

A Wellness Guide for Indigenous Families



**BEAR
PAW**
MEDIA AND EDUCATION

A MESSAGE FROM
ELDER RUTH CARDINAL DE UBIERA

Losing a loved one in this way is tragic and extremely painful. Such a loss may cause you to have a range of feelings and emotions, all at the same time. It may also hinder your ability to think clearly and process information. Everything you are feeling is part of a natural response to loss, tragedy and pain.

It is important for you to take care of yourself. I encourage you, if you can, ask for support from someone you trust as soon as you can.

Sometimes, we do not always have a soft place to land when we need it most. While we may not have all of the supports we need, we always have ourselves. There are so many things not in your control right now, but some things are - ask yourself, "what can I do right now to care for myself?" The answer is inside of you.

There are things you can do to support yourself. You've made it this far. One of our Nehiyaw Wiyasowewina (Cree Natural Laws), Otipaymsowin, teaches us that we are the boss of ourselves - self-leadership - self-sovereignty. This law, left to us by our ancestors, reminds us that we have the ability to make choices and take actions for ourselves. Self-care is important, especially for those who are the one that everyone else comes to for help.

Trust in Wiyotawimaw (Creator) and in the strength of all our ancestors. Trust in the ceremonies. Trust in yourself. It is possible for you to find Miyo-pimâtisiwin (the Good Life) - once again.

We honour the lives and memories of the Indigenous women, girls, men, and boys who are missing, murdered in Alberta and beyond. They are our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, sons and daughters. Each has their own story, family and community. Each is loved and deeply missed.

GUIDE INTRODUCTION

We need each other to heal. Healing is a constant and evolving process; there is no end.

You always have choices on your healing journey. Our communities, families and children are central to our healing. They also are affected by trauma, loss and grief. Centring our family and kin in healing changes the conversations we have and the actions we take to support ourselves and each other. Children and your inner child, especially need you and your support in their healing.

We hope this booklet supports you with some guidance and tools you can use, in your own way, on your journey towards healing, health and wellness. Our intention is to respect and encourage you on your own path.

Only you know what you need. You have the answers inside yourself. Draw on your own spiritual or religious beliefs and practices. Please only take what you need from this booklet - leave the rest.

As you work through this booklet, you may want to use a journal to do some of the activities.

We encourage you to ask for support from someone you trust as soon as you can. A support can be an Elder, family member, friend, partner or advocate. Please reach out to

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HOW DOES TRAUMA AFFECT OUR BRAINS?

Some trauma was passed down intergenerationally. Others, we experience as a child or as we grow up. When we experience trauma, we have natural human responses to it – these responses help keep us safe and alive.

These responses are often called:

FIGHT FLIGHT FREEZE

When we experience a “trauma response”, our brain and body stays “on guard” to watch for threats and protect us. This can severely impact our brain functioning. It can make it harder to make decisions and to remember information.

Everyone reacts and responds to trauma differently. We all need different supports when we experience a traumatic event.

If you have experienced trauma, please reach out for support to someone you trust.



Indigenous Knowledge to close gaps in Indigenous Health

[youtube.com/watch?v=lpKjtujtEYI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpKjtujtEYI)

Trauma and the Nervous System

[youtube.com/watch?v=ZdIQRxwT110](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdIQRxwT110)

Wired for Danger: The effects of childhood trauma on the brain

[youtube.com/watch?v=OA4CqLL_PzE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OA4CqLL_PzE)

ACES Childhood Experiences

[youtube.com/watch?v=8gKyCiOL7eM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gKyCiOL7eM)

WHAT AM I FEELING?

TRAUMA, AMBIGUOUS LOSS, AND GRIEF

You are not your trauma. You are a human being.
You deserve love, care and healing.

Trauma is an experience, not an event.
It is what happens inside of us, as a result of
what happens to us. Trauma is our response
to an event, not the
event itself.

