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## Exploring Indigenous People in Canada and Traditional Health Practices

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## Exploring Indigenous People in Canada and Traditional Health Practices



# Exploring Indigenous People in Canada and Traditional Health Practices

*ELISSA NOAH*





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# Abstract & Learning Objectives

## **Abstract:**

Indigenous people experience disproportionately high levels of poor health compared to non-Indigenous people. To support health equity for Indigenous people, rich and diverse traditional healing practices that are crucial in promoting health, healing, and overall well-being in Indigenous communities and individuals will be explored. Understanding Indigenous concepts of health and healing can propose ways of moving forward for health equity in the Canadian health system that incorporates Indigenous values and beliefs.

The design of this online learning module is to support the learning of undergraduate and graduate students and anyone seeking to increase their familiarity with Indigenous health and well-being in Canada.

## **Learning Objectives**

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the impacts and correlation of Indigenous history in Canada and the effects of health and well-being on individuals and communities.
2. Identify the purpose and components of the four sacred medicines and smudging.
3. Describe the relevance of healing practices that support Indigenous health and well-being.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of how Indigenous-led health care partnerships in Canada in regaining and strengthening traditional cultural health and healing practices.



## PART I

# INTRODUCTION & HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN CANADA

In this section, an introduction to Indigenous people within Canada will be explored with a brief history.

### Outline:

- Lesson One: Terminology
- Lesson Two: Demographics
- Lesson Three: History



# I. Lesson One: Terminology

The term “Indigenous people” refers to the original people of North America and their descendants.

Under the term Indigenous people, Canada recognizes three groups:

1. Inuit,
2. Métis,
3. First Nations.

Inuit:

- Inuit people live predominantly in Canada’s northern regions of Canada, with a large portion of their homelands in the Arctic regions, including land, water, and ice.
- There are 53 Inuit communities across the northern regions of Canada.

Métis:

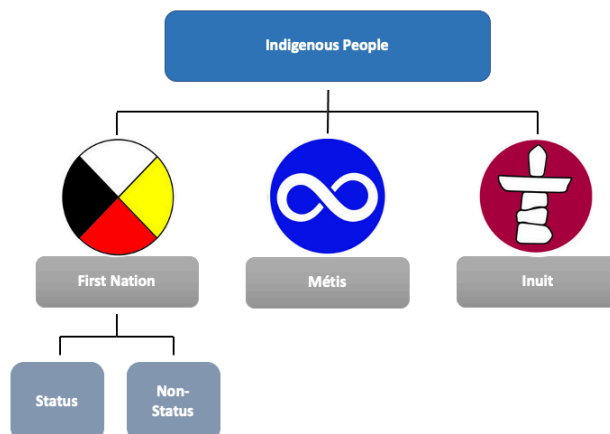
- Métis are of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry who primarily reside in Ontario and the Prairie provinces.

First Nations:

- First Nations people were the original inhabitants of the land now Canada and often occupy territories south of the Arctic.
- There are 634 First Nations communities in Canada, representing more than 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages.

Through the Indian Act ([lesson three](#)), First Nation people are further divided into two categories:

