Being Two Spirit



Sadé Heart of the Hawk Ali, Mi'kmaq First Nation, NESTS (New England States Two Spirits)

The lenses through which I look

- Citizen of the Mi'kmaq First Nation, Nova Scotia, CA
- Two Spirit Elder, Pipe Carrier and Medicine Keeper beginning my 76th rotation around Grandfather Sun in November
- First generation survivor of the residential schools
- Mother, grandmother, great grandmother (3 times so far)
- Person in long term recovery (52 years)
- Person in long term recovery from a severe mental health challenge
- Multiple suicide attempt survivor
- In the BH field for over 52 years





INDIGENOUS HISTORY IS THE REAL HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY...

Many things contributed to the discrimination faced by Two Spirit people today, but none more powerful than the Residential/Boarding School era...

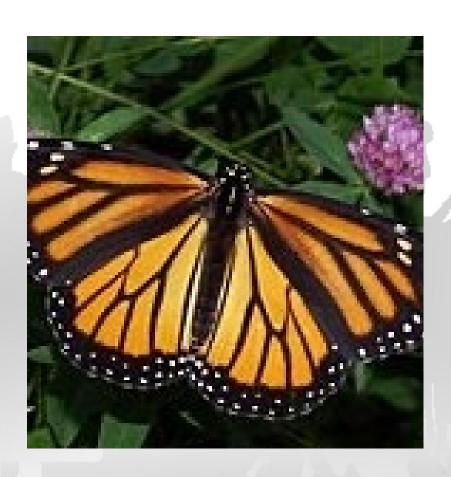
THE CARLISLE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL

This school was the model for a nation-wide system of boarding schools intended to assimilate American Indians into mainstream culture. Over 10,000 indigenous children attended the school between 1879 and 1918. Despite idealistic beginnings, the school left a mixed and lasting legacy, creating opportunity for some students and conflicted identities for others. In this cemetery are 186 graves of students who died while at Carlisle.

2003 ®



Almost every Tribe had a name for us...

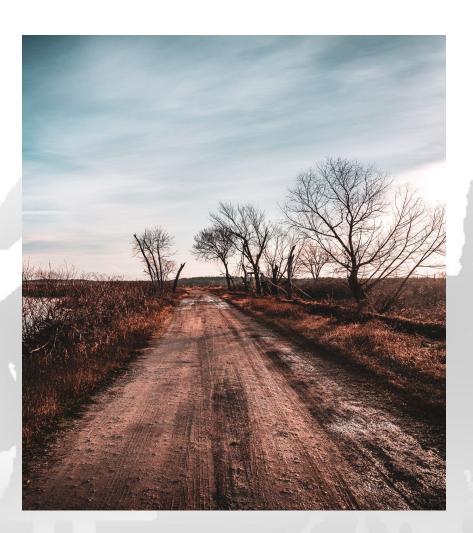


And those names usually had something to do with transformation or change

What is Two Spirit?



Suicide lives at this intersection



Thwarted belongingness

(I don't belong here or anywhere)

Feelings of being a burden on others

(I'm an embarrassment to my family and my Nation)

Lack of fear of dying

(I just need the pain to end)

Dr. Thomas Joiner – Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

Dr. Thomas lainer Internersenal Theory

Fiction

- Many Two Spirit (and LGBT Natives) youth who end their lives have gender dysphoria or are experiencing difficulty with their sexual orientation
- Two Spirit people are all Trans-identified, or gender queer
- Competent health care is widely available for Two Spirit and LGBT Natives
- The residential/boarding school era which removed our children from their Tribes, Villages, homelands, kinship, and families didn't impact Two Spirit children any more than it did other Indigenous children

Fact

- Many Two Spirit (and LGBT Native) youth who end their own lives do so because of bullying, lack of support from their Nations and their families, and because they feel helpless and unsafe
- Two Spirit people are Trans-identified, gender variant, gender nonconforming, asexual, same-gender loving, cis gender, ALL of those, or NONE of those!
- Rarely is competent health care available to Two Spirit people or LGBT Natives in general
- The residential/boarding school era was doubly hard on those Two Spirit babies who were punished severely when they were identified (usually through clothing) and the other children were taught to taunt and torture them with laughter and harsh words

Healing Spirits



What I wish my clinician knew (or even cared about) when working with me

Tips for working in culturally-affirming ways with Two Spirit people in general and youth in particular



- If and when a Two Spirit young person trusts you enough to tell you who they are, honour and believe them
- Be extremely attentive to pronouns, even if presentation may seem to you to indicate something contrary to how the person identifies themselves
- It's not up to us to identify the person coming for services...they are who they say they are
- Do not ask "What are your preferred pronouns?" Instead, always ask "What are your pronouns?" Using the word "preferred" minimizes their reality and assumes choice

And...