(Trauma Foundation, 2021)



GRIEF AND LOSS

Grief and loss are often experienced during or after a traumatic event. Grief is a process. It is our natural response to loss of any kind. It can be felt in many ways:

Emotional Mental
Community
Collective Physical
Spiritual Social

TYPES OF GRIEF

Ambiguous loss: Loss that happens without closure or clear understanding, often leaves us with unresolved questions and feelings. We can experience ambiguous loss when a:

- Family is separated
- Loved one is incarcerated
- Child is taken by Child and Family Services
- Family member goes missing or is murdered

Anticipatory: Grief before a loss happens

Bereavement: Sadness after losing a loved one

Disenfranchised: Grief that is not accepted or understood by others

Complicated: Ongoing and strong feelings of loss that make healing more difficult

If you are experiencing ambiguous loss, contact the Residential School Health Support Program at Native Counselling Services of Alberta for more information on supports. 780-451-4002

(Information adapted from CDLI Toolkit for Grief)

TWO TYPES OF GRIEVING STYLES:

Most of us use a combination of these styles in our grieving process:



(Information adapted from CDLI Toolkit for Grief)

GRIEF IS MESSY!

When we experience grief, we often go in and out of loss-oriented and restoration-oriented states.

LOSS-ORIENTED

- Thinking about loss
- Intense and unexpected emotional responses (crying, anger)
- Focused on the impact of loss of relationship and connection

RESTORATION-ORIENTED

- Managing life changes
- Trying new things
- Distracting from grief (focus on creative or other positive activities)
- Creating new roles, identities, relationships

In honour of

_____.

I remember:

you are _____,

you are _____,

you are _____;

the way you _____.

One of my favourite memories is when:

_____.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY

We create a community of supports around us through healthy relationships. Healthy supports can be your family, Elders, organizations and their staff, friends, partners, anyone who has the capacity to give you what you need – even if that's space, a listening ear, and comfort.

Use this activity to visualize who are the healthy supports you can rely on and trust, call when you need, and they will show up for you in a healthy way. Write their names in each part of the spiral. Use this activity to go back to from time-to-time to move people around, remove and add new supports. Remind yourself you are loved and supported.



CONNECTING WITH ELDERS

You may consider connecting with an Elder to support your healing journey. Elders have a lot of knowledge and wisdom about spirituality, ceremony, language, teachings and history. An Elder is a person who is recognized as an Elder by their community.

Elders generally do not call themselves Elders. Instead, when they speak, they refer to the Elders as the ones they studied with. With proper protocol, Elders can share the lineage of their teachings and who they studied with. Elders study with their Elders to earn the right to pass on their knowledge. Elders can be any gender and any age.

HOW DO I CONNECT WITH AN ELDER?

If you would like to connect with an Elder, here are some ways you can:

- ➔ Ask your community and family if they know an Elder.
- ➔ Contact Native Counselling Services of Alberta – we work with Elders! Other local organizations around you, or Friendship Centres may also have Elders.
- ➔ Once you find an Elder, ask if you can call them. It is always best to meet them in person. During Covid-19, many Elders are meeting by phone or video.
- ➔ Build a relationship with the Elder. Ask them about protocol and how it should be presented to them so that you can ask them specific questions.

When you offer protocol to an Elder, be mindful that they may not respond right away. If an Elder cannot meet the commitment asked for a variety of reasons, they may not accept protocol and may refer you to someone else.

WHAT IS PROTOCOL?

For some First Nations and Métis Elders, tobacco is the preferred offering. Tobacco is a sacred plant. It is important to ask about an Elder's protocol as there are different protocols for different Elders. There are also specific protocols for certain questions and commitments. Other protocol may include: sweetgrass, sage, cedar, broadcloth. Tobacco is not part of Inuit cultural practices. Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers may ask for a small gift or another offering.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ELDER AND A KNOWLEDGE KEEPER?

Elders and Knowledge Keepers are not the same. Knowledge Keepers are people who are recognized and identified by Elders as having cultural knowledge.

Everybody is gifted with that sacred water. If we're overwhelmed with pain and hurt and anger, whatever the emotion is, we want to cry. If we just allow ourselves to cry and when tears come down, we always feel a little bit better after because it's released.