1. Non-status Indians,
2. Status Indian (names are added to the Indian Register- no register for Métis or Inuit).





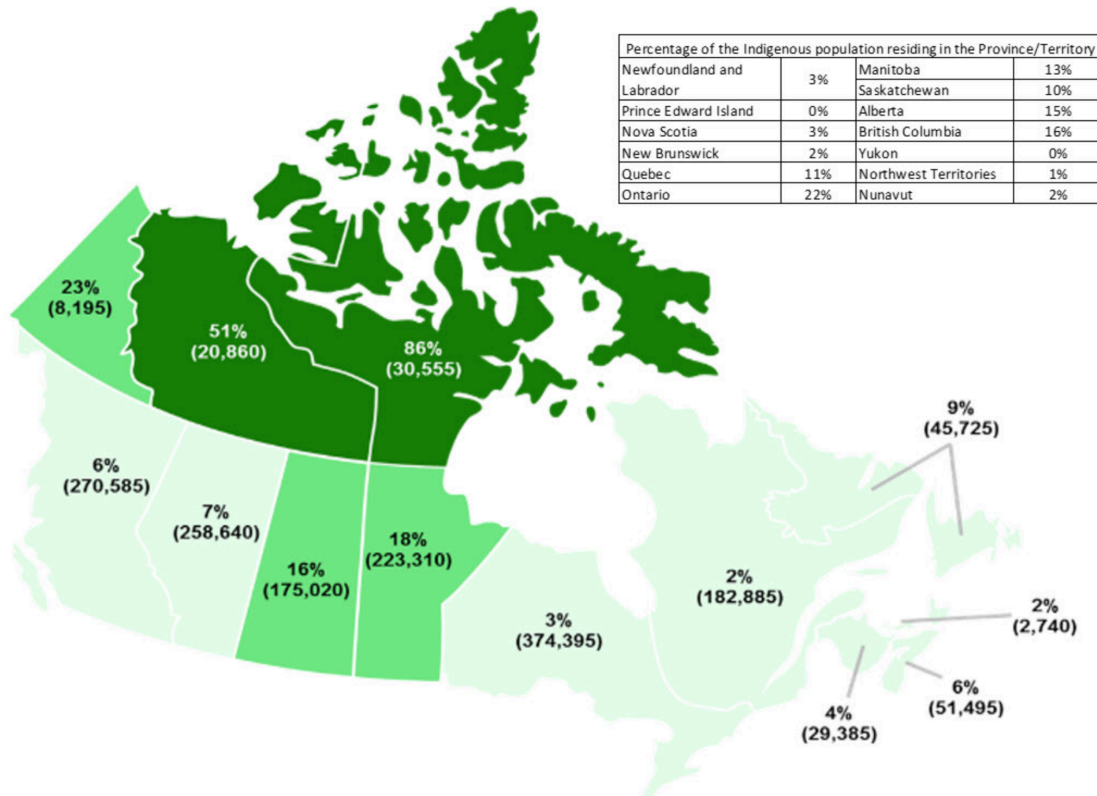
Did you know?

1. Indian is a term that is now considered outdated and offensive, but it is still used in legal contexts (example: Indian Act).
2. The term Indian came from confusion when Europeans arrived in present-day Canada and thought they had landed in what is present-day India.

## 2. Lesson Two: Demographics

According to the 2016 Canadian census, more than 1.67 million self-identified indigenous people live in Canada (4.9% of the population of Canada).

Figure 1: Indigenous Peoples across Canada



(Indigenous Services Canada, 2020).

Fun facts:

1. Although Indigenous people comprise only 3% of the population in Ontario, this Canadian province is home to the largest population of Indigenous people.
2. About 40% of registered Indigenous people in Canada live on a reserve.

### What is a Reserve?

- A reserve is land set aside by the Canadian government for exclusive use by Indigenous people. Reserve land is classified as federal land, and Indigenous people do not own title to the land.
- Reserves represent a small fraction of the traditional territories Indigenous people had before the signing of treaties and were often created on less valuable, rural land.

Did you know?

1. From 1885 into the 1940s, a pass system controlled Indigenous people's movement, requiring those living on reserve to get written permission from an "Indian agent" (government officials) when needed to leave their community.

#### Reserves Today

- Reserves are still vital land bases for Indigenous people across Canada, which continue to be classified as federal land but as self-governed by Indigenous people of their community.
- Some reserves have the most concerning conditions in Canada, such as isolated communities with high poverty rates, substance addiction, suicide, unemployment, and mortality.
- It is widely acknowledged that the cultural genocide and social disruption over generations by displacements, discriminatory legislation, and political neglect results in long-term hardships and hinder the re-establishment of social networks and stable communities.

Did you know?

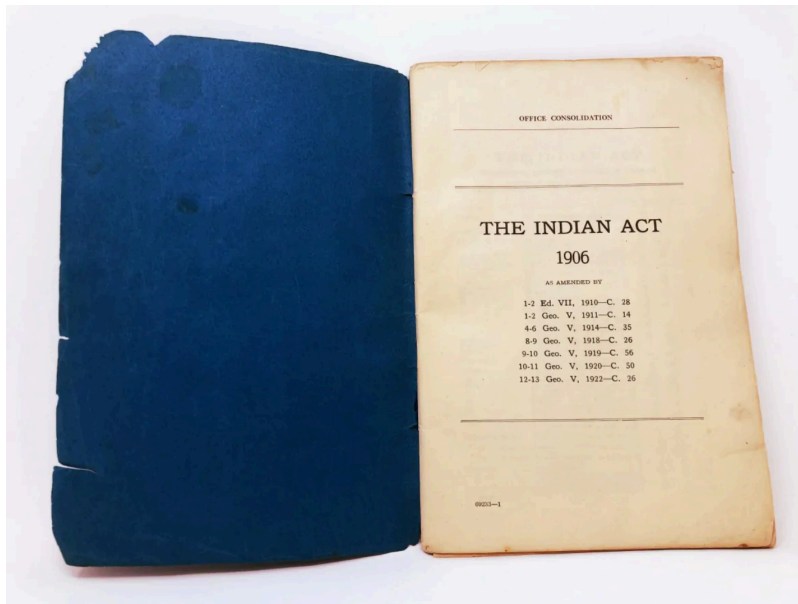
1. Six Nations of The Grand River is the largest reserve in Canada, with over 21,000 members.



