

How Colonialism Affects Indigenous Wellness — pp. 10 – 13

Summary: This selection describes the different ways that Indigenous Peoples' health and wellness have been impacted by colonialism.

Reading Level: 🍷 🍷 🍷

Vocabulary: colonization, access, belonging, wisdom, intentional, genocide, treaties, ceremonies, forced, Elders

Minds on Reflection (Before Reading): Reflect on the word *colonialism*. What does it mean? Is it a positive or a negative word? Who in your community has been impacted by colonialism?

Understanding the Page:

1 On page 11, a photo shows students participating in the Kyuquot Cheklesah annual school potlatch. Potlatches were one of the ceremonies banned in Canada from 1884 until 1951 by the federal government. What do you think were some of the impacts of this ceremony being banned for over 60 years? With this in mind, why is it so important

and meaningful to see images of young people participating in this ceremony?

2 While it can be hard to imagine how Indigenous Peoples lived before the time of contact, there are many stories and evidence that show how Indigenous nations and peoples experienced good health and balance. Today, Indigenous people experience some of

the highest rates of illness, including cancer, diabetes, and mental health conditions. What are some reasons Indigenous people are experiencing higher rates of illness? How can this be addressed so that Indigenous people live healthier lives?

3 On page 11, we learn about a memorial in the Woodland Cemetery in Hamilton, Ontario, for

Inuit patients who passed away in the Hamilton Sanatorium. What is a sanatorium? Why were Inuit sent there? How does tuberculosis continue to impact people in Canada today? Are there communities that are more likely to experience tuberculosis than others? Who are they? Why do you think this is?

Health — Disease had one of the largest impacts on Indigenous populations in the past. Illnesses such as influenza (the flu), common colds, and smallpox killed millions of people over a short period of time. Sometimes the transmission of smallpox was intentional. Investigate smallpox. How has this disease been addressed? Is this disease still a threat in the world?

History — Treaties apply to much of the land across Canada, likely including the territory on which you live and attend school. Investigate the treaty that applies to your area. Which First Nations, Inuit, or Métis groups are signatories to this treaty? Has the treaty (or treaties) in your area been honoured? How can you be involved in honouring the treaties?

Language Arts — On page 11, we learn about some of the effects of the *Indian Act* in Canada. How do you feel about what you learned in this section? What questions do you have? Write an opinion paragraph stating your beliefs about the *Indian Act* and its impacts on First Nations peoples.

Health — In Canada (and around the world), Indigenous people who eat a traditional diet generally experience good health and wellness. Investigate some foods that are indigenous to Canada. Were there any indigenous foods that were surprising to you? How many of these foods do you include in your diet on a regular basis? Share your findings with the class.



Science — One commonly known plant that is indigenous to North America is the sunflower. Plant sunflower seeds in moist soil and place in a sunny area. Track the growth of the sunflower. What do you notice about its growth? What questions do you have about the growth of the plant and flower? What uses can you see for the plant and its parts for foods or medicines? If possible, plant the sunflower in the earth and watch it flourish.



History/Social Studies — Some argue that genocide is one of the intended outcomes of the *Indian Act*, the Indian Residential School System, and the treaty-making and reserve-making processes beginning in the 1800s. What can we learn from the Canadian government's decisions that resulted in the physical, cultural, and spiritual genocide of Indigenous Peoples over the last 150+ years? Has the government been accountable for these actions? If not, how can they be held accountable? How can the effects of these policies be made right? Develop a list of ideas for how the government can be held accountable for justice in relation to these acts of genocide. How can Indigenous Peoples feel that some justice has been served? Discuss with a partner.

How Colonialism Affects Indigenous Wellness

Before Europeans Arrived

Before colonization, Indigenous Peoples set up their communities in ways that helped them maintain good health. Communities had access to land, water, and ice. People were able to move to different locations whenever they wanted.

Each person had a close connection to local plants, animals, and features of the land. This gave them a sense of place and belonging. Children were cared for by everyone in the community, and people worked together to get things done. Each person had a role in the community, and a feeling that they were valued.

