

# Aboriginal Lateral Violence

## what is it?

Although a worldwide occurrence, this fact sheet is about how lateral violence impacts Aboriginal people. Unlike workplace bullying, lateral violence differs in that Aboriginal people are now abusing their own people in similar ways that they have been abused. It is a cycle of abuse and its roots lie in factors such as: colonisation, oppression, intergenerational trauma and the ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination.

Through these factors Aboriginal people now become the oppressor and within the workplace or community they now direct abuse to people of their own gender, culture, sexuality, and profession. In other words, instead of directing their anger at the oppressor, these workplace or community aggressors now direct their anger at their own peers or community members.

Other terms for lateral violence also include:

- work place bullying
- horizontal hostilities/violence
- internalized colonialism
- relational aggression

## How does this affect Aboriginal people?

Lateral violence is a learned behaviour as a result of colonialism and patriarchal methods of governing and developing a society. For Aboriginal people, this has meant that due to residential schools, discrimination and racism; Aboriginal people were forced to stop practicing their traditional teachings of oneness.

As a result of this trauma, some Aboriginal people have developed social skills and work practices which do not necessarily create healthy workplaces or communities. Since many Aboriginal people work in environments which maybe predominately Aboriginal, these practices mean that Aboriginal people are now causing pain and suffering on their own people.

“Lateral violence has impacted indigenous peoples throughout the world to the point of where we harm each other in our communities and workplaces on a daily basis.”

– Rod Jeffries

“When a powerful oppressor has directed oppression against a group for a period of time, members of the oppressed group feel powerless to fight back and they eventually turn their anger against each other.”

– Jane Middleton-Moz



# behavioural signs of lateral violence

## Who does Lateral Violence?

- Boss
- Supervisor
- Co-workers
- Friends
- Family Members
- Peers
- Authority Figures
- Community Members

## What are the behaviours linked with lateral violence?

Lateral violence takes on a number of different toxic behaviours, and it is any action that is meant to discourage or make a person feel bad in the workplace. If you are the target of lateral violence the constant barrage of negative behaviours can be likened to harassment and bullying.

In its extreme form, lateral violence can be conscious, deliberate act of meanness with the overall intention to harm, hurt and induce fear in a co-worker. In other forms of lateral violence, the individual perpetrating the negative behaviour may not be aware of the meanness they are exhibiting and they may not be doing these actions intentionally.

The following are some of behavioural indicators that lateral violence may be happening by you, to you or to someone else in your workplace.

- nonverbal intimation (raising eyebrows, making faces, eye rolling)
- obvious name calling
- sarcasm
- bickering
- whining
- blaming
- belittling a person's opinions
- yelling or using profanity
- making up and/or exaggerating scenarios
- making snide comments and remarks
- making jokes that are offensive by spoken word or email
- using put downs
- gossiping
- rumour mongering
- ignoring, excluding or freezing out people
- handing over work assignments with unreasonable deadlines or duties that will ensure the person will fail
- being purposely unavailable to meet with staff
- undermining activities
- withholding information or giving the wrong information purposely
- constantly changing work guidelines
- blocking requests for a promotion, leave or training
- not giving enough work so the individual will feel useless
- refusing to work with someone
- backstabbing
- complaining to peers and not confronting the individual
- failing to respect privacy
- breaking the confidences of others
- mobbing or ganging up on others

## Where does it happen?

Although the most common place for lateral violence is in the workplace, it does cross the line into the community and home. The primary workplaces in which lateral violence are more prevalent are those with poor organizational systems or those workplaces that are undergoing change such as downsizing or merging, or when power is shifting and people feel uncertain.

## Why does it happen?

Lateral violence happens when individuals who have endured oppression suppress feelings such as: anger, shame, and rage. Eventually these feelings manifest in behaviours such as: jealousy, resentment, blame, and bitterness; and they are directed toward their Aboriginal co-workers.

As many of these people have been victims of abuse these behaviours are usually used to manipulate, dominate, control and diminish others. Regardless of their issues, the behaviour is not appropriate and no one should be the target of someone's unresolved issues.

## Anyone can be a target of lateral violence...

It can really be really disheartening if you are the target of lateral violence in the workplace. Most people enter into an Aboriginal organization expecting that in working with their own people they will be supported and encouraged. Instead you find yourself now working with the very people who are bringing you down and making things hard for you. What did you do wrong? In most cases, you did absolutely nothing. Lateral violence is more about what is wrong with the aggressors than the receiver of their aggression.

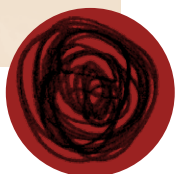
*Sheila was employed at an Aboriginal organization as a financial administrator and she felt the sting of lateral violence incrementally. Having just graduated from university she was keen to make a good impression. Sheila worked extra hours. Then one day a few of the senior managers had talked about promoting her at one of the meetings.*

*After that meeting, Sheila started to notice that there were subtle changes in how her manager and some of her co-workers treated her. When she walked into the lunch room conversations would stop. She was no longer asked out for lunch. Then the key to her filing cabinet would go missing, as would her office chair. Soon the financial administrator noticed she wasn't being invited to team meetings.*

*Instead of speaking directly to her, her Manager now began using emails to communicate as a way to avoid her. After that her requests for training were turned down and she was given assignments with unrealistic deadlines. Rumours started to circulate throughout the organization that she did not actually have a degree and she was not really First Nations.*