**Figure 2:** Map of the location of Six Nations of the Grand River

### 3. Lesson Three: Brief History

#### Indian Act



(Johnson, n.d.).

The Indian Act, created by the Canadian Parliament and still exists today despite many amendments, is legislation the federal government uses to administrate Indian status and governed nearly all aspects of the lives of First Nation communities.

The Indian Act's principal purpose was to force First Nations people to lose their culture and become like Euro-Canadians. The document has allowed generations of Indigenous people to experience trauma, human rights violations, and social and cultural disruption. Métis, Inuit, or non-status First Nations people are not directly affected by the Indian Act.

Examples:

1. In 1895, any Indian festival, dance or other ceremonies were banned, including powwows and the sun dance.
2. In 1927, it was illegal for First Nations people and communities to hire lawyers or file land claims against the government without the government's consent.
3. Subsequent amendments (1894 and 1920) to the Indian Act required First Nations children to attend residential schools.

#### Residential Schools



(The Varsity, n.d.).

Christian churches and the Canadian government established residential schools to eliminate Indigenous culture and autonomy and assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture from the 1880s to the late 20th century. Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and prohibited from acknowledging their Indigenous heritage and culture or speak their native language.

Former residential school students have spoken of horrific mistreatment by residential school staff, including physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological torture. These schools have disturbed lives and communities, generating long-term trauma.

**Key facts about residential schools:**

1. How many students attended residential schools?
  - An estimated 150,000 children.
2. How many children died at residential schools?
  - An estimated 6,000 children died (however, a lack of proper documentation means the actual number is likely to be much higher).
3. How many residential schools were there in Canada?
  - Between 1831 and 1996, a total of 130 residential schools operated.
4. When did the first residential school in Canada open?
  - The first residential school opened in Brantford, Ontario (Mohawk Institute).
5. When did the last residential school in Canada close?

- The last residential school closed in 1996, the Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

Parks Canada developed this video to explain the history of the Residential School System with first-hand accounts.

- Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaExH3StuqY>

\*Warning\* This video deals with topics that may cause trauma invoked by memories of past abuse.



## PART II

# INDIGENOUS HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Indigenous people have experienced and continue to face disproportionate health inequities and poor health outcomes on average compared to non-Indigenous Canadians. This reality results from many social determinants, including systemic discrimination, inter-generational trauma, income, education levels, and housing conditions. Financial investment and country-wide social change to address systemic racism and the disadvantage many Indigenous peoples face are crucial to reducing these inequities. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that Indigenous people and communities have never been, nor do they remain passive, when it comes to supporting Indigenous health and well-being. Indigenous people across the country draw on their diverse culture and practices to promote healing at the individual level and within their communities.

In this section, various Indigenous traditional healing practices will be explored. Indigenous traditional healing practices is a broad phrase that encompasses the many distinct healing traditions found within Indigenous belief systems practiced for thousands of years. It can include health practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs incorporating Indigenous healing and wellness.

### Outline:

- Lesson One: Healing Circles
- Lesson Two: Sweat Lodges
- Lesson Three: Four Sacred Medicines & Smudging
- Lesson Four: Powwow
- Lesson Five: Family

*\*Disclaimer\** The information presented in this module is a small subset of the numerous and extensive Indigenous healing practices today. It may vary from community to community and from one geographic region to another.





## 4. Lesson Four: Healing Circles

### Overview



(Pawis-Steckley, n.d.).

Healing circles have been a fundamental part of Indigenous traditional healing practices for many years worldwide. A healing circle is a method of promoting healing that is based on Indigenous traditional belief systems. It is a form of group support for individuals struggling with addictions, violence, grief, trauma and more.

#### **Process:**

- Each circle opens with smudging ([lesson six](#)), a cleansing ceremony to be healed or help to heal others of negative thoughts, bad spirits, and negative energy.
- In the circle, items such as the four medicines ([lesson six](#)), a candle, a shell filled with water, a smudge bowl, eagle feather, a talking stick, and a hand drum can be placed in the centre.
- As everyone sits in a circle, the Circle Keepers (who assist in the preparation, facilitation, and maintenance of the process) smudge themselves and the items in the centre, then go in a circle and smudge each person.
- While the Circle Keepers are smudging everyone, the other Circle Keepers sing or drum as a form of prayer.
- Once complete the smudging, everyone holds hands for an opening prayer.
- Everyone then introduces themselves while holding an object, such as an eagle feather or talking stick, and is then passed around the circle in a clockwise direction.
- Whoever holds the eagle feather or talking stick is respected with silence and no interruption. They may speak what they wish with no time limit or pass to the next person. When the eagle feather or talking stick has made a complete circle, everyone stands up, completing the circle with a closing prayer.

