

# CATALYST

FUTURE OF CANADA CENTRE

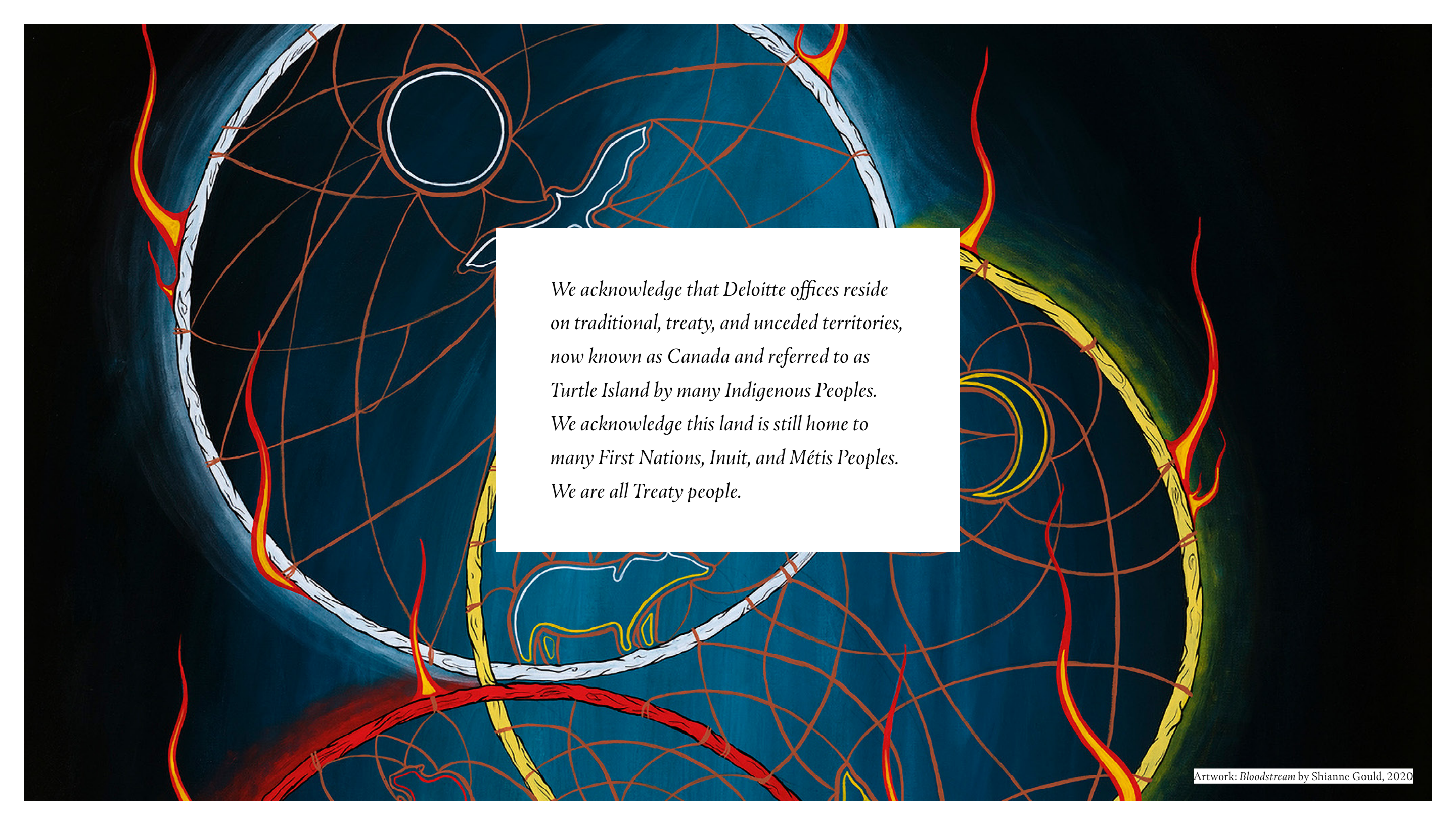
## *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation*

**VOLUME 3: BREAKING COLONIAL LEGACIES AND MAPPING  
NEW PATHWAYS TO MENTAL WELLNESS**

**Deloitte.**



Artwork: *Teachings* by Shianne Gould, 2023



*We acknowledge that Deloitte offices reside on traditional, treaty, and unceded territories, now known as Canada and referred to as Turtle Island by many Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge this land is still home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. We are all Treaty people.*

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This is the third volume of the *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation* series, which acts on Deloitte's commitment to ignite meaningful dialogue on the four themes identified by Indigenous youth as priorities for advancing reconciliation. The series is a joint initiative between the Deloitte Future of Canada Centre and Indigenous Youth Roots, formerly known as Canadian Roots Exchange.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**hrough self-empowerment and mutual support, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities have been working with determination to heal from both intergenerational and current forms of trauma brought on by the colonization of Canada. Indigenous youth feel the impacts on their mental wellness, a reality their non-Indigenous peers don't experience. Recognizing and addressing these traumas is crucial for facilitating healing and wellness among Indigenous families and communities, and across generations.

***“We need to understand the gravity of what happened and what continues to happen. We shouldn't continue with the status quo.”***

The healing journey has begun, but it's been far from straightforward. When asked what policymakers, corporate Canada, and other relevant institutions should prioritize in advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, equitable access to mental wellness care was one of the areas the Indigenous youth we engaged with for this report emphasized.

While governments, industries, non-profit organizations, and health care providers have made efforts to break down systemic barriers Indigenous Peoples face on their path to mental wellness, these efforts continue to fall short. In response, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leaders have been turning to their own communities and Knowledge Keepers for solutions. They've had promising successes in developing and delivering mental wellness care and supports that respond to the unique needs of Indigenous Peoples, including alternatives to Western clinical approaches.