We need to be like little kids. They're naturally like that, little children. They just cry anytime they want, they don't say "I'm sorry." They just allow themselves. They're being natural. They also scream when they're frustrated. They just scream, healing through screaming. They do things naturally.

Little children are so wise. If we just watch and we listen to little kids, we're going to learn all that. They are little Elders teaching us...the way to help us heal ourselves.



CLEANSING WITH WATER

Water is a powerful medicine. You can use water to cleanse your mind, body, and spirit. It can also help wash away negative energies around you.

Cleansing in the shower can be helpful at the beginning, middle or end of the day. Here are some ideas you can use or create your own practice:

Stand under running water

Say "I cleanse my body, mind and spirit" and/or "I release all that does not serve me"

Visualize the water taking it away

Wash from your head to toes and visualize all the negative energy being washed away

End with "I am free from all that does not serve me"

(Adapted from Trauma Healing Guide by Gerald Kiesman)



[Water Sacred Relationship](#) explores our relationship with water and ourselves. There are 15 short educational videos and a 52-minute documentary.

GROUND YOURSELF IN 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Anxiety is real and it is very common. If you are feeling anxious, overwhelmed or having a panic attack, the first step is to focus on your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths can help you return to a feeling of calm, safety and presence.

Once you find your breath, go through the 5...4...3... 2...1... Steps to help ground yourself:

NOTICE:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

OTHER GROUNDING ACTIVITIES:

- Squeeze the pressure point on your hand. Make an "L" shape with your fingers and squeeze the middle part of the "L". Repeat as much as you need.
- Run warm water on your hands and then turn it to cold water. Then try the opposite cold to warm.
- Hold a piece of ice and count to see how long it takes it to melt.
- Touch something comforting to you like a soft blanket, soft sweater, or a fluffy towel.

SMUDGING

Use a flat rock, an abalone shell, a cast iron pan, or ceramic bowl to hold your medicine.

You can smudge and pray any time of the day. Smudge medicines include sweetgrass, sage, cedar, or diamond willow fungus.

Keep your medicine in a clean place. When lighting your smudge, use matches and do not blow on your medicine. Instead use a feather or your hand to get the smoke going.

Remove jewelry and glasses, turn off cell phone and put it aside.

SMUDGE...

Hands first

Ceremonial items

Mouth to speak good things

Eyes to see good things

Ears to hear good things

Head to think good things

Heart for love and acceptance of others

Say your prayer and send it to Creator with the smoke from the smudge



MEDICINE TEACHINGS

Written by and shared with permission from Bernard Dumas (Cree) for all Nations to learn.

TOBACCO Tobacco is the first medicine given by Creator. We cannot move forward with anything without making the protocol offering of tobacco. You can offer tobacco protocol to Elders or knowledge keepers to receive teachings, hold ceremony, receive guidance and healing. You need to also offer tobacco protocol when picking other medicines such as sweetgrass, cedar, sage and diamond willow fungus. Offer tobacco to Creator and to that medicine spirit before picking any medicines. We offer this protocol to give thanks to Creator for providing it to us and to replace what we have taken. We first used the Tobacco plant, however, today we can use tobacco from cigarettes or loose tobacco.

SWEETGRASS Sweetgrass grows in central and southern Alberta. The ideal time to pick sweetgrass is at the end of July to the beginning of August. Sweetgrass is considered a man's medicine. Women can use it except when they are on their moon time. Before you pick medicine, you will need to be in a positive space with a clear mind. The energies you have will be the energies put into the medicine you pick. When you pick the medicine, do not take the root because it will not grow back. After picking the sweetgrass, you dry it by laying it flat in a clean area. When preparing to braid sweetgrass, different people will use different amounts to make the braid. When you braid it, you will create three strands that represent mind, body, and spirit. Light your sweetgrass and cleanse your energy and the energies around you.



CEDAR Cedar grows in British Columbia and Ontario. We pick cedar branches and use the needles to smudge, to cleanse and to decontaminate the air. It boosts our respiratory organs health. Cedar can be picked any time of the year. Only pick enough for what you need for the year. After picking cedar branches, lay them in a flat and clean area to dry. Once dry, you can remove the needles and grind them until they are a powder. Light your cedar and smudge or make tea.