\*Disclaimer\* this is an example of a healing circle and some protocols may vary.

#### **The goals of healing circles are:**

1. To begin the healing process,
2. To promote understanding,
3. To prevent or solve problems,
4. To build trust,
5. To share common experiences,
6. To learn from others and learn about life.

The following video is by Support Network for Indigenous Women and Women of Colour (SNIWWOC Canada), based in British Columbia. It discusses healing circles, the teachings, and the basic foundations of healing circles in Indigenous cultures.

- Video: <https://youtu.be/q34F9Rtt6cU>

## 5. Lesson Five: Sweat Lodge

### Overview



(Bettmann/Getty Images, n.d.).

Sweat lodges are a traditional practice by Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. The purpose of the practice is to encourage health and well-being by excreting toxins and negative energy through sweating. The lodges are made of wood or branches, creating a domed structure, typically covered by animal hides or other fabrics. The lodge size can vary, some for only single-person use and others much larger for group ceremonies. Rocks are typically heated by a fire outside the lodge, then transported into the centre of the lodge. Water is then poured onto these rocks to generate steam.

#### **Process:**

- Before entering a sweat lodge, you typically will offer a gift of tobacco to Mother Earth to thank her for providing you with the water, rocks, fire, etc.
- If you are participating in a larger ceremony with an Elder or a group leader, you can offer them an offering.
- Upon entering the sweat lodge, in the proper attire of a top and skirt (for females) or a top and shorts (for males), you can sit on the ground in a crisscrossed position.
- Ceremonies can be conducted differently depending on the Elder's conduct or personal preference, but some could include prayers, storytelling, or simply sitting in silence.

#### **Advantages of a sweat lodge ceremony:**

- Mental benefits- clearing one's mind, a safe space to think and heal.
- Spiritual benefits- feeling connected to both oneself, Mother Earth, and those around you (culture and community).
- Physical benefits- purges toxins from one's body, help wounds heal, helpful for some with chronic illnesses.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Toronto, ON) created its own sweat lodge, a sacred fire, and gardens to grow sacred medicines. It allows people to participate in spiritual activities while undergoing their healing process at CAMH.

- Video: <https://youtu.be/RvADMeqoUKI>

## 6. Lesson Six: The Four Sacred Medicines & Smudging

### Four Sacred Medicines Overview

The four sacred medicines hold significant value to Indigenous cultures and can be used in everyday life and ceremonies.

#### **1. Tobacco**



(Downie WenJack Fund, n.d.).

- Traditional tobacco is used to communicate with the spirit world.
- It is used as an offering as you can communicate your thoughts and feelings through the tobacco to pray for yourselves, your relatives, and others.
- Tobacco can be used to offer when picking medicines, when seeking help and advice from Elders, and during ceremonies.

#### **2. Sweetgrass**



(Downie WenJack Fund, n.d.).

- Sweetgrass is the sacred hair of Mother Earth.

- It provides a relaxing and calming effect.
- The braid's three strands signify body, mind, and spirit harmony.

### 3. Sage



(Downie WenJack Fund, n.d.).

- Sage is used to prepare individuals for ceremonies and teaching as it cleanses and purifies the spirit.
- It is used for releasing the troubled mind and removing negative energy.
- It can also be used daily for cleansing homes and sacred items.

### 4. Cedar



(Downie WenJack Fund, n.d.).

- Like sage and sweetgrass, cedar is used to purify the home and has restorative medicinal uses.
- Used in fasting and sweat lodges as a form of protection.

## Smudging Overview





(Converging Pathways Consulting, n.d.).

Smudging is a spiritual tradition common to many Indigenous people. Typically using one of the four sacred medicines, smudging involves burning the medicine. It can be done in various ways, with many variations and protocols existing.

**Process:**

- Plant leaves and stems of the medicines are placed in a container, typically a shell.
- The leaves and stems are lit with a wooden match until a small flame ignited.
- The flames are gently blown out, releasing smoke.
- The smoke is then wafted over the person by hand or with an eagle feather.

Smudging enables individuals to stop, slow down, and become mindful and centred. It also aids in the release of negative feelings and thoughts.