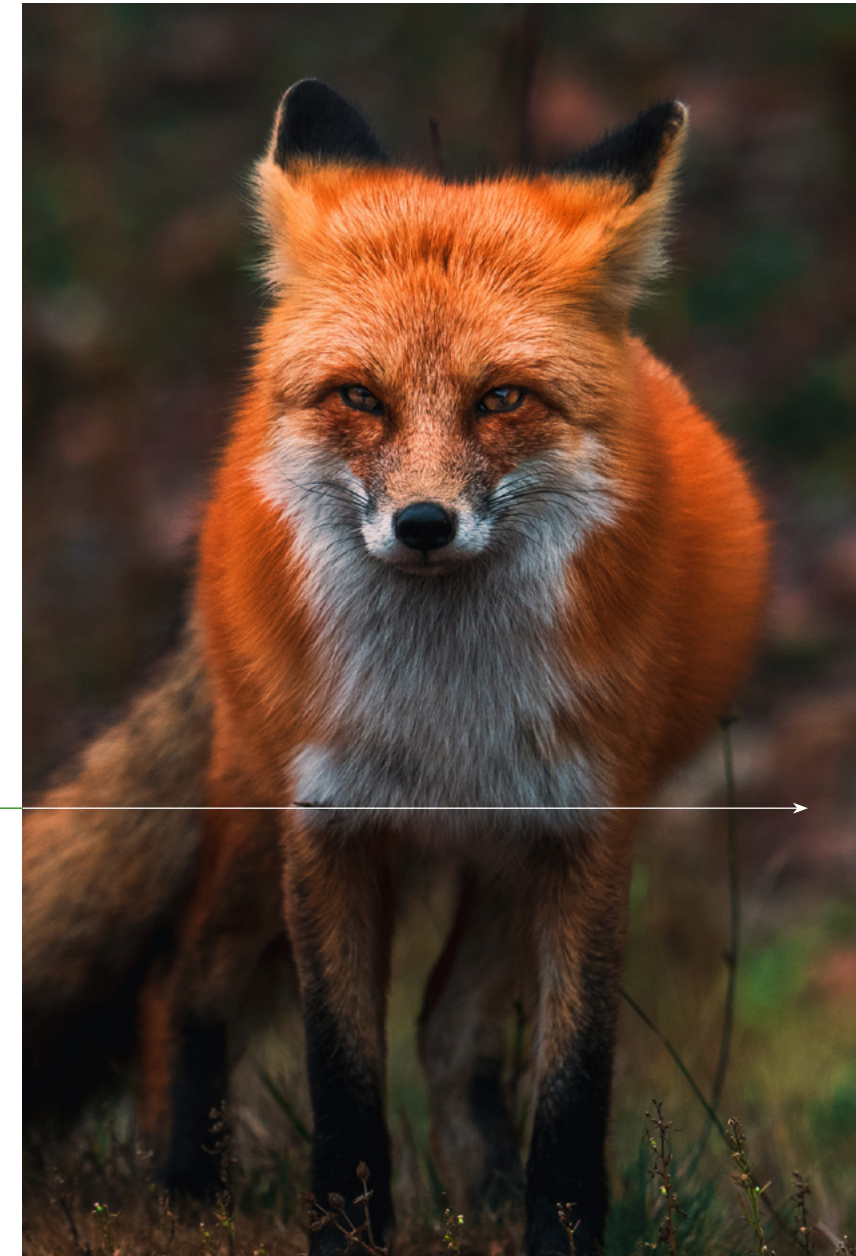


Photo by Damien Bouchard



*As Indigenous Peoples, we've always been forced to adapt to someone else's environment. Then we start questioning our own beliefs. We need to bring in Indigenous voices to these spaces.”*

In this volume, we share insights into how Indigenous youth are affected by the way Canada's mental health care system operates, told in their own voices. Recommendations throughout identify opportunities to better respond to the needs of Indigenous Peoples, of which benefit all in the process.

We hear Indigenous youth voices. We seek to amplify their perspectives and recommendations for the future. We encourage decision-makers to examine the progress of their reconciliation efforts in a way that accounts for the experiences of young Indigenous Peoples and to ensure their efforts are designed to deliver truly meaningful, positive impacts.

***Our approach***

This report takes a youth-centred, “two-eyed seeing” research approach, which balances the use of both Indigenous and Western research methods and perspectives. We collected data and developed our findings in keeping with First Nations ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®) principles. Given our focus on the voices of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, we also applied an inductive approach to our inquiry to identify key themes and findings, as they are experts in their own lived experiences.

We highlight the experiences shared by the participants of the 2022 Indigenous Youth Advocacy Week (IYAW), organized by what is now Indigenous Youth Roots, about accessing support for mental wellness and about their treatment or care. We also offer recommendations for policymakers, business leaders, and the health care system. Informed by youth and bolstered by Deloitte research and external specialists, these recommendations include specific calls to action.

***Methodology***

We began by surveying Indigenous youth, aged 18 to 29, who participated in the 2022 IYAW. We then held follow-up interviews with four of them to dig deeper into the challenges they faced and to discuss possible solutions. We supplemented their insights with secondary sources, including academic publications, analyses of aggregated data sets from Statistics Canada, and interviews with both Deloitte and industry specialists experienced in working with Indigenous Peoples in health and mental wellness care. To ground the discussion in Indigenous knowledge, some of the specialists we interviewed are Indigenous professionals working in mental wellness.