DIAMOND WILLOW FUNGUS Grows on the diamond willow in damp wooded areas primarily in Northern Alberta. You can pick it year-round, however, the ideal time to pick is in the fall. Diamond willow fungus cannot be used by a woman when she is on her moon time. When picking the fungus, remove it from the diamond willow with a knife. Dry the fungus in a clean area before using it. Once dried, you can break of a small piece and light it to smudge.

SAGE There are different types of sage that grow wild in central and southern Alberta. Buffalo sage and horse sage are the most common that grow in Alberta. The best time to pick sage is at the end of July. Sage is a women's medicine. It is the only medicine that a woman can use when on her moon time. When you pick sage, break the stem at the bottom of the plant and do not take the root. This is to ensure the plant grows back by next picking season. After picking sage, lay or hang in bunches in a clean area to dry. Once dried, remove the sage leaves from the stem. The stems should be returned to Mother Earth in a clean area undisturbed by humans or animals or can be burned in a clean fire. You can use sage to smudge your vehicle, office space, home, before you go hunting to be safe, or before you travel. Roll the sage leaves in a little ball, light it and smudge with it.

MEDITATION

Meditation has gained attention and has been the focus of scientific studies to determine if it has a positive effect on mental health. These studies have determined have found evidence that meditation practice has these benefits:

- Literally rewire the brain circuits that boost both mind and body health
- Changes in grey matter volume and enhanced connectivity between brain regions
- Reduce cortisol levels and blood pressure and heart rate, breathing and brain waves improve
- Helps us slow down and be in the present moment. The benefit is that you are more calm, memory gets a boost and so does self-awareness and attention
- Helps us sleep better
- Positive impact on the immune system and boosts T-cell production which fight infections
- Proved effective in helping people with chronic pain management

(Adopted from An Introduction to Mindfulness and Meditation for Well-Being with Dr. Michael Yellowbird)



Meditation with Shayla Stonechild
youtube.com/watch?v=-UsBj9FjR6M

Meditation with Malina Dawn
youtube.com/watch?v=3Mtyi0sEpxg&t=1s

Mindfulness Meditation, Dr, Michael Yellowbird
youtu.be/1ogRvcEB9K4

Meditation 101
youtube.com/watch?v=o-kMJBWk9E0

REMEMBER TO BREATHE

Sometimes, we forget to breathe, especially when we are experiencing trauma.

Sometimes, if we've experienced trauma, talking about breath, breathing can also be a trigger. Take care of yourself and if this section is not right for you, that is ok.

Breathwork can support self-awareness. It can help release tension and trauma in our bodies. Focusing on our breath can bring us back to the present moment and to our bodies.

Here is a breathing exercise you can do anytime:



Breathwork: Alternate Nostril Breathing by
Shayla Stonechild, Matriarch Movement
youtube.com/watch?v=kKToufKZpY

SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

Self-affirmations can help calm your nervous system. Use some of the affirmations below or create your own! Tip: use "I am" to begin and make the affirmations neutral and in the present.

I am safe.

I am loved.

I am supported.

*Even though I am experiencing pain and difficulty,
I am present.*

Use a journal to write your own self-affirmations starting with "I am..."

START A JOURNAL

Journaling can help improve our mental and emotional health. When we are under a lot of stress, it can be very helpful to write down what we are feeling. Journaling what we are experiencing can help provide clarity and help us develop coping strategies.

Here are some reasons why you might consider a journal for yourself:

- Evokes mindfulness
- Reduces stress
- Clears thoughts and provide clarity
- Helps you to understand yourself
- Improves your immune system
- Gratitude can help us sustain our social bonds
- Opportunity for creativity. Some people write poetry, draw or use their journal to explore their dreams. It can be a place to use your creative instincts.
- Make your journal attractive, use colourful pens, stickers, draw pictures and write your thoughts if this is an outlet that appeals to you
- There are many different types of journals! They aren't always writing. Journals can be whatever you want them to be – drawings, photos, collages, poems, letters to your loved one, streams of what is on your mind

You can create your own journal in a notebook, or there are lots of great apps for you to journal on your phone.



