themselves as the “knower” of what is best for Indigenous clients and families.
- SW/SSW must know the history of colonization and genocide in Canada, and accept the historic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by social work professionals.
- The absolute need for cultural competency training, based upon the culture and history of the community practitioners are working with.
- SW/SSW must invest in making relationships with the Indigenous communities they live-in/work with.
- Focus on relational, narrative, restorative, holistic and kinship-focused approaches to care.
- Actively critique stereotypes and assumptions about Indigenous peoples.
- Go beyond the land acknowledgement: Centre and amplify Indigenous voices in community organization.
- “Nothing about us without us”.

The Healing Relationship: Supporting a Therapeutic Alliance with Indigenous Clients

- **Trust is not a given. Recognize and honour the historic mistrust between Indigenous people and care providers.**
- **Find the balance: Practitioners must both recognize the diversity of Indigenous peoples, and their unique life circumstances, while also being well-informed about the historic and current realities for many Indigenous peoples in Canada.**
- **Support and centre holistic, spiritual and cultural understandings of wellness.**
- **Intergenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Resilience: One does not exist without the other.**
- **Go beyond what is 'evidence-based': It's the relationship that heals.**
- **Consider how the values of colonialism play into your therapeutic and social work practice, and seek to dismantle them.**
- **Language and Land: Two keys to well-being**