## INTRODUCTION

### ***An inclusive understanding of mental wellness***

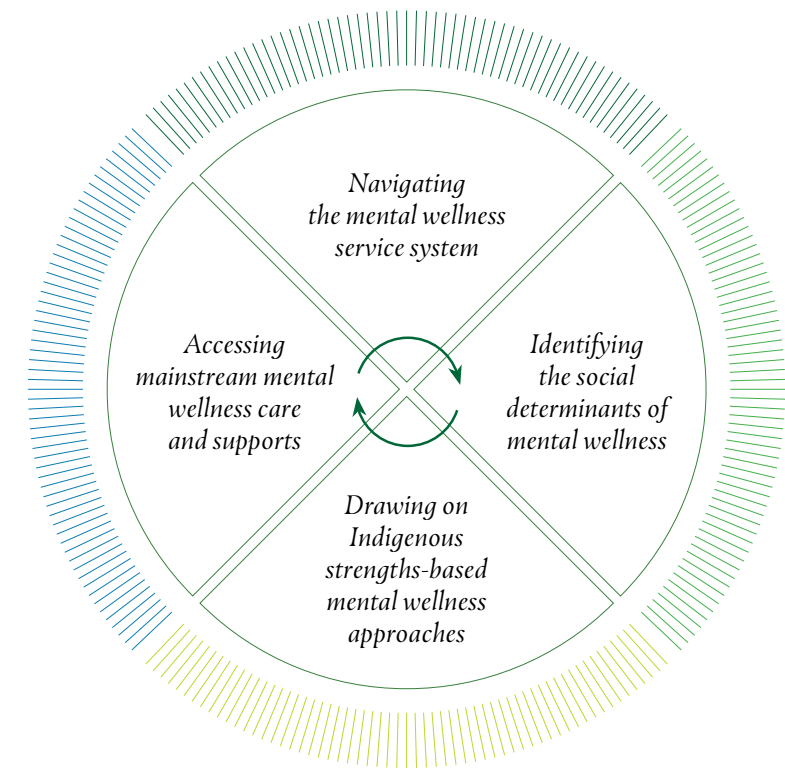
It's important to recognize that definitions of mental wellness can differ vastly. This is particularly true among Indigenous cultures as they generally view wellness holistically, rooted in balance between the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of well-being (as often referenced in the medicine wheel teaching). When asked what mental wellness means to them, some of the young leaders at IYAW said they envision it as moving about the world in an overall state of peace and not feeling triggered by external stimuli. Others described it as feeling safe and welcome in the most important spaces: their home, their community, and public institutions and organizations.

We acknowledge that individuals and communities may have their own definitions of mental wellness. In this spirit, we approach it holistically, inclusive of familial, community, geographic, and cultural experiences.

### ***Mapping pathways to mental wellness***

To organize our insights, we applied the medicine wheel framework, which is an important teaching of key concepts observed by many Indigenous cultures. The image shown in Figure 1 depicts four of the pathways to mental wellness that were identified by IYAW young leaders:

**Figure 1: The four pathways to mental wellness**



Source: Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework: A Guide to Implementation*, 2018. Modified by the Deloitte Future of Canada Centre.

1. Identifying the  
social determinants  
of mental wellness



Artwork: *Spirit of the bear* by Shianne Gould, 2015

*Shianne Gould*

## INSIGHTS

### ***Language, heritage, and culture***

Long before Europeans arrived, Indigenous Nations practised ceremonies, promoted community cohesion, and connected with others and the natural world through their respective languages and cultural protocols. Indigenous specialists in mental wellness we interviewed pointed to the importance of language and culture to forming a person's identity and maintaining mental wellness. Having a strong sense of identity to draw on has sustained generations of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in the face of colonization and cultural suppression. Self-esteem and belief in one's abilities are often rooted in community, language, and culture, according to the specialists we interviewed.

***“Language is a huge part of our identity ... For young people who don't have their language, it impacts their understanding of where they come from, or the teachings held in the community.”***

– Karleigh Darnay, Clinical Lead, Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario

### ***Education and lifelong learning***

Feeling connected to supportive family and community networks typically has a positive effect on a person's overall wellness, because these connections help ground a person in their identity and equip them to meet challenges. In *Bridging study and work for long-term success*, we explored the challenge of isolation experienced by many Indigenous post-secondary students through the eyes of IYAW participants, who had shared how they felt detached from their roots after leaving their communities to pursue their education. This had drained their ability to deal with adversity and compromised their mental wellness.

The young leaders suggested urban Indigenous youth could benefit from programs that help them connect with their roots and engage with their cultures, especially those who must relocate for school or work.

“

***Indigenous youth are cycle breakers. They may not have family support, and they may have to leave their community and family as the new generation to get that education.”***

– Kim Bayer, Counsellor, Owner,  
Kimber Counselling





*In the future, I want to see people healing and communities thriving, with more programs to help kids ... all the things that everyone else has. Non-Indigenous people don't have to think about these things, and it should be the same for Indigenous Peoples."*

**Land and resources**

A stable and sufficient land base is foundational to effective Indigenous governance and a contributing factor to community and individual well-being. The reserve system displaced Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral lands and their cultures, handing access and control to the Crown. Such dispossession also undermined their ability to pursue healthy and fulfilling lives.<sup>1</sup>

"We shouldn't be on tiny little reserves and should not have had our land taken to begin with," said one IYAW participant. To reclaim lands would allow communities to better plan and build capacity to serve the needs of their members for generations to come.

