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The Alberta Men's Network

Community. Practice. Research. Equity Movement.

AMN Healing Circles

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Treaty 7 Territory Land Acknowledgements

Alberta Men's Network acknowledges that we organize, work, live and build community on the traditional homelands of the Blackfoot Confederacy: the Siksika, Kainai and Piikani; their Treaty 7 cosignatories: the Tsuut'ina and Îyâxe Nakoda Nations; the Métis (MNA Region 3) and those who call Calgary (Mohkinstsis) home. We recognize, as settlers and guests, that we are on Indigenous homelands and express our gratitude and appreciation for the Indigenous people who live here and have shared their knowledge. We are committed to taking action on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 94 Calls to Action (2015) and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: Reclaiming Power and Place (2019).

Introduction

The Alberta Men's Network (AMN) in collaboration with the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women (ANIW) and the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work, received funding from the Family and Community Safety Program, Alberta Government, to coordinate the *Men as Agents of Change: Peaceful Families, Harmonious Communities Project* (April 2019 - March 2020). AMN also received further support from Calgary Foundation for its ongoing work. Building on AMN's previous achievements, the project aim was to prevent and reduce domestic violence and increase well-being by supporting men in maintaining healthy relationships and decreasing gender-based violence. Healing Circles, along with Men's Talks, became one of the featured activities of the project which sought to welcome men and Albertans in general into a space of reflection and healing through facilitated group dialog and peer-based support. AMN has recognized both the critical need for and lack of empathetic spaces for healing from trauma and difficult life experiences for men and for community members in general. Healing Circles, guided by First Nations teachings and practices, provides a much-needed space for Albertans.

Who is Alberta Men's Network?

The Alberta Men's Network is a community committed to nonviolence and working across the gender spectrum to create healthy families and communities. We are supported by a number of community partners including Men's Action Network Calgary, Alberta Network of Immigrant Women and the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work. We support healthy masculinities and gender equity by identifying and working within a human rights, feminist and anticolonial framework. AMN is made up of dedicated members who belong to community, non-profit, academic, social service, government, business, and other sectors in Alberta. Our human rights anticolonial lens is a firm foundation from which to build community supports and programs to transform our structures and the social norms that perpetuate violence and inequality. We work inclusively with men from diverse backgrounds and across genders to foster peersupport, and share knowledge of community supports and services. With diversity as our strength, AMN believes that cultural humility, respect, and solidarity through love are cornerstones of men's violence prevention work. Through the development of an online and in-person resource network, AMN supports men and their families and communities to access supports, improve and maintain healthy relationships, learn about various aspects of their own mental health, and develop and contribute to positive peer networks for richer community supports.

What is: Human Rights and Anticolonial Work with Men?

AMN works to promote healthy and positive masculinities by recognizing and working to end all forms of oppression, including: patriarchy and gender inequity, colonization, racism, white privilege, economic inequality, gender and sexual stigma, ableism and other dehumanization. We understand that historical relationships of power and oppression create various levels of marginalization and social exclusion, which together, maintain enduring systemic inequality over generations. In the Canadian context, historical and intergenerational trauma through European colonization and ongoing colonial relations maintain white, male hetero/cisgender privilege. This resonates with the histories of communities around the world. Human rights organizations worldwide recognize the need to involve men in gender equity work, with a focus on capacity-building and peer mentorship roles as primary strategies for the prevention of gender-based violence and intersectional oppression¹. Building on this momentum, organizations and communities in Alberta have important roles to play in shifting social norms and advocating for progressive policy changes.

Overview of AMN's Healing Circles



Members of AMN at a workshop

¹ Lorenzetti, L., Lantion, V., Murwisi, P., Hoyt, M., Oliphant, F., Sadhwani, H., Oshchepkova, T., & Este, D. (2016). The Alberta Men's Survey: A conversation with men about healthy relationships. Alberta Men's Network, Calgary, Alberta.

Healing Circles Teachings, from the perspective of Elder Adrian Wolfleg:

Healing Circles are a place, based on Indigenous philosophy, where people can safely share feelings, thoughts and concerns about their lives while receiving, and providing, support as they work through any difficulties they feel may be impeding their development, well-being, and life choices. Typically, participants attend regular, guided consecutive sessions that facilitate sharing: establishing boundaries, addictions, communications, family rules, control, loss, and closure. The number of sessions, and topics, may be increased should participants and the organizers choose to do so. The Healing Circle recognizes, and incorporates, Sharing Circle teachings and is a form of group support, not therapy. As offered, the sessions are more Support Circles. Participants are provided an opportunity to meet with support staff and/or Elders (on site) should there be a need, or wish, for deeper discussions and/or sharing.