[5 Minute Journal](#) – Beginner journal
[Penzu](#) – Secure journaling
[Daylio](#) – for the non-writer
[Dario](#) – secure journaling

NEED HELP TO GET STARTED?

Try any of these...

- I feel....because....
- A letter to your loved one
- 3 things you are grateful for...
- I need more...
- Something I need to say but can't (yet)...
- I would love some support with...
- Words of support you've received from others





MUSIC

Listening to music can be entertaining and a source of pleasure and contentment. Research shows that music can also relax the mind, energize the body, and even help people manage pain.

Instead of thinking of music as pure entertainment, consider some of the major mental health benefits of incorporating music into your everyday life. You might find that you feel more motivated, happy, and relaxed as a result. These are some of the benefits of listening to music:

- Reduce stress
- Improve memory
- Improve mood
- Cultural and spiritual connections
- Help manage pain
- Help with sleep
- Reduce symptoms of depression

Most people have music that they enjoy listening to. Consider expanding your musical tastes and see if you might enjoy music from other genres.

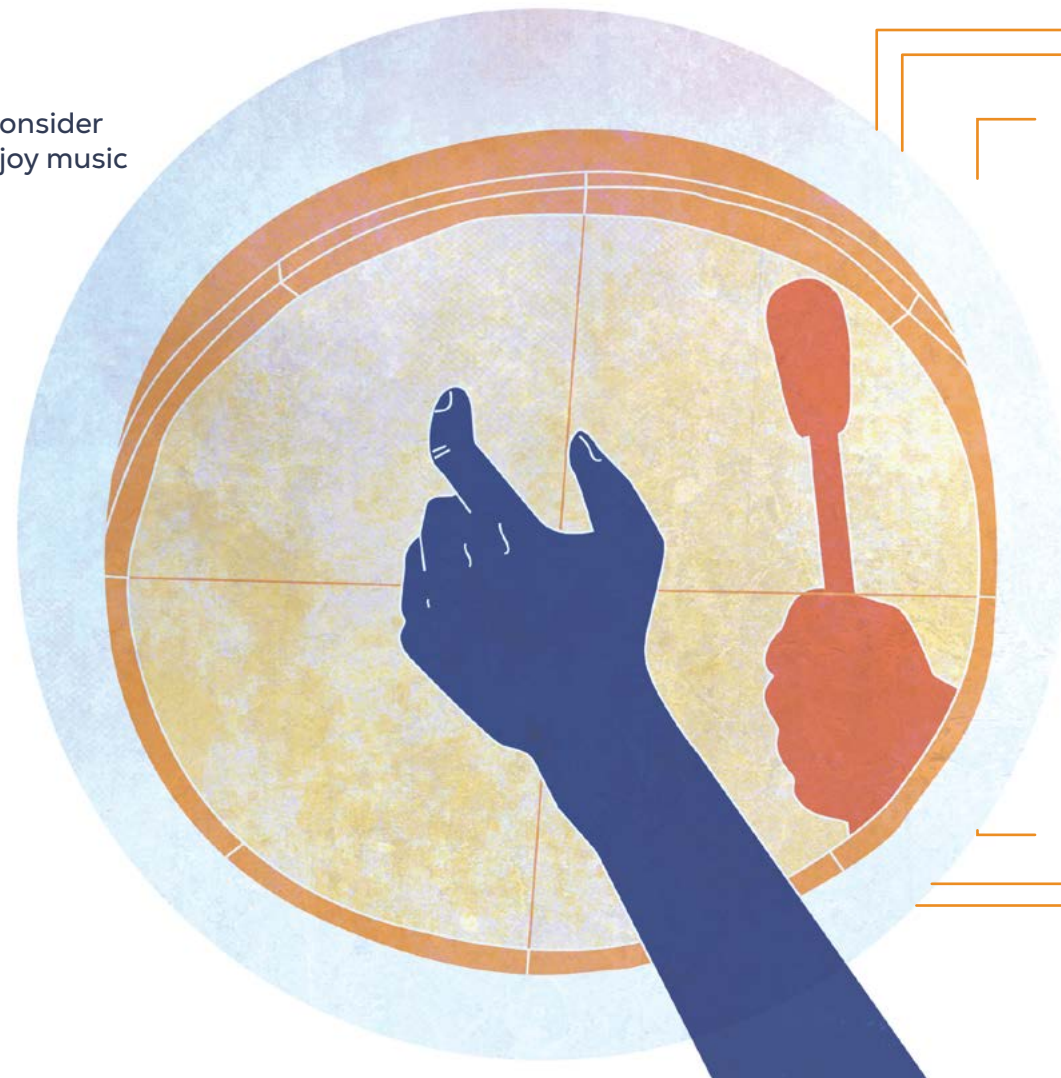


Strong Women's Song by Shelly Young
[youtube.com/watch?v=FJB-ysGzu80](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJB-ysGzu80)

Jeremy Dutcher – Honour Song
[youtube.com/watch?v=7wtB-XN3pql](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wtB-XN3pql)

Algonquin Water Song
[youtube.com/watch?v=KC2FHciQ0sU&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KC2FHciQ0sU&t=7s)

3 Hours of Native American songs for relaxation
youtu.be/h34MSoNUXSM



TAKE PHOTOS

Walking *in* and *out* of the city can create an opportunity for us to wonder, wander and to experience the present moment. From a simple leaf, to intricate flower patterns, noticing nature draws our attention closer to the natural world and our hearts, wherever we are.

Most of us now have powerful cameras in our pockets! Mindfulness photography can help us practice mindfulness, awareness and creativity. Bring the energy of nature inside of yourself.

HERE'S AN IDEA!

Take yourself on a walk. Turn all of your notifications on your phone off, even for a short time.

Set your camera on auto – so you can just focus on walking, breathing, and witnessing what you see, hear, and smell.