**Infrastructure and essential services**

Having key infrastructure available and basic needs met—such as safe and affordable housing, clean drinking water, and food security—is correlated with states of mental wellness.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests colonialism is a social

determinant of health because it resulted in higher rates of poverty among Indigenous Peoples.<sup>3</sup> The IYAW participants noted that funding inequities in key infrastructure and essential services leads to families being faced with the difficult choice of prioritizing basic needs over their mental wellness.

Income insecurity also has negative effects on mental health, research indicates. In a 2021 national survey of Canadians conducted by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and Environics Institute, high daily stress was reported by 47% of those with precarious incomes, compared with 17% of respondents who reported having enough disposable income to invest in savings.<sup>4</sup> On daily wellness, 40% of Indigenous respondents in a 2020 study described most days as "quite a bit stressful" or "extremely stressful," compared with 27% of non-Indigenous participants.<sup>5</sup>

## INSIGHTS

### ***Racism and discrimination***


Being grounded in identity is integral to shaping and maintaining self-confidence and resilience, according to the specialists we interviewed. The youth leaders told us about their ongoing experiences with racism and microaggression—of having to navigate a world that’s hostile to Indigenous Peoples, where their humanity is not recognized or respected—that cause continual stress. Studies refer to this ongoing unsettled feeling as “racial battle fatigue,” a state of constant engagement in a stress response that wears down a person’s strength and resilience.<sup>6</sup>

To pre-empt such recurring negative experiences, many young Indigenous Peoples attempt to socially blend in by downplaying their identity and culture. However, over time, this feeling of having to hide who they are can adversely affect their self-esteem and diminish their resilience. Indigenous youth should be able to move about the world freely expressing their identity while being treated with respect and feeling included.

“

*How do we break that cycle of prejudice? It shouldn't be like that.”*

## Working together, invest in a society that advances equity and safety for all

- 
- ♦ **Governments at all levels** should provide sufficient funding to ensure basic infrastructure and services such as housing, clean drinking water, health care, education, and transportation in Indigenous communities. This includes increasing the number of essential staff and compensating them equitably.
  - ♦ **Provincial and territorial governments** should prioritize improving the proximity and accessibility of community and hospital-based mental wellness supports to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.
  - ♦ **Health care systems and mental health care providers** should collaborate more closely with educational institutions to improve and promote supports and services to Indigenous students.
  - ♦ **Businesses and governments, in their role as employers,** should do more to help educate Canadians about Indigenous Peoples, our shared history, and the impacts of colonialism. This can be accomplished by working with local Indigenous Nations to raise awareness and train staff to work with and serve Indigenous Peoples. This will foster empathy and decrease racism and bias.

*2. Drawing on Indigenous strengths-based  
mental wellness approaches*



## INSIGHTS

Mental wellness care grounded in Indigenous cultures has been found by many Indigenous communities and mental health leaders to be effective as it is more responsive to their needs. The specialists we interviewed noted that in the past five years, communities have taken on more initiatives and they're yielding promising results. By using a strengths-based rather than a deficits-based approach, providers are building collaborative plans with their clients that empower their mental wellness journeys. A sharper focus on culture and Indigenous-centred approaches could be a transformative experience for clients and lead to more sustained, positive health outcomes overall.

Well-being indicators from a strengths-based orientation can be also considered from the medicine wheel framework, in which the wheel serves as a balance of four kinds of wellness: spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Spiritual wellness creates hope***

Mental wellness involves more than the physical and the mental. As one IYAW participant noted, "It's a spiritual thing, that comes with ceremony and group activities." The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, a culturally centred voice on First Nations' mental wellness, substance use, and addictions, emphasizes the importance of promoting spiritual wellness

as it is integral to strengthening one's identity and place in the world.<sup>8</sup> Traditional forms of healing—for example, ceremonies and working with land-based medicines—underpinned Indigenous Peoples' mental wellness for generations before being disrupted by colonial forces. Today, many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth find the availability of cultural forms of care extremely limited.

The specialists interviewed for our report generally found that programs like arts groups, drumming circles, and peer social gatherings promote the mental wellness and resilience of Indigenous youth, help them determine earlier if they may need extra support, and help them view accessing wellness services with less shame or embarrassment. The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health has identified, through its research, that these activities have healing qualities and positive physiological effects as well, ranging from enhanced self-esteem and confidence to "decreased heart rate and blood pressure [and] the release of endorphins."<sup>9</sup> One practitioner observed that sweat lodge ceremonies and hide-tanning camps were found to reduce depression and anxiety, demonstrating that such cultural practices play an important role in an Indigenous-focused wellness care plan.

“

*When people can organize these things themselves and bring in the Knowledge Keepers, that and the culture would be the healing piece, not just from those with a licence.”*

– Kim Bayer, Counsellor, Owner,  
Kimber Counselling

## INSIGHTS

Research has also demonstrated the positive impacts of community ownership of local cultural programming on wellness.<sup>10</sup> However, most funding programs are dedicated to immediate, acute treatment rather than maintaining wellness. Specialists involved in Indigenous community mental wellness planning told us they observed a lack of adequate funding for long-term programming, which is important for preventing lapses in mental wellness.

### ***Emotional wellness creates belonging***

Some Indigenous cultural teachings maintain that at birth a child's spirit is whole, but that throughout their life they take on the emotional pain of family and community trauma, which leads to mental health challenges later in life.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous youth today still live with the legacy of residential schools and the mass removal—mostly without consent—of Indigenous children taken from their families and placed in the child welfare system. This practice accelerated in the 1960s and so is often referred to as the Sixties Scoop.<sup>12</sup>

By removing children from their family and community life and by abusing and discriminating against them, these institutions degraded the mental wellness of these Indigenous children and provided few healthy family role models. It's a harm that has

passed down through generations. "Our parents don't know how to parent, so it will take a long time still to break those forms of trauma," observed one IYAW participant.

