

The Soul Wounds of the Anishinabek People



The Psychological And Intergenerational Impacts
Of The Indian Residential School

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The legacy of the Indian Residential School System continues to be affecting the survivors, their children, grandchildren and communities they live in. These experiences can be found for individuals, families and communities in the mental, emotional, physical, social, economical and spiritual parts of their lives. Understanding the soul wounds or impacts this has had across the generations can assist in creating healing and wellness for Anishinabek people.

This booklet will provide information on the impacts of the Indian Residential School system to the survivors, their families and First Nation communities.

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The Union of Ontario Indians gratefully acknowledges the financial contribution from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada for this work.

**WARNING: If this booklet causes any crisis or distress, call the Indian Residential Schools
Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419**

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1st Printing

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At the heart of the Indian Residential School system was the intent to “kill the Indian in the child” (Campbell Scott, 1920) by attacking Anishinabek culture, language and practices and replacing it with Euro-Canadian languages and practices. It is known that First Nation children were forcibly removed from their parents, families and communities and placed in schools thousands of miles away from all that was familiar to them. During their stays at the schools many suffered neglect and physical, sexual and psychological abuse while enduring harsh living conditions under the pretence of gaining an education. As a result many children experienced personal and cultural degradation that lasted a lifetime for many of them.

The survivors often believed these experiences to be traumatic and resulted in long-term negative impacts across many areas of their lives such as relationships, parenting, health, mental health, beliefs and coping. Many of the survivors were left without any supports or help to heal from the traumas they experienced in the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. In some cases, the survivors didn’t recognize some of their problems as being connected to the Indian Residential School experience. As the survivors had families of their own they unintentionally placed their children at risk of being exposed to these same long-term negative impacts. In doing so, they transmitted their trauma and its effects to their children who were often unaware of their parents’ experiences in the Indian Residential School system. This transmission of trauma is known as intergenerational trauma transmission and it has negative long-term impacts across the generations.

Today there is more awareness of the serious negative experiences that the survivors of the Indian Residential Schools were exposed to, trauma and its impacts, and the ability to transmit trauma across generations. As survivors and their families speak out about the trauma there are opportunities available using cultural and counselling supports to heal from their soul wounds.

Indian Residential School

Source: Where are the Children? Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2009)

What is the Indian Residential School system?

The Canadian Government established the Indian Residential School system in 1892. It was jointly run with various religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The intent of the Indian Residential School system was to assimilate First Nation children into the Canadian society by promoting Euro-Canadian practices and beliefs while discouraging First Nation cultural practices, language and beliefs.

How many Indian Residential Schools were established in Canada?

Approximately 80 schools existed across all parts of Canada except Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

How many children attended the Indian Residential Schools?

Approximately 150,000 First Nation children attended the Indian Residential Schools during their existence.

How long were the schools opened?

Most Indian Residential Schools were closed in the mid-1970s. However, the last school closed in 1996 in Saskatchewan.

Did the parents and their children have a choice about attending these schools?

Some parents voluntarily sent their children to these schools believing they would provide their children with an education. However, many children were forcibly removed from their parents, homes and communities and placed in these government run boarding schools often thousands of miles away. If parents objected there was a risk that they would be placed in jail for refusing to follow the laws of the Canadian Government and its representatives. In 1933 residential school principals were made legal guardians, under the direction of the Government, of all First Nation children who attended the schools causing parents to forcibly give up legal custody of their children.

What happened to the children while at the school?

- Forcible removal of their cultural identity such as cutting of hair, stripped of traditional clothing and possessions
- Renamed with 'Christian' names or known only by a number
- Unsanitary and overcrowded conditions
- Exposure to illnesses such as tuberculosis with lack of effective and immediate health care
- Inadequate food and clothing

- Physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse
- Forced replacement of spiritual beliefs by religious teaching
- Physical and emotional separation from parents, grandparents, extended family, siblings and the opposite sex
- Death due to violence, suicide, malnourishment, disease, exposure to extreme weather conditions
- Loss of language
- Loss of cultural practices and customs

What are the long-term impacts to survivors of the Indian Residential School system?