HERE ARE SOME PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS!

Focus on getting closer to what you want to photograph. When you think you're close enough, get closer. Right up to what drew you to want to take the picture in the first place.

Cut out any unwanted background.

When you are done, use your camera editing tools to edit your image by cropping, playing with colour or changing the orientation.

There is no right way to take a photo of something that intrigues you!



[everyday-mindfulness.org](https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org)

MOVEMENT IS MEDICINE

One of the best things we can do when we are experiencing anxiety or stress is simply get out and take a walk. You don't have to hike up a mountain, usually a lap around the block will do. Getting some fresh air and our bodies moving can help release stuck thoughts and change negative thinking patterns.

Walking for 20 to 30 minutes every day is highly beneficial for your mental and physical well-being.

YOGA

The term "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit word "yuj" which means "to yoke" or "to join." It is a practice that brings our body and mind together. The benefits of yoga are numerous. Scientific studies have found that regular practice lowers cortisol levels, stress, anxiety, fatigue and depression.

There are many short YouTube instructional videos that could be a great starting point for some stress relief. Yoga is very beneficial for anyone - from beginner to Elder!



YOUTUBE IT!

Grandmothers Meditation from 'Namgis First Nation Yoga Instructor

youtube.com/watch?v=JzyKi4JhX6g

10-minute Morning Yoga for Beginners

youtube.com/watch?v=VaoV1PrYft4

Gentle and Slow Yoga

youtube.com/watch?v=kFhG-ZzLNN4



FOOD IS MEDICINE

Being mindful about the food we eat and how it impacts our health is more important than ever. Our cultural traditions have much to teach us about eating well and respecting mother earth. Below are some resources about how to sustain our body, mind and spirit.



GO GOOGLE!

The Importance of Native Food Systems During COVID and Beyond.

foodprint.org/blog/native-food-systems/

Combat Stress with Good Nutrition

verywellmind.com/how-to-combat-stress-with-good-nutrition-3144529

6 Ways to Practice Mindful Eating

mindful.org/6-ways-practice-mindful-eating/

wernative.org/articles/food



YOUTUBE IT!