Acknowledging the collective grief of communities and parents is a first step toward healing. Supporting parents and rebuilding healthy bonds with family and friends through programming such as feasts and land-based learning have been showing promising results, according to the specialists we interviewed.

### ***Mental wellness creates meaning***

More positive examples of what mental wellness can look like should be explored and showcased. The IYAW participants said they don't see enough Indigenous Peoples speaking about their struggles or sharing what helped them heal, which could help them process their own complex feelings and find meaning. Research has shown that many First Nations youth are seeking mentors to turn to, which is more pronounced among those who live away from their family and community.<sup>13</sup> The IYAW youth also told us that having mentors, including non-Indigenous ones, could improve their confidence and skills in navigating their mental health.

“

*We are all starting from scratch—so many of us are the first generation doing so many of these things, like getting higher education and following different career paths. We don't have the mentors that know where these resources are, where they're available, and how to overcome the complex navigation you need to undertake.”*



*The healing is already here and in the land; we just have to find a way back to it. Our culture and the land should always be our safe space.”*

– Brenda Gear, Counsellor, Owner,  
Gear’s Indigenous Counselling and Consulting Services

Without mentorship structures, some have turned to media, both traditional and social, for positive Indigenous representation of wellness and success. While social media can be problematic and harmful to young peoples’ mental wellness, the youth said it could also be leveraged as an effective healing tool. For example, online platforms could help educate youth about mental health concepts and introduce them to available services.<sup>14</sup>

***Physical wellness creates purpose***

One example of integrating cultural and community practices into approaches to promote mental wellness for Indigenous Peoples is land-based learning activities and camps. These programs involve not only mental wellness workers and land facilitators, but also Elders and/or family members. Each initiative can be modified, one specialist told us, to build a program that’s relevant to the culture and community.

While land-based approaches are showing promising results, the specialists with whom we spoke expressed concern that the facilitators, Elders, and mental wellness workers are still not regarded at the level of Western-accredited workers for government funding, even though their approaches yield similar if not more effective outcomes for Indigenous Peoples.

Participating in sports and recreation is also found to have positive effects on Indigenous youth well-being and has been a time-honoured tradition among many Indigenous Nations. Such activities have been shown to help young people explore their identity and spirituality and strengthen their social connections, confidence, and resilience.<sup>15</sup>

## Return autonomy to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nations and empower them to pursue their mental wellness goals and provide care to their people

- ♦ **Governments** should increase and ensure ongoing funding to communities and Indigenous-led mental wellness service providers that offer decision-making flexibility and honour Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and facilitators' time and expertise. Businesses can also contribute health-related funding as part of their work with communities they operate in.
- ♦ **Governments** should provide additional funding and subsidies to cover travel expenses for Indigenous Peoples to receive culture-based programming and care in their communities.
- ♦ **Research bodies and governments** should fund Indigenous-led research on innovative practices and measurement of mental wellness outcomes from Indigenous-led interventions.
- ♦ **Private, public, philanthropic, and non-profit sectors** should work to increase the availability of high-quality mentorship programs for Indigenous youth to help strengthen support networks.
- ♦ **Governments and media outlets** should use channels to highlight examples of Indigenous excellence and use strengths-based phrasing when discussing Indigenous themes.



### *3. Accessing mainstream mental wellness care and supports*



Artwork: *Wished for you back, on a shooting star* by Shianne Gould, 2020

### ***Availability in rural and remote communities***

Many Indigenous communities struggle to meet the demand for mental health care. This is particularly evident in rural and remote communities where, IYAW participants said, it's often difficult to find even one provider, and travelling to receive care further increases the financial and emotional burden. The specialists we interviewed told us that having options is key in mental health care; ideally, it should be possible to easily switch providers to find the right match to meet one's needs. Youth interviewees cautioned that delays or barriers to care can result in more harm or even loss of life.

Technology can help improve access to care. Some specialists envision technology facilitating the matching of people in rural and remote communities with practitioners in other parts of the country. However, at the end of 2021, only 43.3% of First Nation reserves in Canada had access to the minimum broadband speeds of 50 megabits per second (Mbps) for downloads and 10 Mbps for uploads, compared with 91.4% of all Canadian households.<sup>16</sup> Investing in digital hardware, connectivity infrastructure, and computer training would be needed to fully realize the possibility.

As policymakers contemplate how to support different licensing regimes for psychologists and counsellors to use technology, practitioners may continue to encounter regulatory barriers in delivering virtual care across jurisdictions, which reduces the availability of options and real-time service for those who need them.<sup>17</sup>

“

*There is no true reconciliation until all of our Nations are healed. How are people supposed to heal without having the services and all the things that they need to thrive?”*

## INSIGHTS

### ***Administrative barriers to accessing equitable care***

In addition to availability challenges, administrative barriers foil those seeking timely care.<sup>18</sup> Both the Indigenous youth and the specialists we interviewed commented on the amount of paperwork required to access the various types of supports. Navigating through processes that many IYAW participants described as excessive may deter those seeking support.

Two of the key barriers to comprehensive care, according to both the IYAW youth and the specialists, are eligibility for and awareness of the federal Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program. The program covers mental health counselling for First Nations Peoples registered under the Indian Act and Inuit recognized by an Inuit land claim organization.<sup>19</sup> Some non-status First Nations individuals have sought to reclaim their status in order to become eligible for NIHB supports, while many others who are eligible do not know the supports exist. It's problematic overall.

