Indigenous Wellbeing:
A Strengths-Based Approach with Virtual Supports

Research Question: "How might we support wellbeing and health for Indigenous women & families with a Virtual Resource Centre?"

Contributors

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Background Context

Indigenous beliefs and constructions of wellbeing encompass the balance of the four aspects of self, including mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical, rather than only resolving health problems (Government of Yukon, 2016). However, Western conceptualizations of health involve a deficiency-based approach, centering around an absence of disease and employing a colonial narrative that often pathologizes Indigenous peoples (Hopkins & Dumont, 2010). Accordingly, colonization negatively influences the overall wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, including mental health; we are called to resist blaming individual behaviours and refocus on the historical and social contexts of Indigenous peoples due to colonization (Crowshoe et al., 2019).

Reports revealed that Indigenous communities have ongoing higher rates of mental health challenges than non-Indigenous communities (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). While examining Indigenous wellbeing in the Yukon, researchers found that one in five people will experience a mental health or substance abuse problem per year (Government of Yukon, 2016). Thus WAWC identified mental wellbeing as a community priority as it contributes to the overall wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. With COVID-19 as a catalyst for virtual resources, WAWC identified an opportunity to create a culturally safe Virtual Resource Centre (VRC) for Indigenous peoples to support wellbeing while supporting and enhancing strengths and community connection.
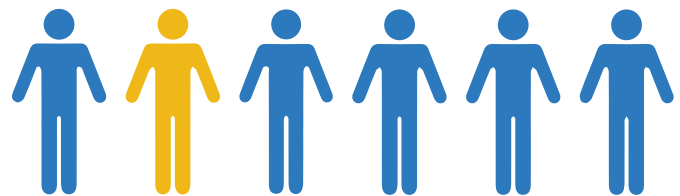
1 in 5 Indigenous people in Yukon will experience a **mental health** or **substance abuse** problem per year. (Government of Yukon, 2016)

50% of individuals seeking addiction treatment also had a mental health issue in Yukon. (Government of Yukon, 2016)

Methodology

This report explores Indigenous wellbeing and health from a systems and strengths based approach and focuses on the interplay between Canadian Indigenous women's wellbeing, resilience, and challenges. The report was guided by secondary research in the form of academic and non-academic literature alongside a community conversation with WAWC to learn about the Yukon community structure, needs, and traditions from its members.

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Why a Strengths-Based Approach is Needed

Within a deficiency narrative, there is an accentuation and focus on risk behaviours and problems (Bryant et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2022). Research on Indigenous health from a deficit discourse often pathologizes Indigenous peoples, as there is an overemphasis on illness and the need for solutions (Bryant et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2022). In countering the inherent colonial narratives of a deficit-based perspective, strengths-based approaches look at the strengths and resilience of Indigenous individuals and communities as leverage to examine and address challenges (First Nations Information Governance Centre [FNIGC], 2020; Kennedy, 2022). This approach attempts to reconcile Indigenous peoples with their identities, communities, and land connections (FNIGC, 2020).

Indigenous Wellbeing and Mental Wellbeing

Indigenous healing and wellbeing perspectives are holistically driven, emphasizing the balance of the four aspects of self, spiritual, emotional, and physical, rather than only resolving symptoms of health problems. (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015). Additionally, mental wellbeing within an Indigenous perspective also encompasses mental health, mental disorders, substance abuse and misuse, trauma, mental health challenges, and mental distress (Government of Yukon, 2016). It is suggested that mental wellbeing is an ultimate state of Indigenous peoples that helps them realize their full potential, have healthy coping strategies to deal with everyday stressors, and contribute to their environment (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015). Similarly to overall wellbeing, mental wellbeing is deeply associated with connection to culture, traditions, spirituality, land, and family (Alberta Health Services, 2009). Ultimately, Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing also consider the importance of broader influences such as social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors of Indigenous peoples wellbeing (First Nations Health Authority, n.d.).