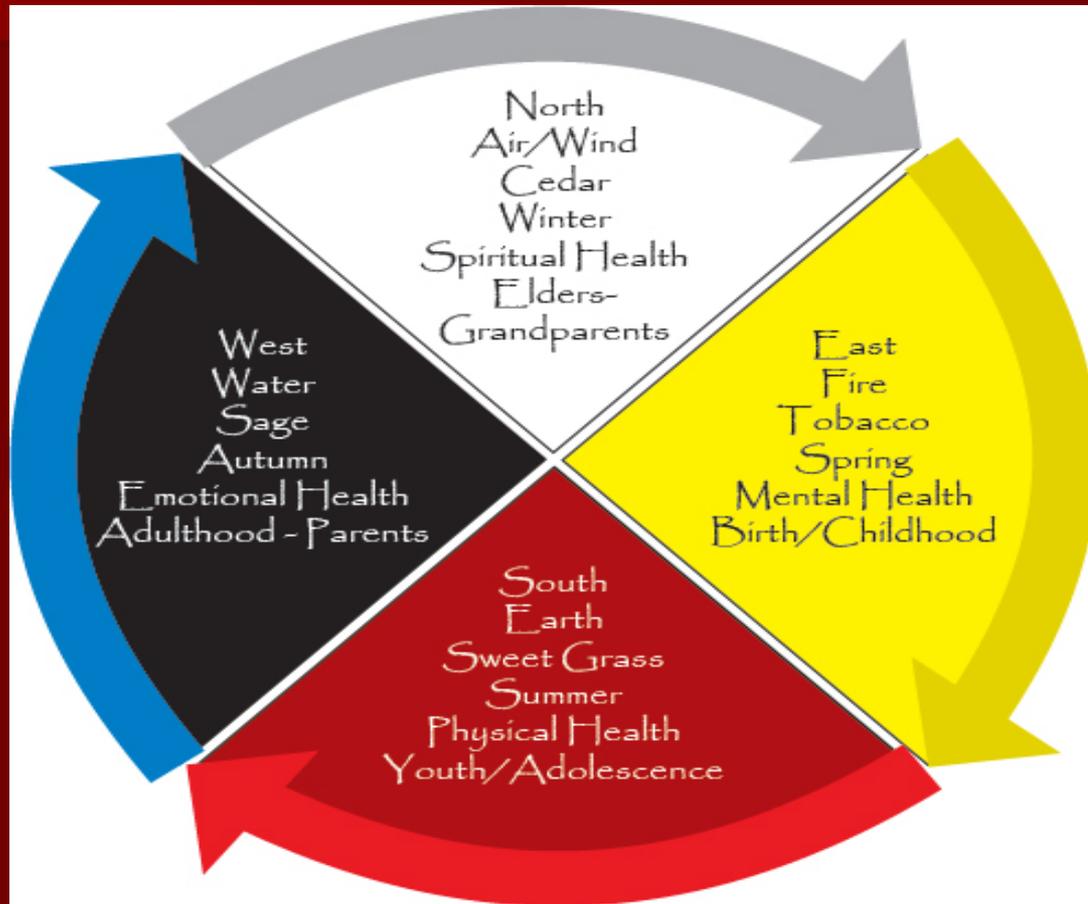
Social Work and the Role of Ogichidaa

- **Ogichidaa is an Anishnaabe word that means both “helper” and “warrior”.**
- **In her 2011 book “Strong Helper’s Teachings”, Dr. Cyndy Baskin identifies that social workers must strive to recognize that in order to help those who experience marginalization, we must also be willing to fight against the system that perpetuates the harm.**
- **Social Work not as job, but as vocation: “Warriors have a mission that originates from their agreement with the Creator. Warriors prepare themselves to complete their mission through ceremonies and their own on-going healing as it is understood that they will face challenges and adversities.” (Baskin, 2011).**
- **Indigenous social worker Sharon Big Plume identifies that both social workers and warriors are “doers”: they speak up for what is not right with society, and have a vested interest in strengthening people so communities can survive, flourish and thrive. (Big Plume, 2008).**
- **Ogichidaa for Self-Determination: Centering the truths/needs/visions of Indigenous clients and communities.**

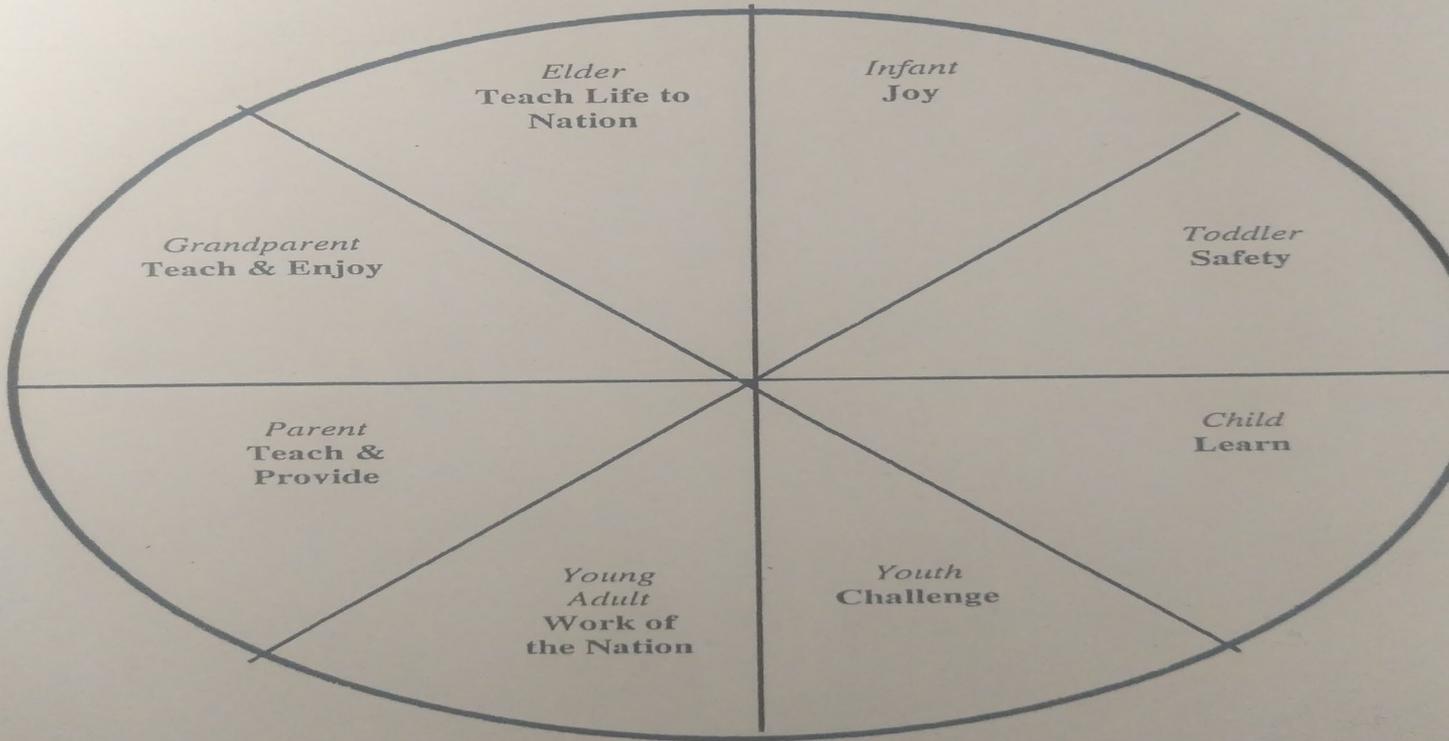
Indigenous cultures already hold the framework to community, family and individual wellness.

