

Rebuilding Strength

VOICES OF FIRST NATIONS MEN IN NORTHERN BC

In April 2015, Northern Health published a report on First Nations men's health in northern BC called *Rebuilding Strength*. This is a short companion document that summarizes the words of First Nations men who offered their experiences and knowledge to that report.

The report *Rebuilding Strength* is the result of a shared desire by the Aboriginal Health and Men's Health programs at Northern Health to undertake a careful and respectful exploration of First Nations men's health in northern BC. The purpose was to learn about barriers and challenges that First Nations men face in accessing health services, about challenges faced by those providing services to First Nations men, and about successes, promising practices and opportunities for positive change.

Rebuilding Strength sets the context for understanding the health of First Nations men in northern BC with information about colonialism, socio-economic and cultural determinants of First Nations men's health, and a short review of existing literature about First Nations men's health in northern BC. First Nations men were interviewed to inform the report with their knowledge and experiences. The findings were summarized and some thoughts offered about moving forward and supporting the health of First Nations men and communities in northern BC.

“First Nation men play a key role in many First Nations cultures, and it is important to continue to strive and find useful information for them when they seek it.”

Sim'oogit Hleek, Dr. Joseph Gosnell, Nisga'a Elder

Read the words of First Nations men in the following pages as they share their experiences and insights about their own health and personal well-being. Refer to the full report for additional context, information, and suggested directions to consider for supporting First Nations men's health in northern BC.

THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS FROM FIRST NATIONS MEN ABOUT THEIR HEALTH

“Men need to know that it is better to take care of your health at an early age, don’t be stubborn like our generation, eat properly, learn about nutrition, work out and really try to understand more about your body.”

“In the past I ignored my doctor’s advice, but this time it was different, I felt something had changed and was quite worried. The paper on how to change your lifestyle, what kinds of activities to do, what to eat. I followed that.”

“Some of my friends are too proud, just like I was, to set time aside for a regular check-ups or ask questions when they do see a doctor. We miss opportunities to understand the messages our bodies send us, this is what I regret the most. I had an episode once and I thought it was just because of my previous night, little did I know it was a symptom of something bigger to come.”

“I did tell my friends that I have diabetes and it did not even faze them, they told me what they have. It is clear our generation did not take good care of ourselves on the physical side. I remember the days when I earned a lot of money, I would have a lot of fun, eat whatever and whenever I felt like it, today I am pretty disciplined on time, quantity and type of food — no more processed foods. I have learned new ways to cook traditional food and limit my intake when visiting or attending feasts or other community functions. Living with diabetes is not the best way to get healthy, but if I didn’t get diagnosed I was on a path for stroke, a much more unforgiving situation.”

“I may be slow to get the message, but when I get it, I got it. I can make the changes once I get there.”

“I believe a holistic approach for First Nations encompasses all aspects of life and not a linear system like the health model. In the First Nations world we think of everything, not just look for the problem or a symptom, but the actual issue. When you find the issue, the realization is noted and change is made under the holistic approach.”

“There is a need for rite of passage programs to teach young men to be fathers. Some First Nations have lost their connection to their home communities, as a result it seems they are not able to connect back to their communities. If we could become a bridge for that, it would help. Men need assistance in dealing with issues like losing a job or relationship, coping skills that will improve the thought process that there is hope, instead of the idea that the world is against them. “

“As we paddle, the environment is constantly changing, but the people we are traveling with does not. The place we are journeying towards does not. We know if twelve foot waves come they will not last long because the creator has an intention for us – to reach the destination.”

“Any information is good information in regards to the physical and lifestyle changes needed to improve the body. However for First Nations, more is necessary to include a holistic aspect.”

“Men want to learn the traditional medicines that First Nations used to improve their health. Few First Nations have done herbal medicines and at college or university it is hard to find facilitators that teach that concept.”



THOUGHTS FROM FIRST NATIONS MEN ABOUT CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO THEIR HEALTH

“In our communities there is still evidence from both colonization and residential school. In their own way they are the cause of a lot of dysfunction for men that I work with; not all men though. Those men that are affected are stuck in cycles of negative behaviour caused by either direct or secondary exposure to residential school; while others are hampered by the nature of nepotism which stems from colonialism.”

“First Nation men today are affected by the colonialism of the Aboriginal people. Even though the year is 2013, the effects of the 1800’s are for some like yesterday. Racism is still a reality for many smaller remote regions of BC, low employment opportunities plague many small communities. Men who once were leaders in their lives are now subject to asking for assistance. Men are not as easily welcomed into society as their counterparts the Aboriginal women, more employment options for women in health centers, band offices and schools. Men are deemed to be the cause of many abuses, therefore not many funding entities that recognize men’s programming positively, so most organizations working with men fund these programs internally.”

“The impacts of the cycles of colonization and residential school, has caused a lot of dysfunction, not in all men, but for those that learned that the paths they are on are going nowhere, or for others who have hit rock bottom, those that experienced trauma, broken homes, failed relationships, the trauma is compounded and collective, where they feel isolated, lack of self-esteem, they feel they are at the end, and the thought of suicide becomes an option. It’s hard for them to function.”

“Learned behavior, everything bad in our communities, is learned. Therefore becoming aware that this is the case is a starting point, if we can learn it - then we can stop it and replace it with something better. The key is to learn good skills like coping skills, life skills, effective communication, anger management, violence against family members. These were not the ways of First Nations men. Instead we want all our men to be responsible for their actions, and if they live right then the assumption is they will be happier.”

“We, as First Nations men are dealing with years of shell shock. Racism played a larger role in holding the people back, more than the policies of the government; if we only had to deal with the government then our people would have had a better chance to forge a better lifestyle. Instead the First Nations, every First Nation had to endure negativity, judgement from ordinary citizens and people in power like RCMP and Health Care. That systemic barrage left many men broken and reclusive, thus teaching future young men to act in a similar way — even though they may have never been subject to the act of racism.”

“The residential school syndrome is impacting people’s lifestyle, the structure of society has changed. Men do not hunt as much as they used to, this generation is more reliant on grocery stores as opposed to gathering what they need and taking the time to prepare the food for storage, that connection to the land required families to work together. Today the people don’t come together like they used to and share what they harvested. Restoring that broken connection to the land, not just retaining the language-but actively using the language, hosting feasts, families knowing their house stories, this is what a healthy man needs to strive for today.”



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