Indigenous Wellbeing is Associated With

- Social factors
- Economic factors
- Environmental factors
- Cultural factors
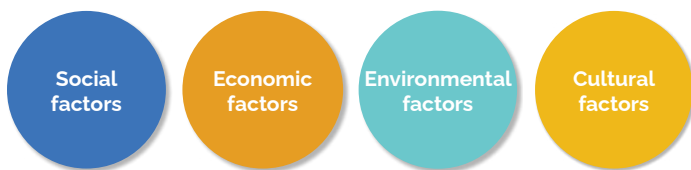
Resilience and Strengths of Indigenous Women

Resilience is the capacity of Indigenous peoples and biological, psychological, and social systems to restore themselves to wellbeing after facing challenges (FNIGC, 2020). For Indigenous women, their resilience is found within their values, culture, and identities, which gives them the strength to overcome the consequences of colonization (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). Indigenous concepts of strength indicate resilient people are humble, helpful, respectful, connected to their culture and compassionate (FNIGC, 2020).
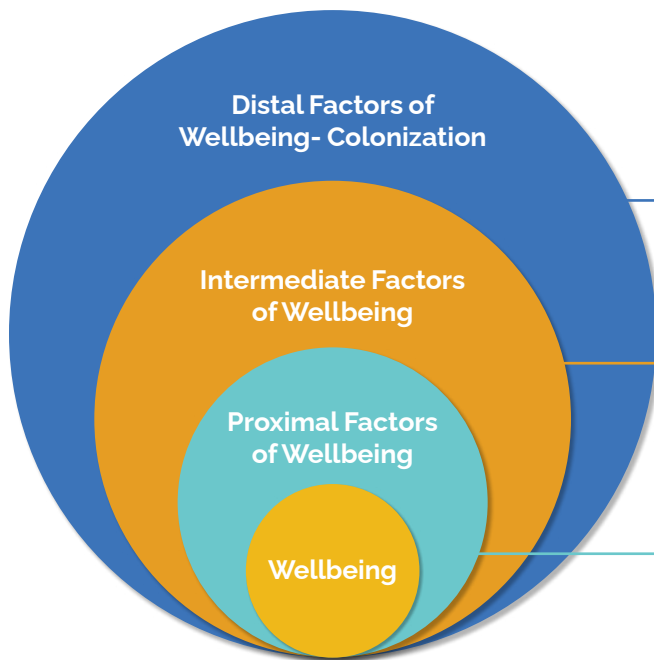
Considering the Forces of Colonization

Distal Factors of Wellbeing- Colonization
- Racism
- Discrimination
- The Indian Act
- Residential Schools

Intermediate Factors of Wellbeing
- Cultural Supports
- Cultural Continuity
- Health Care Access
- Social Networks

Proximal Factors of Wellbeing
- Income
- Education
- Employment
- Housing
- Substance Use

Wellbeing

Colonization as a Broader Social Determinant of Health

Due to the ongoing and historical colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the observed health inequities between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, the previously mentioned social determinants of health differ for Indigenous peoples and are largely equated to colonization as a distal determinant (Giles et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2009). Remarkably, colonization influences all other social determinants, such as proximal and intermediate determinants of health (Reading & Wien, 2009). For instance, proximal determinants consisting of health behaviours, environmental stewardship, employment, and income are all influenced by ongoing colonization (Government of Yukon, 2016). Moreover, health care, education, and communities, intermediate determinants of health, are also negatively influenced by historical and ongoing colonizing policies (Government of Yukon, 2016; Crowshoe et al., 2019). In regards to mental wellbeing, the forces of colonization have produced and reproduced environments that have been detrimental and digressive to the mental health of Indigenous peoples, resulting in entrenched challenges and disparities (Czyzewski et al., 2011).

Initiatives to Create More Accessible and Inclusive Health Spaces

In attempts to support the wellbeing of Indigenous women and families, there have been various online initiatives created that are centred around holism and Indigenous culture. WAWC is in the process of creating a Virtual Resource Centre that will have culturally relevant programs, projects, and support resources for Indigenous women and families to enrich their wellbeing. This project has been guided by the foundational work done with the Catamount Fellowship and with the examination of exemplar virtual resources, including We Matter (n.d.), the Canadian Virtual Hospice (n.d.) and Pallium Canada (n.d.)

Future Steps of WAWC's Virtual Resource Centre

Although the Catamount Fellowship comes to an end in April, WAWC's Virtual Resource Centre project is just beginning its three-year journey. The end goal of this project is to provide Indigenous women and families in Whitehorse with access to culturally relevant resources and support in a safe space that enriches the Whitehorse community through full participation in their cultures, communities, governments, and economies.

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