



**Native Women's
Association of Canada**



**L'Association des
femmes autochtones
du Canada**

**Trauma Informed and Culturally
Appropriate Approaches in the
Workplace**

**A Native Women's Association of
Canada's Initiative**

By Elder Roseann Martin

1 Nicholas St, 7th Floor
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7
Tel: (613) 722-3033
Fax: (613) 722-7687
Toll-free: 1-800-461-4043
reception@nwac.ca



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Backgrounder	2
Definitions	3
Trauma Informed Approach	3
Lateral Violence	3
How does Trauma Present Itself in the Workplace?	4
Culturally Appropriate Approaches	4
Step 1 - Selecting an Elder	4
Step 2 - Elder Assessment	5
Step 3 - Emotional Identification	6
Step 4 - Empowering Individuals	6
Workplace Example 1 - Gossiping	7
Workplace Example 2 - Group Conflict	7
Workplace Triggers	8
Internal Triggers	8
External Triggers	8
Employer Relations	9
About the Author	10



Background

Most First Nations, Métis and Inuit people who have chronic health conditions and attended residential schools report their health and well-being was negatively affected by their residential school experiences. Intergenerational trauma is also a result of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, causing higher rates than the non-Indigenous population of suicide, mental health and addictions.

The separation of children from their families and abuse causes feelings of disconnection, lack of belonging and a lack of trust leading to heightened stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Within Indigenous organizations, it is imperative employers and employees are fully informed and recognize the present day affects of the traumas Indigenous people face. They must use a trauma informed and culturally appropriate approach to their human resources within the workplace.



Definitions

Trauma Informed Approach

A trauma informed approach in an Indigenous context must take a culturally appropriate approach. This means knowing, understanding, acknowledging and validating that a person in the workplace has suffered trauma from their lived experiences, including intergenerational trauma. People who suffer from trauma struggle with everyday workplace situations, and require a trauma informed approach to address their issues in order to provide a healthy environment for all staff. The workplace must provide support to empower and deal with the emotions they are experiencing.

Lateral Violence

This occurs when oppressed groups use emotional or psychological attack(s) on other group members. This is a result of oppression, when it is easier to fight each other than the oppressor. Examples of lateral violence include bullying, gossiping, harassment, exclusion, intimidation and physical violence.



How does Trauma Present Itself in the Workplace?

People with lived experiences or intergenerational trauma can experience hypersensitivity, anxiety, depression and anger manifesting into negative energy. This negative energy can present itself in many different forms. This includes deflection, manipulation, retaliation and ostracism.

Hypersensitivity, anxiety, depression and anger can cause alternative realities, skewing individual's perception. When this occurs, the individual must seek Elder support and guidance to manage the situation and their emotions.

Culturally Appropriate Approaches

Step 1 - Selecting an Elder

Workplaces with Indigenous employees should have an Elder available. Hiring an Elder is paramount to ensure effective implementation of a culturally appropriate trauma informed workplace. Elders provide spiritual and emotional support and bring knowledge of the land, culture, background and ceremonies to the workplace. The Elder must be aware of the different Indigenous cultures to navigate situations respectfully and meaningfully. They must also know the history of intergenerational trauma and the present day impacts.



Step 2 - Elder Assessment

The Elder must make themselves available in a reasonable amount of time once a workplace matter is brought to their attention.

First, the Elder must calm down the individual to ground them and release the emotion that is built up. This can include smudging to cleanse the negativity the individual is feeling at the moment and to give the individual strength and courage to talk about their emotions. Medicines, like sage, help individuals to protect themselves and should be available in all the workplaces.

It is essential to establish a sense of confidentiality. The individual must know their experience is safe with the Elder they are sharing it with. If the situation involves other employees, the Elder must first ask permission to speak to the other employee(s). If it is a medical emergency, such as an individual is a threat to themselves or others, the Elder must take steps to protect the employee(s).



Step 3 - Emotional Identification

Next, the Elder must have the individual talk through their emotions and the story. It is important to keep asking questions at this stage in order to allow the individual to identify their emotions and perspective independently.