- If you make a mistake, apologize, slow down, and be more deliberate in the future
- Respectfully ask for assistance from others with identifying Two Spirit Elders in the Tribe. If the Tribe is less Traditional in their ways, do an internet search for the nearest Two Spirit Society or Alliance and ask for help
- Consult with behavioral health organizations such as <u>WeRNative</u> for advice, and materials. Pamphlets in your waiting room, and posters on your walls focusing on Two Spirit people act to indicate to them that they are welcome there and that it is a safe space

Additionally...

- Check your intake forms and other paperwork used in your services. Do you use binary gender markers? Is there room to talk about domestic partnerships rather than just the M, the S, and the D? (Kudos to the National Indian Health Board who uses *Two Spirit* on their conference registration form.)
- Whether you think you work with Two Spirit people or not, you probably do. Not all of us have completed our Coming In process
- With that in mind, there are many fine YouTube videos and other information about the sacredness of Two Spirit people and how we were once honoured in our Tribes, Villages and communities. Learn a little about us...but make sure what you watch or read comes from us and not someone studying us

And finally...

- Check your assessments and screening tools for language that could be re-traumatising to any Indigenous person
- Once we've returned to a more normal way of living, consider having a Two Spirit Talking Circle with Two Spirit Elders and allies and let the community know that it is happening

But most of all

- Be aware of your own biases
- The re-traumatisation of people who come for services is real
- If you have difficulty moving beyond your own biases, get supervision and remove yourself from working with Two Spirit individuals
- Remember that it's not about you...it's about them

Our Elders say.....

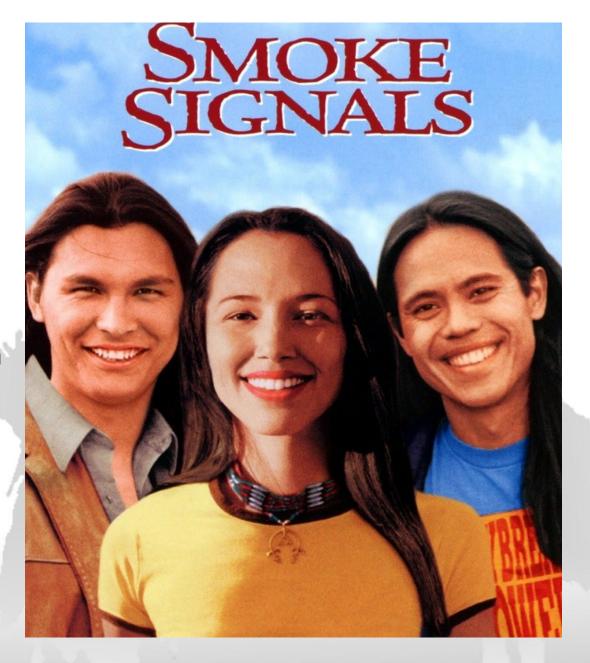
Our Culture is our Cure

TWO SPIRIT PEOPLE ARE BUSY RE-CREATING THE ROLES HELD TRADITIONALLY BY OUR TWO SPIRIT ANCESTORS

While we might not all be people of medicine in the narrow sense of the definition, medicine is more than tobacco, sage, sweetgrass, cedar and corn pollen.

Medicine is also western and Traditional healing and healers, psychology, law, the arts, counseling, suicide prevention, and any other profession that lifts our People up...

We are Leaders of our Nations, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, and Tribal court judges. We run for presidency of the largest Tribal Nation on this side of Turtle Island. We star in movies, on and off Broadway, and on television. We write plays, music and novels.









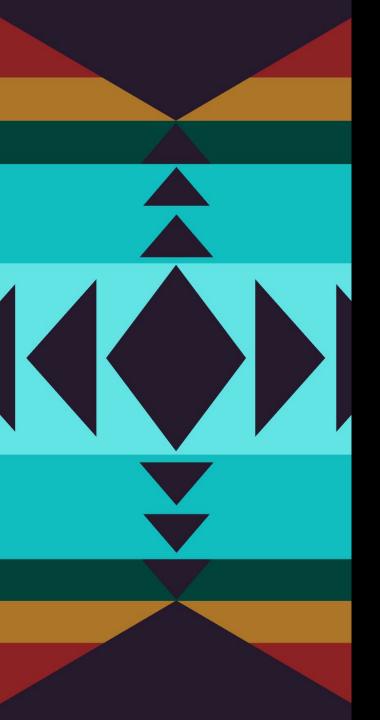
...and we even win Amazing Race Canada

Best and Promising Practices for the Implementation of Zero Suicide in Indian Country



Resources

- Zero Suicide Toolkit for Indian Country
- Two Spirit People Guide
- What is Two Spirit?
- What is Two Spirit (Youth)
- Two Spirit Documentary



Wela'lioq!

(Thank you everyone)

sali@edc.org