*Soon Sheila began to doubt her abilities and wonder if there was something wrong with her. "It takes away your self-esteem," she said. "You don't want to get out of bed in the morning; you have nightmares, migraines, aches and pains. At work you never knew what to expect. I would go into work thinking, what are they going to do to me today?"*

*After talking about it with a good friend, Sheila's friend suggested that these behaviours were connected with lateral violence.*



## Anyone can be a target of lateral violence... (continued)

Certain situations and events predispose one to experiencing lateral violence in the workplace. Usually individuals who are the target of lateral violence are:

- New employees that may be coming into an organization during times of change and become a target because other workers who may feel vulnerable see this individual as a threat to their jobs.
- Employees who have received a promotion or advancement and are seen as undeserving by other co-workers.
- Younger employees who have more education and training than older workers and are seen as a threat.
- Members of families or friends of leaders who are no longer in power positions.
- Employees who are good at their job and popular with people.

## The Effects of Lateral Violence

On a personal level, depending on the severity of the lateral violence there are a lot of health problems that can manifest for the individual being targeted. They could experience:

- Sleep disorders either not being able to sleep or not wanting to get out of bed in the morning;
- Changes in eating habits – either eating more or less or differently;
- Weight loss or gain;
- Moodiness – lack of sleep will usually mean that you won't be all that happy;
- Self-doubt –you question all your decisions and abilities;
- Decreased self confidence;
- Feelings of worthlessness;
- Forgetfulness;
- Chronic anxiety;

“When individuals feel inferior, inadequate and afraid, they take on the qualities of the oppressor as a way of acquiring strength and an illusion of power.”

– Jane Middleton-Moz

- Depression;
- Emotional and teary eyed;
- Higher absenteeism–not wanting to be at work; and
- Weakening immune system – resulting in greater susceptibility to colds, flu and other illness.

Because the individual may have no other employment options, as the lateral violence continues or gets worse the individual may experience more intense physical and emotional health deterioration. Some individuals end up on sick leave and long-term disability. In the extreme, it can end in suicide or violent death.

## The costs to the organization

Lateral violence not only affects the individual who is experiencing it. It also impacts other people in the organization and community. Spending time rumour-mongering and gossiping costs the organization money in terms of lack of productivity. Additionally, a toxic organization also creates an atmosphere in which there is:

- High staff turnover
- Loss of corporate history
- Low morale
- Decreased customer service
- Increased financial costs
- Increased absenteeism
- Lack of teamwork
- Unhealthy competition

# what you can do if you are experiencing lateral violence?

## For the individual:

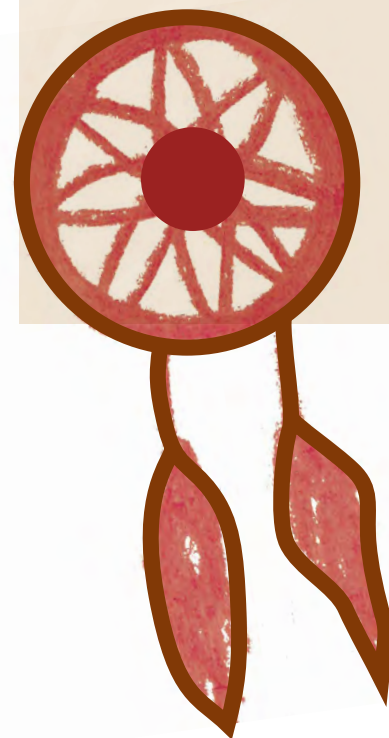
Sometimes it is difficult to do anything about the behaviour of others. If you feel that you are being the target of inappropriate behaviour you could:

- Report the behaviour to the appropriate manager in your workplace.
- Keep a record of the negative behaviours. Make notes about the time, date, location and any witnesses who may have seen the incidents.
- Address your concerns with the aggressor and ask them if they can stop.
- Seek help and advice at work or in the community. In the workplace, you may have a human resources manager, or manager who can assist you in resolving the situation.
- Speak to an Elder.
- Seek external advice.
- Seek the support of friends and family.

## For the Organization:

Before you can create a healthier workplace you have to first admit that lateral violence exists. To address the issues associated with lateral violence management could:

- Admit that lateral violence exists.
- Establish policy and procedures for lateral violence.
- Have workshop sessions on lateral violence.
- Establish rules for civil meetings... no one can cut the other off.



“Those most at risk of lateral violence in its raw physical form are family members and, in the main, the vulnerable members of the family: old people, women and children. Especially the children.”

– Narcua Langton

## Looking for more information?



Bearpaw Media Productions -- Lateral Violence Video

This is a documentary-drama that takes a look at lateral violence in our own Nations, communities, organizations and families. Hosted by Tantoo Cardinal, this Lateral Violence video sheds a new light on an age old topic – ourselves.

[www.bearpawmedia.ca/content.php?ID=15&prodid=72](http://www.bearpawmedia.ca/content.php?ID=15&prodid=72)



A YouTube clip of Rod Jefferies' workshop on lateral violence in Winnipeg.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOMJ6wynHUU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOMJ6wynHUU)



Native Women's  
Association of Canada  
1 Nicholas Street,  
Suite 900  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1N 7B7

T: 613-722-3033  
T: 1-800-461-4043

F: 613-722-7687

[www.nwac.ca](http://www.nwac.ca)