Healing Circles Learning Goals

The Healing Circles we offered were facilitated by AMN's Traditional Knowledge Keeper, Adrian Wolfleg, and focused on the following learning goals for participants:

- To recognize the importance of a safe space and dedicated time for deep reflection, sharing thoughts and concerns, while offering peer support to other community members.
- 2. To increase awareness and knowledge about healthy relationships, forgiving self and others, letting go and the impact of past trauma.
- 3. To increase knowledge of resources and supports for healthy relationships, mental health, and well-being.
- 4. To learn from, and participate in, Indigenous healing practices.

Healing Circles Protocol & Agenda

AMN's guiding principles were developed into our Healing Circle's guiding principles through separate AMN training sessions² for facilitators and support staff and shared, then modelled, for participants just before the group guidelines were presented.

² Wang, Q., Lorenzetti, L., Mancey, A., Tabak, W. (2020). AMN Foundational Training: A Community Report. Alberta Men's Network/ University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work.

Guiding Principles

- **Safety and inclusion** we are aware of the culture and prevalence of oppression of all forms in society so we work to ensure that everyone feels safe, welcome, and can fully participate in, and benefit from, the session. Participants are advised that as the session is a one-time gathering, to filter what they share and that anything discussed confidentially (as long as there was no presumption of harm to self or others) will be safeguarded and kept within the group.
- Anti-oppressive environment as organizers and facilitators, we acknowledge
 that inequities, privilege and power differentials among individuals and community
 groups exist and take measures to empower, encourage and provide space for
 individuals and community voices that experience oppression in all forms.
- **Collective expertise** we recognize the knowledge and expertise of individuals, community, and groups and work to create a safe space for knowledge exchange, equal sharing and mutual learning.
- Intersectionality an intersectional lens facilitates a greater awareness, and a
 better understanding, of the complexities violence, oppression, and inequities
 bestow upon all communities. We encourage everyone to see examples and/or
 analogies used in session through an intersectional lens.

Healing Circle Protocol/Outline

Our Healing Circles followed the summarized outline below to ensure that learning goals were met, and everyone was able to participate. Please note that, although guided, the theme and context of each session flowed from participant discussion and need, thus varying from session to session.

- 1. Arrival and Welcome
- Opening prayer and Land Acknowledgement by Elder (AMN's Traditional Knowledge Keeper) or designate.
- 3. Round of introductions with name, place of origin and a tag line (from a guided statement: reason for attending, introduce a family member, something that made me laugh/smile today)
- 4. Overview of purpose, and reason, for healing space shared
- 5. Establishment of group guidelines and the 'circle method'
- 6. Two to three rounds of sharing by participants (depending on theme/topics agreed upon and time available)
- 7. Closing reflections and sharing
- 8. Evaluation

Notes on set up and environment:

- When deciding on a venue, it is important to find an accessible facility, with parking and access to city transit, that has a space that is private with no outside interruptions to the group.
- An extra room may need to be arranged for concurrent child-care or child-minding for parents and guardians attending the sessions.
- Seating is arranged in a circle with the facilitator, so everyone is included and able to see each other.
- Ensure sufficient time is spent at the beginning welcoming participants, establishing ground rules, and discussing the purpose and protocols for Healing Circles. It is important that everyone feels safe and welcomed to share or contribute as much as they feel comfortable doing.
- In keeping with AMN's experience with community-based gatherings, light refreshments are provided.

Who do we invite?

The event organizer(s) may have specific groups in mind, invite a diverse audience or do a general call out. When inviting, and encouraging, participants who express an interest and willingness to attend the Healing Circle, assure them that all genders are welcome.

AMN Healing Circles: Program and Evaluation

Three Healing Circles took place during the 2019-20 period and were facilitated by AMN's Cultural Knowledge Keeper, Elder Adrian Wolfleg.