Indigenous Peoples also enjoyed good health. They had active lifestyles based on hunting, fishing, and gathering, which kept people physically fit. They also had healthy diets made up of plants, berries, fish, and wild meat—and they didn't have processed sugar! That means they had no cavities in their teeth and almost no diabetes.

In the last 200 years, all this has changed. Today, Indigenous Peoples experience some of the worst health in Canada. Diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer, heart disease, accidents, and mental health conditions are all more common in Indigenous Peoples than in non-Indigenous Canadians.

So how did this happen?

It's complicated. There are many reasons. Some of these were intentional to break Indigenous Peoples' connections to their cultures, families, and communities. These are considered by many to be acts of genocide.

Genocide: deliberately working to destroy a group or what makes them an ethnic group

Treaties

Treaties Indigenous Peoples made with European or Canadian governments were used to secure peace and friendship, create mutual obligations, and share resources. Over the years, many promises were not kept, such as health care and education.

The Indian Act

The *Indian Act* which came into law in 1876 changed the way First Nations people live. Ceremonies and ways of life became illegal. This separated First Nations people from their cultures and identities. First Nations also had to accept European forms of government and education. That meant they could no longer make their own political decisions or raise their children. This led to feelings of powerlessness, which had a very negative effect on health and wellness.

First Nations were forced to move to reserves. They could no longer move freely on the land. Hunting, fishing, and gathering became more difficult. When they farmed, laws were passed that prevented them from selling their crops to support their families. It meant living in crowded conditions, which also had negative effects on health and wellness. Some First Nations people began to use alcohol and drugs to forget their pain.

New Diseases

Many Indigenous people died from diseases the Europeans brought with them. In some cases, diseases were spread intentionally. For example, blankets infected with smallpox were given to Indigenous communities. Healers didn't know which plants could be used to treat the diseases or which ceremonies would help. When Elders or Knowledge Keepers died, much of their scientific and medical knowledge died with them.

Vocabulary:
sweat lodges

Understanding the Page:

- 1 There are four sections on page 12. What are some of the similarities between each of the sections? What are the differences? Even though many of the items discussed in each section happened in the past, they still impact individuals and communities today. What are some ways that communities continue to feel the impacts of the government policies described?
- 2 In residential schools, children were only allowed to speak English or French and were punished for speaking their ancestral languages. Do you have the opportunity to learn your family's original language(s) in your school? If so, could you imagine having to learn a different language and being punished for speaking your mother tongue? Do you have the opportunity to learn an Indigenous language in your school? Why is it important to have access to learn an Indigenous language?
- 3 Forced relocation in different forms impacted First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Consider some of the impacts of being forced to leave your home. How were these policies harmful to communities? What are some ways that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples resisted these policies?
- 4 Traditional diets are typically healthier than modern, Western diets which are highly processed. Do you think it is hard to eat a traditional diet today? Does your family eat traditional foods? Do you find it hard to find/eat those foods where you live? For Indigenous people in the city, what are some ways that they can follow a traditional diet?



Social Studies – The Sixties Scoop refers to the time period when thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families and put into foster homes or were adopted by non-Indigenous families. This was done to intentionally disconnect children from their families and cultures. Investigate some of the consequences of adoption. Is adoption always a positive or negative experience? Explain your thinking.



Health – The traditional foods of Indigenous groups vary from coast to coast; however, they typically fall into the categories of fish, wild meat, grains, vegetables, fruits, and dairy/alternatives. Looking at *Canada's food guide* (Web link: <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>), what kind of foods are you eating? What are some ways that all Canadians can benefit from consuming a diet of foods indigenous to Canada?



Social Studies – Resilience is sometimes defined as the ability to bounce back from challenges. What are some of the key challenges that Indigenous Peoples continue to bounce back from? Is it right that communities have to continue to respond to these challenges? What are some changes that can be made in Canadian society to respond to the challenges Indigenous Peoples continue to face?



Further Inquiry

Friendship centres provide a gathering place for Indigenous people to come together. Is there a friendship centre in your community? If not, where is the nearest friendship centre? Are there other resources for Indigenous people available in your community? What resources might be needed, and how can they be brought into your community?