It is important the Elder is fully informed of the individual's version of their experience and is able to assess what the individual needs at that time. At this point, the Elder is able to identify if the emotions and situation are work-based or personally-based and if external resources such as medical attention are required.

Step 4 - Empowering Individuals

The next stage is to have the individual identify possible solutions to their emotional upset or distress. Turning the discussion around so the individual explains the situation, their emotions and solutions requires people to question their perceptions. It is important to ask if they have done anything to address the situation and if not, why?

Through taking responsibility on how the individual helped themselves, the Elder is empowering individuals to navigate negative emotions and to identify personal solutions. The Elder must be open, honest and direct. Direct language alleviates misinterpretation, providing clarity to the situation.



Workplace Example 1 - Gossiping

An everyday example present in all workplaces is gossiping. This is a form of lateral violence and bullying. If an employee overhears coworkers gossiping about them, it can trigger emotional responses. In some cases, the negative, emotional reaction the individual experiences may be amplified due to trauma they've experienced. The situation must be immediately addressed by the Elder through the trauma informed and culturally appropriate approaches.

Workplace Example 2 - Group Conflict

If the situation is a multi-party conflict, the Elder must ask for an intervention to gain perspective from the other side or sides of the story. The Elder may speak with both employees separately. If both parties are willing, the Elder can have a mediation where the two individuals speak to each other for clarity. In the end, they often resolve their differences through a reconciliation. This requires a commitment from each party. It should be based on promises and values showing each side's commitment to resolve the conflict and move forward in a positive sphere.

If the conflict cannot be resolved, the Elder must bring the situation to the employer to give distance to the employees in conflict to make room for healing. This could involve moving parties in the office to different workspaces.



Workplace Triggers

Internal Triggers

Many employees deal with difficult subject matter in their day-to-day work. This can trigger negative emotions due to trauma, lived experiences or intergenerational trauma. The Elder can use the trauma informed method to calm the individual down and navigate their emotions. This can identify triggers, helping individuals manage their emotions. In some cases, it is crucial to respect some individuals cannot work on certain subjects or may need a break from the subject matter to restore their positive energy.

External Triggers

There are triggers that are outside the control of the employer, but must be recognized within the workplace. The external triggers include unstable project funding, colonial structures imposed by the Government, unrealistic timelines to respond to government requests and culturally inappropriate and insensitive stories reported in the media. Employers must recognize the adverse impact of external triggers and provide benefits reflecting the need for time off for mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.



Employer Relations

Employers must consult Elders regularly to ensure cultural appropriateness in the work environment. Indigenous organizations are navigating within colonial structures so it is essential for the Elder to create a work environment with cultural infusion. This could include smudging, opening and closing prayers, pipe ceremonies, moccasin making, beading, drumming and sharing Indigenous teachings. Promoting cultural harmony and balance within the organization releases emotions through ceremony to build strength and resiliency. These are examples of non-threatening counselling techniques. People start opening up, reflecting with one another and sharing their experiences in a healthy, safe environment.

Additionally, all staff must be educated how to appropriately respond, handle and navigate in an Indigenous context. This must be part of the comprehensive onboarding process with the HR team.



About the Author

Roseann Martin
NWAC's Elder Advisor

Roseann Martin is a Residential School survivor and a Mi'gmaq Grandmother who has travelled all over Canada, is a pipe carrier, drum keeper, water protector and likes to share her teachings.

Born in Listuguj Quebec on September 2, 1952, her parents are Howard Metallic and Rebecca Wysote, both of Mi'gmaq ancestry. She is the eldest of 14 siblings. At the age of five she was sent to the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School where she stayed for 3½ years. Following her return to her community, she was once again sent away to the Gaspé coast for an additional eight years. In total, she spent most of her childhood away from her community, family and friends. Her journey has seen enough trauma and anger along with multiple addictions that she has overcome.

Today she has over 25 years of sobriety and healing to share her story for future generations to begin the healing process. Some of her hobbies include various types of beading and sweet grass picking. As a respected Elder within her community, she is able to conduct sweats and various other ceremonies to help the healing process for family and community. Currently she sits on the Board of Directors for the Quebec Native Women Inc. as a Regional Elder, and works for Native Women's Association of Canada as an Elder adviser.