Consider the following examples....

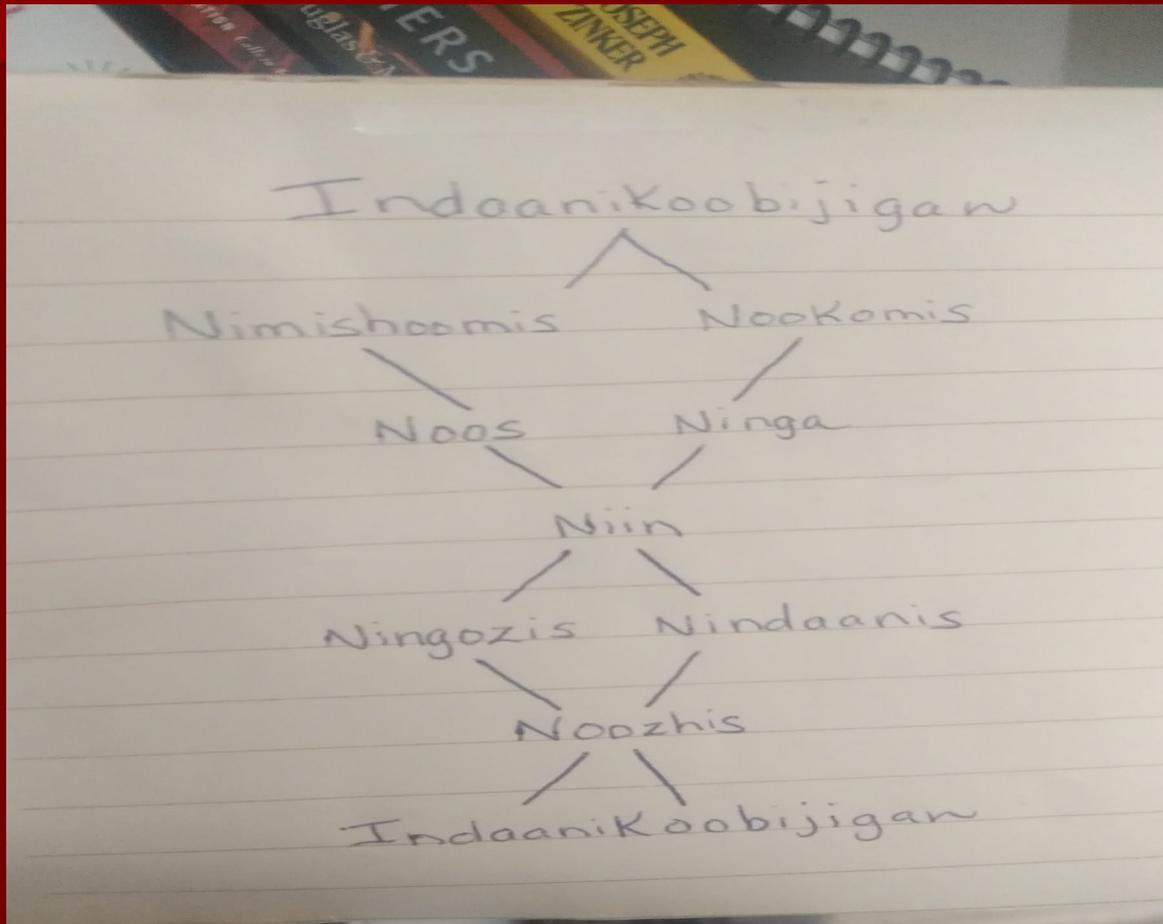
The Medicine Wheel



Life Cycle Responsibility



Seven Generations (teachings by James Vukelich, Anishnaabe)



In Conclusion: Go Forward In Your Own Canoe

- The Kaswenta serves as a reminder to Social Workers that being in relationship with Indigenous peoples is about respect, allyship, knowledge, and being a warrior for self-determination and healing.
- Nation to Nation: Non-Indigenous Social Workers must be able to reconcile with their own social location within Canada and Canada's history, and seek to create a respectful, humble and informed relationships between themselves and Indigenous communities.
- Process-oriented, critically informed, lateral, narrative-based, restorative, land-based and holistic approaches to mental health and wellness respect traditional Indigenous values on well-being.
- The relationship is everything.

Miigwetch!!

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