Medicine Walk with Elder Walter Lavallee

youtube.com/watch?v=L4EBgVyML1M

Elder Walter Lavallee is Cree from the Piapot First Nation, Saskatchewan. The video shows different plants, how to recognize them, and how they are used by First Nations and Métis people.



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED COUNSELLING OR A PSYCHOLOGIST?

Sometimes stress and life events make it difficult to cope.

Stress from the loss of a loved one, a relationship breakdown, employment or financial problems have been even more overwhelming during the pandemic.

Paying attention to your mental health is critical. If you are in a state of constant exhaustion, high anxiety or experiencing feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, counselling may be a good option for you.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

If you are interested in counselling, talk with your family doctor. This may be a good first step. Doctors can conduct an assessments and may also prescribe medication if you agree it is needed. Doctors also can make referrals for counselling, psychologists or psychiatric assessment.

Only psychiatrists and doctors prescribe medications.

If you have access to an Employee Assistance Program through your employer, contact them to see what kinds of benefits you have access to.

COUNSELLING OR PSYCHOLOGIST APPOINTMENTS

If you are experiencing ambiguous loss, it is generally recommended to access practical supports rather than counselling in the first six months after the initial loss.

A counsellor or psychologist is like a mirror - they reflect back to you what they hear and ask questions to guide you to your own solutions.

A person's gender, race, cultural background and age may impact a counselling relationship. Counselling is most effective when there is a feeling of trust in the therapeutic relationship. Initial appointments with counsellors or psychologists are usually a first step to get an understanding of the issues you are currently experiencing. If you don't have a connection with your counsellor or psychologist by your third visit, it may be time to find a new one so you can build a good relationship. You get to decide if a counsellor or psychologist is right for you.

If you or members of your family attended residential school, you may be eligible for funding with a registered psychologist approved by Health Canada.

Contact NCSA's Resolution Health Support Worker in your region for suggestions for supports at 780-451-4002

RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL HEALTH SUPPORT WORKER PROGRAM

[Native Counselling Services of Alberta](#)

Phone: 780-451-4002

THE CIRCLE (Edmonton area and surrounding First Nations)

- Support group for surviving family and friends of Missing and/or Murdered Indigenous People
- Court support
- Family support
- Resource referrals

Phone: 780-264-8437

CANADA BENEFIT FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG VICTIMS OF CRIME

canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/parents-young-victims-crime.html

NATIONAL MMIWG 24/7 SUPPORT/CRISIS LINE

Toll-free phone: 1-844-413-6649

Alberta: 1-888-495-6588

ALBERTA FAMILY INFORMATION LIAISON UNIT (FILU)

- Information about the justice system and processes
- Updates on investigations and court
- Connections to Elders, spiritual supports and counselling

Phone: 780-427-3460

Toll-free phone: 310-0000

alberta.ca/family-information-liaison-unit.aspx

VICTIMS SERVICES

- Coping and emotional support and referrals
- Support during interviews with police and identification of your loved one
- Liaison with the homicide investigation team
- Court support

Phone: Edmonton 780-421-2217

Email: ctss@edmontonpolice.ca

RCMP VICTIMS SERVICES

Phone: 780-995-5273

Email: info@karevictimsservices.ca

ALBERTA VICTIMS OF CRIME PROGRAM

You may be eligible for financial support from the Province of Alberta if your loved one died as a result of a violent crime. For more information google: Alberta Victims of Crime Program

VICTIMS OF HOMICIDE SUPPORT SOCIETY

➤ Support group for families of victims of homicide
victimsofhomicide.org

OUR GRATITUDE

We started and ended this project in ceremony. We are grateful for the guidance of Elder Ruth Cardinal de Ubiera and Elder Elsie Paul as well as family members of Missing, Murdered and Exploited Indigenous People in Alberta. Kinanâskomitin for your willingness to share the stories of your loved ones and your experiences through these processes to help others.

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[BearPawLegal@ncsa.ca](mailto: BearPawLegal@ncsa.ca)

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