Other general barriers identified by IYAW participants include finding and completing the required forms, finding providers who are Indigenous or qualified to work with Indigenous Peoples, and dealing with lengthy wait times and unclear instructions for fulfilling insurance or funding provider requirements. Care seekers may also need to reapply for funding after a set period of time. Such administrative processes may limit access to those who are eligible and need help in a timely way.

***“Many are looking for Indigenous therapists. I got lucky because I recognized her last name. But otherwise, how do people know?”***

### ***Social stigma and privacy concerns***

Prior to colonial control, Indigenous communities had healing supports to help individuals and families in times of crisis and need. One specialist we interviewed noted that information about individual wellness or mental health struggles would be shared with helpers in the community from a positive place. Today, this important component of social cohesion has been disrupted, which can manifest in young people feeling social stigma and anxiety about the risk of gossip in seeking mental wellness services.

Those with concerns about their privacy may be discouraged from seeking support within their community and deterred from openly talking about their struggles. In fact, a 2017 survey revealed that although the likelihood of having mood disorders was about the same for all age groups of Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous youth are less likely than older age groups to report their mental health challenges.<sup>20</sup>

## Improve the supply of mental wellness care services and reduce barriers to access

- ♦ **Governments, regulatory colleges, and educational institutions** should promote and incentivize the accreditation of Indigenous mental wellness practitioners by providing targeted scholarships and grants, incorporating Indigenous ways of learning into programs, and making them more flexible for prospective learners.
- ♦ **Governments and businesses** should continue to work with Indigenous Nations to invest in relevant infrastructure to increase internet connectivity so that members may access virtual care options and foster stronger social connections.
- ♦ **Provincial and territorial governments** should continue to collaborate to simplify registration and licensing to reduce barriers for licensed care providers to supply cross-provincial services.
- ♦ **Through the NIHB program, the federal government** should work with registered practitioners to simplify practitioner and client eligibility and approval processes.
- ♦ **The federal government should also work with the NIHB program** to regularly update comprehensive lists of NIHB-registered practitioners. These lists should indicate which practitioners are Indigenous and which are accredited for working with Indigenous and two-spirited Peoples, as well as approximate wait times for each.
- ♦ **Governments, regulatory colleges, insurance companies, and business organizations (as employers)** should create a central repository of all resources available, along with clear instructions and guides on how to obtain funding, find a provider (including Indigenous and diverse practitioners), and schedule care. The objective should be to make the experience of finding and accessing the right care with the right practitioner as seamless as possible.

# 4. Navigating the mental wellness service system



***Culturally inclusive approaches***

Canada's health care system and mental health organizations were not established with Indigenous Peoples' needs or cultural protocols in mind. These systems instead caused harm, whether it was the forced relocation of Inuit to southern hospitals and sanatoria for tuberculosis treatment, the forced sterilization of Indigenous women, or the substandard care and facilities for First Nations Peoples—and these are only a few examples.

Colonial influences in mental wellness settings impacted Indigenous Peoples' sense of belonging and overall mental wellness, YAW participants said. Western models prevail in physical and service delivery design, which can isolate patients from their social, physical, and spiritual environments.<sup>21</sup> The young Indigenous leaders were also concerned with representation and inclusion, saying they've rarely seen practitioners who look like them and that they haven't seen or had access to cultural practices in care.

***“Indigenous Peoples are made to conform to Western medicine, which can often be counterproductive. We are dismissed in emergency rooms and treated differently due to our ancestry.”***

They also noted the lack of specific programming or counselling for two-spirited people. Such specialized services could have a significant positive effect on their wellness journeys, as their experiences are unique, and they may have distinct needs that require thoughtful approaches.

A mental wellness system that incorporates strengths-based approaches in adapting care to be more relevant to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures can also help repair relations and foster more collaborative approaches so that no one is left behind.

“

*Young people are looking for relational activities that expand a mainstream understanding of what health services can look like. Things like going outside and spending time in the land: oftentimes people are not prescribing or recommending doing this as part of treatment, but we should.”*

– Karleigh Darnay, Clinical Lead, Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario

“

*When we go through school and practicum, we are taught to do this intake and ask difficult questions, but we need to find a balance and put more emphasis on building relationships instead of rushing folks to share.”*

– Danika Charlebois, Director,  
Partnerships and Outreach, We Matter Campaign

***The intake process***

Because the mental health care system is delivered with a Western lens, the youth leaders said it isn't conducive to open and honest dialogue for healing. When entering care systems and first meeting with a practitioner, they didn't know where to begin. They felt their experiences of trauma ran so deep that it was difficult to find the right words to describe the impact they felt. And the specialists we interviewed were unanimous in noting the problematic nature of the intake process at a systemic level, because it emphasizes Western theories and approaches for treatment. These put the onus on the client to say what they need.

The path to mental wellness is not linear, said one youth leader, and “these things take time to heal, and a variety of different approaches can exist.” The Indigenous specialists in particular emphasized the need to build trust and invest

in relationships with Indigenous youth, and advised mental health sector leaders to be mindful that it will take time.

To meet the challenge of finding one's path to wellness, the Indigenous specialists emphasized the need to move from clinical to more relational approaches to mental health care. Relational approaches would include broader support from care providers, including mentoring, connecting those under their care to other services, and helping them navigate other aspects of life that may be indirect stressors.