- Inability to express feelings about the abuse they suffered in the schools
- Internalized feelings of anger, fear, grief, shame and guilt
- Substance abuse, addictions
- Self-sabotaging behaviours
- Violence directed toward others or self (i.e., suicide, self-harm)
- Risk taking behaviours
- Avoidance
- Mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Cultural alienation
- Poor or no interpersonal and relationship skills
- Lack of trust or belief in others or of a safe and predictable world
- Lack of loving and effective parenting skills
- Inability to effectively handle conflict in healthy ways
- Continuation of abuse others
- Anger

Trauma

What is trauma?

There are different types of trauma. Physical trauma is the result of a physical wound or injury. Psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that break a person's sense of security and predictability, leaving one feeling helpless and vulnerable. It does not require a physical injury to be considered traumatic. Survivors of the Indian Residential School system often experienced psychological trauma as many report feeling alone, frightened and overwhelmed.

What are some causes of psychological trauma?

- It happens unexpectedly
- The person is unprepared for it
- The person feels powerless to prevent it
- It happens repeatedly
- Someone was intentionally cruel
- It happened in childhood

How does trauma happen?

- A single, one-time event (i.e., car accident, unexpected loss, assault)
- A prolonged or repeat experience (i.e., apprehension, abuse)
- A cumulative effect (i.e., violence + abuse + racism/discrimination)
- A historical event with prolonged impact (i.e., relocation)

Does trauma happen immediately?

It has the potential to have immediate effects but for some it can take weeks, months or years before the impacts of trauma are noticeable.

Are there long-term impacts to trauma?

Yes, there can be emotional, physical, mental, social, behavioural and spiritual impacts.

What are the spiritual affects to trauma?

Persons may describe a lack of belief or faith in others, including a higher power.

What are the emotional impacts to trauma?

- Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- Feeling shocked, numb and not able to feel love or joy
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Avoiding people, places and things related to the event
- Being irritable or having outbursts of anger and aggressive behaviour
- Becoming easily upset or agitated
- Being withdrawn, feeling rejected or abandoned
- Loss of intimacy or feeling detached
- Feeling detached or unconcerned about others
- Feeling jumpy and getting startled easily at sudden noises
- Confusion
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours

What are the mental impacts to trauma?

- Blaming yourself or having negative views of yourself or the world
- Distrust of others, getting into conflicts, being over controlling
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling on guard and constantly alert
- Having disturbing dreams, memories or flashbacks
- Having work or school problems
- Short term memory loss
- Loss of interest in activities
- Decreased performance levels
- Increased difficulty in relating to others
- Sadness or depression
- Anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

What are the social impacts to trauma?

- Inability to relate to others
- Distrust in others
- Problems with parenting and intimacy

What are the physical effects of trauma?

- Headaches, aches and pains - including chronic pain
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Bowel problems
- Skin problems
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, feeling edgy
- Vomiting
- Ongoing medical problems getting worse
- Sleep problems such as nightmares, sleeping too much or not being able to fall or stay asleep
- Addictions such as alcohol or drug abuse including prescription drug abuse

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

An anxiety disorder that involves reliving psychologically traumatic situations long after the physical danger involved has passed, through flashbacks, nightmares and other physical responses (i.e., poor eating and sleep)

Can trauma be transmitted to others?

Yes, impacts or reactions may be transmitted to the offspring (and subsequent generations) of victims of collective emotional or psychological trauma. This is known as intergenerational, historical or multigenerational trauma.

Does intergenerational trauma happen to First Nations people?

Yes, intergenerational trauma is directly linked to the banning of cultural practices, policies and institutions of assimilation, and loss of culture. It is a reaction to multigenerational, collective, historical wounding of the mind, emotions and spirit.

Why does intergenerational trauma happen?

Victims of trauma such as survivors of the Indian Residential School system display various behaviours and (negative) coping strategies that increase the likelihood of trauma transmission.

- Troubled with traumatic memories, behaviours and negative coping strategies they pass on to their children through modeling
- Limited ability and/or lack of knowledge and skills to assist their children in coping with difficult situations or emotional difficulties.
- Limited ability and/or lack of knowledge and skills to support their children in dealing with developmental transitions and milestones (i.e., moving from childhood to adolescence).
- Overprotective or neglectful of children and their needs

What are the impacts of intergenerational trauma?