Social Studies – Elders play a very important role in Indigenous communities. Is there a difference between an Elder and an older person? Do you have Elders in your life that are important to you? What are some of the things you have learned from them? How are Elders important in preserving culture?



Health – Traditional sources of food (e.g., fish, berries, wild meat, etc.) helped Indigenous people keep their bodies healthy. Through colonization, relocation, and removal from their territories, many people lost access to traditional foods, while colonizers at the same time introduced foods composed of a lot of milk, flour, and fat and that are also high in salt and sugar. The introduction of these foods had health impacts on Indigenous communities. Investigate some of the health impacts. Choose one health impact and do further research. Write a paragraph on the ways that healthy eating can positively support recovering from ill health.



Geography/History – What are some of the ways that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people relied on the land in the past? Do you think it would have been an easy adjustment for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who were forcibly relocated, sometimes to drastically different climates and geographical areas? What can you think of as some of the impacts of relocation on these communities (consider both the community that was forcibly relocated, and the community they were removed from)?

Residential Schools

When Indigenous children were sent to residential schools, they were told that their cultures were wrong, and they were forbidden to speak their languages. Being forced to speak English or French for most of the year meant that many children forgot how to speak the languages of their ancestors. When they returned home, they could no longer communicate with their parents and grandparents, and it was difficult to pass down cultural knowledge. Survivors of the schools often felt like outsiders in their own communities. They felt isolated from their families, communities, cultures, and languages. That made it hard for people to stick together. The family unit broke down, so children had no model of what a healthy family looked like. At school, some children were abused. Children were also not shown any love, so they became angry, afraid, and sad. When they became parents, some passed this anger, fear, and sadness on to their own children.



Students at a residential school in Shingle Point, Yukon, 1932-1933.

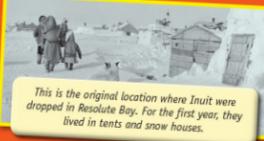
Ways of Resilience

It's still happening!
The negative effects of colonization didn't just happen in the past. Colonialism still affects Indigenous Peoples today. Discrimination, lack of clean water, food insecurity, poverty, and poor housing all have negative effects.



Playing hand games in the community of Deline, Northwest Territories.

Forced Relocation



This is the original location where Inuit were dropped in Resolute Bay. For the first year, they lived in tents and snow houses.

Many First Nations communities were forced from their traditional territories, and Métis were forced from their homelands. This broke up families and communities. Later, Inuit were forced into permanent settlements, which also made it difficult to move freely on the land to hunt, fish, and gather their traditional foods. All of these things created poverty, starvation, hopelessness, and a lack of food security.

Change of Diet

Losing access to traditional sources of food forced Indigenous Peoples to eat a Western diet with more starch and sugar. Many people began to have problems with their health, such as heart disease and diabetes.



The traditional diets of Indigenous people were much healthier than a modern, processed diet.

The Sixties Scoop

The Sixties Scoop began in the mid-1950s and continued well into the 1980s. Thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families and placed in foster homes or put up for adoption to White families. This disconnected kids from their families, communities, cultures, and languages.



Indigenous children were adopted by families around the world.

Friendship Centres

Indigenous Peoples living in urban communities can use healing and wellness services at friendship centres, which are staffed by Indigenous people in each province across the country. Friendship centres offer family support services, language and culture programs, appointments with Elders, counselling, and help locating health care services in the city.

Working With Elders

Many Indigenous health centres work closely with Elders and traditional healers. Indigenous communities are also setting up land-based healing programs, and Elders pass on the knowledge they have learned. Inuit Elders are teaching youth traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering. They are also preparing ways to help lessen the dependency on Western food and lower the cost of eating.

Cultural Practices

Many organizations are using traditional healing practices such as sweat lodges, and cultural programs such as traditional food preparation, traditional toolmaking, and medicine gathering to improve the health of Indigenous Peoples.

Land-Based Practices

There is a focus in many communities on land-based practices such as hunting, gathering, and fishing. Young people in Indigenous communities are learning skills that were lost as a result of colonization. When Elders share knowledge of the land, water, and ice with young people, it creates pride in Indigenous identity. The positive feelings participants have when they take part in land-based practices show just how important culture is to wellness and healthy living.