***“[Mental health care providers] need to be open to that discussion, and to be open to finding that balance together.”***

***Decolonizing the profession: Indigenous representation and competencies***

Today, Indigenous youth still experience racism in health care settings. Studies confirm that discriminatory and racially hostile treatment by health care professionals results in Indigenous Peoples being reluctant to seek health care when they need it, which can have negative consequences on their long-term health and well-being.<sup>22</sup>

***“Western practitioners and the system have traumatized Indigenous Peoples in the past. There is a long history of mistrust, and it’s a well-placed and smart mistrust. This underscores our professional obligation to address truth and reconciliation.”***

– Dr. David Danto, academic specializing in community mental health and Indigenous wellness

The IYAW participants we spoke with said the non-Indigenous health care providers they dealt with lacked an informed perspective and overlooked their lived experience as Indigenous and/or two-spirited youth. Most, they suggested, were ill-equipped to handle the systemic biases, historical context, and current challenges faced by members of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

But that may be changing. Mental health organizations and regulatory bodies in several jurisdictions have been making efforts to deliver training on trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and personal histories to better serve Indigenous Peoples. In Ontario, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Shkaabe Makwa Centre’s Workforce Development program provides education and training to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis service providers who work in mental health, justice, and education.<sup>25</sup>

And in British Columbia, a pivotal development is under way. The provincial government’s *In Plain Sight* report, published in November 2020, detailed widespread systemic racism against Indigenous Peoples in the BC health care system and provided recommendations to all health regulatory bodies in the province. Two years later, in September 2022, the College of Psychologists of British Columbia (CPBC) joined 10 other BC regulatory colleges in adopting a joint Indigenous Cultural Safety, Humility, and Anti-racism Practice Standard.<sup>24</sup> Now, all CPBC registrants, regardless of their workplace or area of practice, are expected to provide culturally safe and appropriate care to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in the province.

The IYAW youth leaders suggested the addition of more Indigenous practitioners would help foster a better experience because of mutual understanding, trust, and safety. As of September 2021, Indigenous Services Canada reported that 3,128 mental health

counselling providers were registered with the NIHB program, with a fee-for-service billing agreement. Of these, 430 voluntarily self-identified as Indigenous.<sup>25</sup> However, when looking at listings to find a mental health care practitioner, the IYAW youth said they found it hard to determine which providers were specialized in or trained to work with Indigenous Peoples or were Indigenous themselves.

***“Our people are looking for our people to support them. They are looking for a shared lived experience, and we know that culture heals and works. Culture also heals intergenerational trauma and genocide trauma that is still a part of us today.”***

– Leigh Sheldon, Registered Psychologist, Owner, Indigenous Psychological Services



## Reconcile approaches to mental wellness care

- ♦ **Public and private care providers** should work with Indigenous communities to design spaces that are welcoming, safe, and relevant to local language(s) and culture(s). This includes incorporating natural elements, Indigenous art, and areas conducive to relationship-building.
- ♦ **To establish better therapeutic relationships, regulatory colleges and educational institutions** should work together to explore best practices for a client intake process that would enable a more relational and holistic trust-building approach.
- ♦ **Governments, regulatory colleges, and educational institutions** should work together to fund, mandate accreditation, and improve the availability of trauma-informed care and cultural safety, and to include intergenerational trauma and colonial histories in educational curricula.
- ♦ **Regulatory colleges, professional associations, educational institutions, and mental health care systems** should work with Indigenous Nations and mental health leaders to train practitioners in prescribing care interventions that are rooted in Indigenous traditions such as land-based programming, art therapy, and time in community and with Elders.



### WHAT'S NEXT ON OUR JOURNEY

**T**here is still much that can be learned from Indigenous ways of knowing. Solutions for improving mental wellness outcomes for Indigenous Peoples need to come from and be led by Indigenous communities and mental wellness leaders.

Reaching and maintaining a sound state of mental wellness is a journey that involves us all. Youth leaders have been working hard to forge a new path of individual and community wellness, but they're still waiting for meaningful action and support from non-Indigenous parties to create a better future.

***“Everybody has had some instances of success in their lives. Everybody is a superhero of their own story—if you can get that out of folks, then that is what makes the difference.”***

– Danika Charlebois, Director, Partnerships and Outreach, We Matter Campaign

In recent years, we have seen more open dialogue on mental health, including the need for coordinated and improved access to care for all. This has amplified calls for national action, and policymakers, mental health organizations, and corporate Canada are paying closer attention in order to respond to the unique needs of Indigenous Peoples.

When asked what their hopes are for their and future generations, one IYAW participant said: “I would like to see a world of Indigenous Peoples who are ... prospering and finally just healing from all of the trauma.” In this spirit of hope, Indigenous youth are calling on leaders to work together and actively participate to see this vision through.

***The time to invest in healing is now. For we are all on this reconciliation journey together.***

Photo by Damien Bouchard

*Appendix*

# Mental wellness resources

Progress has been made to improve access for young First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to culturally responsive mental wellness supports and mentorship. The wide range of programs and initiatives now available include:

## ***Help lines and supports***

### **Hope for Wellness**

Offers immediate help to all Indigenous Peoples across Canada 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Call 1-855-242-3310 or chat online at [hopeforwellness.ca](https://www.hopeforwellness.ca).

### **Kids Help Phone**

A national 24/7 e-mental health service offering free, confidential support to young people in English and French.

### **Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Crisis Line**

Individuals impacted by the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls can call toll-free at 1-844-413-6649.

### **NAN Hope**

The Nishnawbe Aski Mental Health Wellness Support Access Program (NAN Hope) offers 24/7 navigation and counselling support to community members in northern Ontario at 1-844-626-4673 or via live web-chat or text.

### **National Indian Residential School Crisis Line**

Free crisis support is available to former residential school students and their families 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-866-925-4419.