Oct 7, 2019. Healing Circle for the Latino Men's Support Group:

This Healing Circle was a closed group organized for the AMN Latino Men's Support Group, whose male participants had just completed a 10-session series examining wellness, healthy relationships, violence prevention and personal self-reflection. The Healing Circle was requested by the Latino men and was co-led by Adrian Wolfleg and Fanny Oliphant, a Spanish speaking facilitator from AMN.

Nov 14, 2020. Public Healing Circle:

This Healing Circle was open to the public and was conducted at the Rosscarrock Community Hall.

Feb 20, 2020. Public Healing Circle:

This Healing Circle was open to the public and was conducted at the Rosscarrock Community Hall.

Participants were provided with an evaluation survey after each Healing Circle that include participants demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity) and 13 open and close-ended feedback questions on the session. They were also asked to reflect on the learning gained from the Healing Circles and if they planned to implement this new knowledge within everyday contexts. A separate evaluation survey was provided to Healing Circles facilitators with both demographic and feedback questions. Completing the questionnaire was completely voluntary, and participants and facilitators were not required to answer all the questions posed in the survey. The Healing Circle evaluation was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Eighteen out of nineteen (95%) participants completed the evaluation form as did both facilitators (100%).

PART I: Participant Response:

All participants who completed the evaluation were based in Calgary, primarily male identified, with diverse age and ethno-cultural identities.

Age ranges	Ethno-cultural Identity (self-described)	Residing City	Gender Identity
18 - 29 (1) 30 - 39 (5) 40 - 49 (6) 50 - 59 (5) 60 & older (1)	Caucasian (2) Dutch Canadian (1) East European (2) Euro-Canadian (1) European (1) French Canadian (1) Latino (3) Latino Mestizo (1) Mixed race (1) Muslim (1) Yuroba from Nigeria (1) White Hispanic (1) Not Disclosed (2)	Calgary (18)	Male (12) Female (6)

Key Learning Themes

Three key learning themes emerged from the evaluation of the Healing Circles: shedding a spotlight on healing as a personal journey, the power of "*letting things go*" and healing as a shared process within community. In addition to key learnings, the participants collectively identified resources and strategies to cope and build resiliency. Participants provided rich feedback on the session, despite some not knowing what the process would be like, as exemplified below:

- "Didn't know what to expect, was different than expected"
- "First time at a healing circle, didn't know what to expect"

Healing as a Personal Journey

Healing is a process that encompasses all aspects of life: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual (Awo Taan Healing Lodge Society, 2007; Ross, 2014). According to the Blackfoot Confederacy and a few other First Nations whose traditional teachings incorporate the Sacred Rock Circles (contemporarily referred to a Medicine Wheel teachings) balance of all these aspects of life determines wellbeing on personal, community and national level (Greenwood et al., 2015; Lane, Bopp, Bopp and Norris, 2002). The theme of being able to heal oneself and being attentive to, and accountable for, one's healing journey was emphasized and resonated in participant feedback:

- "Everyone has experienced hurt in some form or another"
- "We all need to heal ourselves in order to be better to people"
- "For my personal healing, because when I'm happy I make people around me happy."

"Let it go"

Participants reiterated and reflected on a metaphor shared by Adrian Wolfleg, as a powerful learning from the circle activity:

- "Let go like a whale breathes out things they don't need"
- "Don't let mistreatment get away, but let yourself to let it go. They don't have power over you."

As described by Adrian "there are whales that can dive miles underwater, traveling to different worlds, all while holding their breathe. To do this they make space for the oxygen needed to burn the fuel and produce energy by getting rid of the toxins (carbon dioxide) – that, with water vapour, makes up the plume we see when they come up. They exhale a few times and fill their lungs with rich, oxygenated air. This allows them to swim and dive while holding their breath (in some species) for over an hour. To make room for new experiences, we have to let go of some."

Letting go doesn't mean that challenges and traumatic events didn't happen, or that we should put up with mistreatment. We acknowledge the experience, let go of its influences and burdens (toxins), take away the lesson and move on. We are letting go of the experience's control over us (Adrian).

Other participants embraced the teaching as a key take-way, articulated through the following comments on evaluation forms:

- "Let it go!"
- "It is important to let go"
- "To let go and forget"
- "Do I really need it"
- "You can't change the past"
- "Letting go burdens"
- "I learn how to let go ... also to [be] happy"
- "Most people seem to struggle with letting go of the past"

A tool that participants shared related to letting go was "brushing off" negativity:

- "Brush off negativity"
- "Brush off troubling things before coming home"
- "Brush off the bad before you go into the house."