- Addictions, alcohol or drug abuse
- Abuses: physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, mental, spiritual
- Low self-esteem
- Dysfunctional families and interpersonal relationships
- Poor parenting such as rigidity, neglect, abandonment, emotional coldness
- Suicide acts, thoughts and behaviours
- Teen pregnancy
- Depression, particularly chronic to individuals and widespread across the community
- Chronic and widespread anger and rage
- Eating and sleeping problems that are significant and chronic
- Chronic physical illness
- Chronic unresolved grief and loss
- Fear of personal growth, transformation and healing
- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol effect (FAE)
- Unconscious internalization of residential school behaviours such as false politeness, not speaking out, passive compliance, excessive neatness, obedience without thought
- School based learning problems like fear of failure, avoiding learning that seems 'too much like school', learning disabilities with a psychological basis
- Spiritual confusion and alienation that doesn't allow for growth

- Internalized sense of inferiority or avoidance to non-First Nation people
- Becoming abusers and oppressors of others
- Cultural identity issues including denial or refusal of cultural background, cultural identity confusion, fear of learning or practicing culture
- Disconnection from the natural world as an important part of daily life and spiritual beliefs
- Passiveness or having no voice
- High risk behaviours (i.e., sexual promiscuity)
- Early death
- Poor attachment to caregivers

Is it possible to see intergenerational trauma transmitted at the community level?

Yes, many of the social, economic and political challenges in First Nation communities are directly or indirectly related to the residential school experience and other colonial factors. These may include:

- Paternalistic authority
- Passive dependency
- Patterns of misuse of power to control others
- Community social patterns that foster gossip and rumours but failure to support and stand with those who speak out or challenge the status quo
- Breakdown of 'social glue' that binds families and communities together such as trust, common ground, shared purpose and direction, a strong community life of giving and sharing, lack of volunteerism, co-operative groups/neighbourhoods working together for the benefit of all
- Conflict and lack of unity between individuals and families including factions within the community
- Conflicts and confusion over religious and spiritual based practices
- Toxic communication: gossip, criticism, personal attacks, sarcasm, secrets, put downs, etc.
- Destruction of social support network
- Passive acceptance of powerlessness with community life and/or governance
- Loss of traditional governance processes that gave people a sense of influence in shaping the community
- Joblessness and poverty
- Family violence
- Family breakdown
- Homelessness
- High rates of imprisonment

Healing

Healing can occur at an individual level and requires the survivor to learn strategies to cope with the anxiety and negative emotions or behavioural reactions to the trauma. Seeking counselling from a counsellor trained in trauma therapy or a cultural support person/elder is often recommended.

Some helpful coping skills to learn to cope with trauma and intergenerational trauma are:

- Muscle relaxation and deep breathing
- Thought stopping
- Pleasant imagery
- Positive self-talk
- Recognizing triggers and reminders
- Family and social support
- Creating a story that empowers one to survive and see strengths

As trauma and intergenerational trauma was the result of attacks to the culture and spirit of the children, addressing these soul wounds often requires cultural interventions and supports. Cultural ceremonies and practice allow one to reclaim their cultural identity and pride while learning strategies to cope with the impacts of the trauma.

Healing from intergenerational trauma has 4 critical components:

1. Confront our trauma and embrace our history by learning Anishinabek history and what happened. Knowledge is power!
2. Understand the trauma by learning about trauma reactions and cultural practices to address grief and loss.
3. Release the pain; usually through cultural ceremonies/practices that creates a sense of belonging and connection to land, culture and others with a shared history.
4. Transcend the trauma by moving to healing that allows us to define ourselves in ways that move beyond the trauma.

The Elders have shared that we have all the teachings within us to be well and live a good life - 'mno-biimaadzawin'. Reclaiming culture and language have the ability to set us free from the soul wounds inflicted on our people and community. We are thankful to all those survivors who spoke out and demanded healing and brought about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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