### **Talk4Healing**

Talk4Healing is a culturally grounded, confidential helpline for Indigenous women in Ontario available in 14 languages, including Algonquin, Mohawk, Oneida, and Odawa.

### **Wellness Together Canada**

Provides free mental health and substance use supports such as counselling, courses, peer support, and coaching. Call 1-888-668-6810 or text WELLNESS to 686868 for youth.

### **WeMatter Campaign**

We Matter is a national multimedia campaign to gather positive messages from people across the country for Indigenous youth going through a hard time.

## ***Mentorship programs***

### **Indigenous Youth Roots (formerly Canadian Roots Exchange)**

A national Indigenous youth organization that provides programs to strengthen and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth.

### **Indspire Rivers to Success**

Indigenous mentees have access to mentors of all backgrounds to help them prioritize their development, seek career opportunities, and achieve success in their chosen fields.

# Summary of recommendations

## ***1. Identifying the social determinants of mental wellness***

**Working together, invest in a society that advances equity and safety for all.**

- ♦ Governments at all levels should provide sufficient funding to ensure basic infrastructure and services such as housing, clean drinking water, health care, education, and transportation in Indigenous communities. This includes increasing the number of essential staff and compensating them equitably.
- ♦ Provincial and territorial governments should prioritize improving the proximity and accessibility of community and hospital-based mental wellness supports to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.
- ♦ Health care systems and mental health care providers should collaborate more closely with educational institutions to improve and promote supports and services to Indigenous students.
- ♦ Businesses and governments, in their role as employers, should do more to help educate Canadians about Indigenous Peoples, our shared history, and the impacts of colonialism. This can be accomplished by working with local Indigenous Nations to raise awareness and train staff to work with and serve Indigenous Peoples. This will foster empathy and decrease racism and bias.

## ***2. Drawing on Indigenous strengths-based mental wellness approaches***

**Return autonomy to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nations and empower them to pursue their mental wellness goals and provide care to their people.**

- ♦ Governments should increase and ensure ongoing funding to communities and to Indigenous-led mental wellness service providers that offer decision-making flexibility and honour the time and expertise of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and facilitators. Businesses can also contribute health-related funding as part of their work with communities they operate in.
- ♦ Governments should provide additional funding and subsidies to cover travel expenses for Indigenous Peoples to receive culture-based programming and care in their communities.
- ♦ Research bodies and governments should fund Indigenous-led research on innovative practices and measurement of mental wellness outcomes from Indigenous-led interventions.
- ♦ Private, public, philanthropic, and non-profit sectors should work to increase the availability of high-quality mentorship programs for Indigenous youth to help strengthen support networks.
- ♦ Governments and media outlets should use channels to highlight examples of Indigenous excellence and use strengths-based phrasing when discussing Indigenous themes.

### ***3. Accessing mainstream mental wellness care and supports***

#### **Improve the supply of mental wellness care services and reduce barriers to access.**

- ♦ Governments, regulatory colleges, and educational institutions should promote and incentivize the accreditation of Indigenous practitioners in mental wellness by providing targeted scholarships and grants, incorporating Indigenous ways of learning into programs, and making them more flexible for prospective learners.
- ♦ Governments and businesses should continue to work with Indigenous Nations to invest in relevant infrastructure to increase internet connectivity so that members may access virtual care options and foster stronger social connections.
- ♦ Provincial and territorial governments should continue to collaborate on simplifying registration and licensing to reduce barriers for licensed care providers to supply cross-provincial services.
- ♦ Through the NIHB program, the federal government should work with registered practitioners to simplify practitioner and client eligibility and approval processes.
- ♦ The federal government should also work with the NIHB to regularly update comprehensive lists of NIHB-registered practitioners. These lists should indicate which practitioners are Indigenous and which are accredited for working with Indigenous and two-spirited Peoples, as well as approximate wait times for each.
- ♦ Governments, regulatory colleges, insurance companies, and business organizations (as employers) should create a central repository of all available resources, along with clear instructions and guides on how to obtain funding, find a provider (including Indigenous and diverse practitioners), and schedule care. The objective should be to make the experience of finding and accessing the right care with the right practitioner as seamless as possible.

### ***4. Navigating the mental wellness service system***

#### **Reconcile approaches to mental wellness care.**

- ♦ Public and private care providers should work with Indigenous communities to design spaces that are welcoming, safe, and relevant to local language(s) and culture(s). This includes incorporating natural elements, Indigenous art, and areas conducive to relationship-building.
- ♦ To establish better therapeutic relationships, regulatory colleges and educational institutions should work together to explore best practices for a client intake process that would enable more relational and holistic trust-building approaches.
- ♦ Governments, regulatory colleges, and educational institutions should work together to fund, mandate accreditation for, and improve the availability of trauma-informed care and cultural safety, and to include intergenerational trauma and colonial histories in educational curricula.
- ♦ Regulatory colleges, professional associations, educational institutions, and mental health care systems should work with Indigenous Nations and mental health leaders to train practitioners in prescribing care interventions that are rooted in Indigenous traditions such as land-based programming, art therapy, and time in community and with Elders.

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Artwork:  
*Hearing my prayers*  
by Shianne Gould, 2017



#### **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

*A Mi'kmaq artist from Whycocomagh, Cape Breton Island, Shianne began painting at the age of ten as a creative outlet and coping mechanism in response to the abuse she was enduring. Working in this healthy way to process and express emotions, she found a more balanced and content state of mind. As a successful artist, writer, teacher, and entrepreneur today, Shianne is passionate about mental health and continues to use her art to express her ideas, emotions, and perspectives.*

*"I'll always spread the love for art and how it can help therapeutically—it got me through my darkest days."*





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