Adrian taught the healthy habit of leaving work at work, and negative influences, news, or mishaps outside of home literally, by brushing them off as one would dust, snow or debris. In doing so we mentally switch to other, positive, things, move away from negative thoughts and allow ourselves to mindfully be in the moment and enjoy time spent with family.

Healing Through Sharing

The healing process participants highlighted as the third key learning was the concept shared by Adrian and everyone. We first review that everyone has wounds and challenges in life, and it is ok to share these experiences and lessons: reciprocal sharing. The key is actively listening and hearing one another in a shared space. Takeaways related to healing through sharing were:

- "We all share difficulty at different levels"
- "I loved sharing stories to help us identify stuff in ourselves/our lives"
- "Focused on discussing and sharing challenges in your life"

- "I liked the sharing of personal stories and find things I can relate to"
- "Talking about intergenerational traumas and listening to other people sharing; and Adrian's wisdom."

Participants pointed out that listening to others was easier than sharing personal experiences. A valid point as sharing personal experiences requires vulnerability and has been defined as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2015, p. 34). As shared in the evaluations, it is very difficult to open up and be vulnerable in front of others:

• "Sharing in a circle is difficult but supporting others who shared is easy and natural."

The facilitator sets an example by being vulnerable and sharing their personal and family experiences, which was a powerful invitation for the participants to follow:

"Adrian leads not only with words, but also with example."

Key Strategies to Build Resiliency

Aside from these key insights on personal healing, participant reflections identified several key strategies as the first steps in their personal action plans to coping and building resiliency. These strategies are: setting boundaries, developing mindfulness, self-love, love and connection, safe space and relationships, asking for help and positive thinking.

Setting boundaries

A common reflection was setting boundaries as a way to protect oneself from "toxic people" and their negative influences:

- "Setting better boundaries"
- "Protect yourself emotionally by not letting people affect you emotionally"
- "Don't let the thoughts and feelings of others keep you down"
- "Throw toxic people in an imaginary barrel and into the Niagara Falls"

The challenge of family members being the "toxic ones" was raised as it is the hurts inflicted by those closest to us, the ones we trusted, that hurt the most. "Setting better boundaries" does not necessarily mean to cut off people from your life completely, but is something that may be required, depending on situation and circumstances. Adrian's

teaching "We don't always have to like the people we love" was reflected in strategies by the participants:

- "It is ok to love someone, but not to like him/her"
- "You can love someone but not like them"
- "Limiting your time with people you feel like you need to rest from"

Mindfulness

Adrian shared a teaching around "now is not forever" when he covered setting boundaries; encouraging those present to focus on what they could personally influence, or were capable of handling, at this time, and to set physical, and chronological, boundaries when brainstorming/planning. Even though the term "mindfulness" wasn't mentioned by the participants, several participants' key learnings were related to the power of mindfulness, which means for them to:

- "focus in the present"
- "... be aware of negative moments and not let them take hold of me"
- "Find things you hold on to keep you going"

Self-love

A major coping strategy to build resilience is the manifestation of self-love. These manifestations range from self-acceptance and self-respect to self-forgiveness. Adrian spoke about "...forgiving ourselves for the choices we made and remembering that those decisions were based on the resources and knowledge available to us at that time". We acknowledge that the experience had a hand (for better or worse) in shaping who we are today: we have learned from our experience and have (hopefully) become the wiser. Participants reflected on this concept:

- "Love me as I am"
- "Self respect"
- "How I treat myself"
- "Letting go doesn't mean forgetting, also means forgiving yourself"

Love and connection

Love of oneself is also connected to love in general, including family relationships and connection to other people, which was highlighted by the participants in the following insights:

- "Importance of love and connection"
- "When kids grow up and leave, let them, so they return later"
- "Sharing in a circle is difficult but supporting others who shared is easy and natural."