## 7. Lesson Seven: Powwow

### Overview



(Lee, 1983).

Powwows are a traditional celebration in which Indigenous culture is celebrated through various practices. Indigenous communities in Canada welcome both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to participate and can be conducted on outdoor powwow grounds or indoor facilities.

#### **Celebrations include:**

- Traditional music and dances,
- Regalia (traditional outfits),
- Food,
- Crafts and vendors,
- Storytelling,
- Opening/closing prayers.

#### **Traditional dances:**

- The dancer is free to interpret the music in their way, moving in a clockwise direction with the other dancers. Different regalia are worn by males and females or for different styles of dances.

#### **Drumming and singing:**

- Drumming can either be an individual activity where one is in control, or there are large drums where multiple

players are involved (typically men). Men typically hold the deeper octaves while singing, so they are the primary voices, but women can also participate as background singers providing the higher octaves in songs.

**Activities:**

- While performances such as drumming, singing, and dancing occur, powwows typically have vendors at the ceremony. Some include craft tables where people can make traditional items such as dreamcatchers or others sell their handmade goods. Traditional food, such as Bannock (fried bread) or other soups and meats, is also sold.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indigenous communities throughout Canada could not host their powwows due to restrictions. The Summer Solstice Festivals created a virtual powwow page for people to still participate, and it is updated with recent performers. There are a variety of videos broken down into the different types of traditional dances, drumming and singing.

- View here: <https://summersolsticefestivals.ca/virtual-pow-wow/>

## 8. Lesson Eight: Family

### Overview

Family relations and supportive networks are critical to Indigenous families, communities, and culture. For many Indigenous people, families define their identity and give a sense of belonging. Acknowledging Indigenous cultures and social relationships influence on Indigenous health is vital.

### Indigenous Family and Social Relationships During COVID-19:

As family and social relationships are essential to maintaining a healthy Indigenous community, COVID-19 has disrupted the dynamics in many communities. Due to social distancing and lockdown mandates, the COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedentedly disrupted cultural practices within Indigenous communities. Ceremonies were heavily restricted during the first wave of COVID-19. In some cases, public health urged them to stop participating in traditions such as sweat lodges due to the transmission uncertainty. These practices often are associated with cultural connectedness and social relationships with community and extended family.

There is a need to adopt evidence-based strategies that promote health equity for Indigenous populations. Awareness of Indigenous cultures and how cultural practices, beliefs, and feelings of belonging can affect health is essential. Thus, providing health care tailored to Indigenous people and funding to Indigenous-led partnerships cannot afford to ignore the role played by culture in Indigenous well-being. If we are serious about addressing the health and social inequities that Indigenous people experience, recognizing how possibilities to renew Indigenous values and beliefs through family and community relations can play a crucial role in maintaining Indigenous well-being.

## PART III

# REFLECTION

Thank you for engaging in this module on Indigenous people in Canada and the importance of recognizing unique Indigenous traditional healing practices. To end this module, please reflect on the questions below to facilitate and enhance your learning.

Reflection Questions:

1. Why is it important as you learn about health and healthcare in Canada to learn about Indigenous healing practices?
2. What might be valuable for healthcare providers learning about Indigenous healing practices?
3. Summarize what you found the most important or meaningful about this module in a sentence or two.



# Authors

## Author: Elissa Noah, BHSc, MPH (c)

Elissa Noah is an Indigenous master's student at Western University in London, Ontario, studying Public Health. Previously attending Western University, obtaining a bachelor's degree in Health Sciences. Elissa is Lunáapeew from Eelūnaapéewi Lahkéewiit, Delaware Nation and of the Turtle Clan. As a researcher, she is committed to Indigenous health, addressing health disparities and inequities prominent within Indigenous communities, and developing and maintaining healthy relationships between Indigenous people and the health system.

## Co-Author: Averi Labancz-Vye

Averi Labancz-Vye is an Indigenous undergraduate student at Western University in London, Ontario, studying Health Science. She is from the tribe of Michipicoten in Northern, Ontario. By using her knowledge of health and own culture, she would like to work towards expanding others knowledge of Indigenous people.

## Supervisor: Elysée Nouvet, PhD

Dr. Nouvet is a medical anthropologist and an Associate Professor in the School of Health Studies (Global Health) at Western University in London, Ontario. Dr. Nouvet is a founder and lead for Western University's [Global Health Equity hub](#). Uniting her work is a commitment to bringing the lived experiences of those on the receiving end of initiatives developed in the name of advancing global health and equity to bear on understandings and assessments of the value, limits, and impacts of those initiatives.

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