Safe space and relationships

The theme of connection softly intertwines with the importance of safe space and feeling included, which, according to the participants' responses, were created by the facilitator and the participants of Healing Circles:

- "Adrian was a great facilitator. He engaged with everyone"
- "Adrian leads not only with words, but also with example"

The participants shared that having safe space created an atmosphere of trust and connectedness which allowed them to be vulnerable without being judged and to be more open while "accepting differences". Some participants highlighted the comfort of physical space, others admired the process of sharing itself:

- "The place was in a church and it was comfortable to be there"
- "Instructions were very clear at the beginning that sharing was expected" Everyone had a chance to speak"
- "The Latino men group know each other so they trust already"
- "Instructions were very clear at the beginning that sharing was expected.
 Everyone had a chance to speak"
- "Small group so everyone had chance to share"
- "It was a very organic process and I didn't feel holding back (intimate environment)"
- "Different languages with different interpretations"
- "Accepting differences."

Asking for help

A learning one participant highlighted was that it is ok to ask for help and "Seek counselling if needed". This is significant due to prevailing beliefs among men that seeking help is a sign of weakness: not recognizing the strength, courage and self-awareness required to do so.

Positive thinking

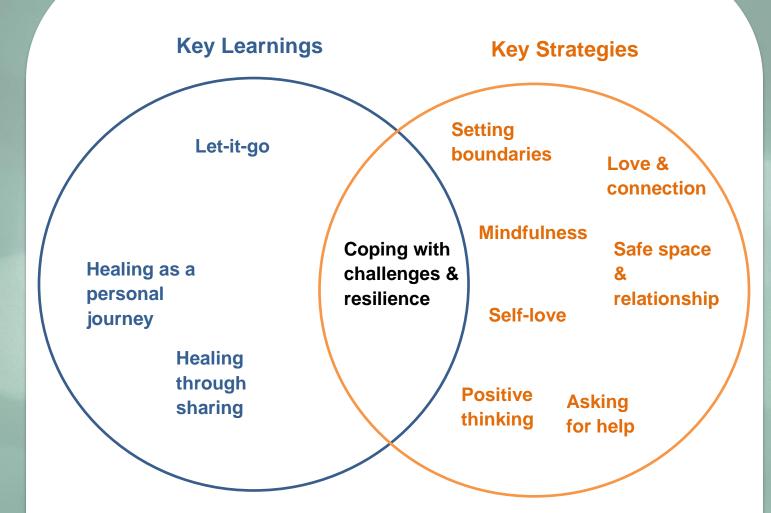
Our closing strategy was highlighted through all three Healing Circles: how to use the power of our mind to develop positive thinking. Our thoughts and self-talk are very powerful and can make ourselves feel more depressed or vice versa – relieved, inspired and elevated (Adrian). Participants chose the following words and phrases to describe this key learning:

- "Be hopeful!"
- "Stay positive!"
- "Change mentality"
- "Positivity "

- "Learning to not focus on negative things that are part of past experiences"
- "Remember things that make you happy and being it to your difficult time"
- "Don't forget about the good things that are happening"

Recommendations from Participants

- 1. More sessions needed
- "It would be helpful to have follow up sessions arranged before starting the healing circle"
- "A lot to cover in only one session"
- "To have more people to look into ways to cross promote."
- 2. Improve facilitation process
 - a. "Have some activities that would help people to relax and connect to other attendees"
 - b. "Could have a short break to move"
 - c. "More dialogue in round 2,3..."



The research team analyzed the most frequently used words and phrases found in the completed evaluations to see what words and concepts most resonated with respondents. The most commonly mentioned phrase is "*let it go*" or "*letting go*", which was shared 15 times in total. The second most commonly reported word "sharing" or "share" was mentioned 13 times in total. The word "love" in the context of self-love or love in general was shared six times across three healing circles (see the diagram below).



Wordcloud of most frequently shared words from participants' feedback forms.

Overall Program Evaluation

Healthy relationships and violence prevention learning

Participants were asked whether they feel more confident to take action to promote healthy relationships and prevent relationship violence; and in terms of accessing resources or supports related to healthy relationships and relationship violence: out of all answers, 16 answers were "yes" and two replied "not sure". This indicates that the format of non-formal sharing and exchange of information within a Healing Circle is also beneficial for the participants in terms of learning about family violence and experiences of Indigenous communities through personal stories.

Satisfaction

All respondent evaluations contained positive feedback about the Healing Circles. Ten (56%) respondents (seven male and three female) indicated that the session completely met their expectations and seven participants (four male and three female) replied that their expectations had "mostly" been met. One participant did not respond to the

question. All participants expressed that they felt encouraged to contribute to the dialogue.

Overall, participants indicated that the Healing Circles were beneficial for them, and that the reflections shared, and knowledge gained would be useful for them in their daily lives in terms of personal growth and relationships. Among the answers to the question "How will you use what you have learned?" the following trends emerged:

In daily life (Three male and three female participants)

- "I will use it in my life everyday"
- "I will use it everyday in my life"
- "In my daily life dealing with everything"
- "Reflecting on daily actions and thoughts"
- "In my everyday life and to teach others"
- "Adapt all it to my daily life"

Personal healing and growth (three male, one female participants)

- "First I need to internalize it and then apply it"
- "For my personal healing, because when I'm happy I make people around me happy"
- "To continue my growth and healing"
- "Learning to not focus on negative things that are part of past experiences"

Self-awareness and reflexivity (one male and one female participant)

• "Will be aware of negative moments and not let them take hold of me"

Improve relationships (four male participants)

- "Apply it to improve my relationship with my partner"
- "I will apply to myself and talk about it with my family"
- "To counsel people that close to me"
- "Go lightly with people that cannot let go of the past"

PART II: Insights from the Healing Circles Facilitators

The facilitator and co-facilitator for the Healing Circles provided feedback for all sessions they facilitated. Similar to the participants' feedback, one of the major themes reflected in sharing of facilitators is mindfulness and paying attention to yourself and self-love.

- "Self acknowledgment/acceptance"
- "Letting go of harmful learnings/behaviors"
- "Right here, right now"
- "Love, forgiving of self, perseverance"
- "Take care of yourself and listen to yourself"

Further, facilitators commented on the useful skills that were taught through the process:

"listening", "mindful listening", "empathy", "life experience" and "patience".

Among things that were surprising to facilitators were certain cultural similarities between Latino and Indigenous people, empathy expressed by the participants, and a sense of trust that encouraged deeper sharing:

- "Familiarity between societal expectations and roles between Hispanic and Indigenous"
- "Everybody was very respectful when participants were talking about difficult situation. Empathy in the group"
- "The depth of trust people had when sharing"
- "Being able to facilitate more, deeper sharing"

Facilitators commented on the things that went well:

- "Being truthful and honest with what I share. Direct storing"
- "Allowing everybody to participate"
- "Taking turns and allowing a "pass"
- "The small number facilitated sharing and more "asks"

Facilitators gave recommendations to improve future sessions:

- "Start with a round of introductions, get to know the group better"
- "To remove extra chairs at the beginning of the session"
- "To do a quick icebreaker to facilitate sharing"

Impact on AMN's Healing Circles

Reflecting on the feedback obtained from the community members, Healing Circles were a powerful resource for them. The following is a summary of participants' testimonials:

- 1. Healing Circles facilitated their healing and catalyzed exploring their internal and external resources to facilitate their resilience.
- 2. The format of Healing Circles based on traditional Indigenous knowledge and group facilitation techniques conducted by an Indigenous Elder allowed the creation of a space open for trust, vulnerability, connection, empathy and hope.
- 3. The variety of strategies for building resiliency which were collectively co-created in the group indicate that communities are very resourceful, and that they just need space to assist with collective and individual healing and exploring their own and community resources available out there.
- 4. All participants' evaluations were positive and recommendations by the community members were mainly about asking for more Healing Circles in the future.
- 5. The vast majority of participants answered "yes" to the questions whether they increased their knowledge and awareness about relationship violence and healthy relationships.
- 6. Healing Circles are a powerful tool for and a significant contribution to decolonization and Truth and Reconciliation processes in Canada.
- 7. Indigenous ways of reciprocity, empathy and caring promotes a mindset of practicing kindness and violence prevention.

Recommendations and Next Steps

AMN Recommendations:

- 1. Offer Healing Circle training for frontline staff (in the fields of Social Work, Community Development, etc.) and for community leaders (formal and informal).
- 2. Host regular Healing Circles for Calgarians in different community groups and from diverse backgrounds.
- 3. Map local resources and supports for addressing healing from trauma.
- 4. Recommend more research to be conducted to show the prevalence and impacts of community members, especially men, who have not been supported to heal from past trauma.

For more information and links on Indigenous teachings, please see the reference list.

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For more information about AMN, contact coordinator@albertamen.com



http://www.albertamen.com



Alberta Men's Network



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