

PX CONFERENCE REPORT

DETAILS

Date:	January 13-17, 2025	Conference:	Giwiidabindimin Certificate Program, CTRI
Time:	9am-4pm	Location:	Victoria Inn Hotel & Convention Centre, Winnipeg
PX:	Joel Swaan		

SUMMARY

The Victoria Inn Hotel & Convention Centre and the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI) office are both located on Treaty One Territory, the home and traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininew, Anishininew, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Red River Métis Nation. With acknowledgement and thanks, Shoal Lake 40 First Nation in Treaty Three Territory is recognized as the source of the water provided. Shoal Lake 40 underwent a boil-water advisory in 1997, and only obtained their own clean drinking water in 2021. I acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, with a commitment to reconciliation and restitution.

The Giwiidabindimin Certificate Program is on “Responding to Trauma and Grief with Decolonized Practices”. Giwiidabindimin is an Ojibwe word for “we sit together”. By sitting together, we can acknowledge grief and trauma, share perspectives, and learn from each other in a reciprocal way. The program incorporates Indigenous and Western knowledge to provide a two-eyed seeing understanding of trauma and grief, and operates with the belief that reconciliation happens best through giwiidabindimin: when we sit together.

It is Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall who founded the concept of two-eyed seeing (or “Etuaptmumk” [Ed-do-up-dim-moomk], in the Mi'kmaw language). Two-eyed seeing is learning to look at the world in a way that embraces the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and Western methods of understanding. The journey of “continuous learning and weaving together both perspectives to create a new worldview that uses both these ‘eyes’ together” can be to everyone’s benefit. It is about levelling hierarchies of knowledge, and learning from each other in a balanced way—when we



truly respect the strengths of diverse perspectives, it encourages us to be “fluid, adaptable, and to seek out a variety of approaches and worldviews.” (quotes from [Two-Eyed Seeing - Our Reconciliation Journey - CTRI](#).)

I signed up for this course for a few reasons. As educators, we deal with students and colleagues who are dealing with trauma and grief. As an education system, hurt has been caused for entire communities—historically and in the present—through structures and abuses of power; we need to humble ourselves to sit with those that have been harmed and learn from them. There is often talk about MTS’s colonial structures: with this in mind, I wanted to learn more about two-eyed seeing, to learn how it can be used to better our processes and procedures. Lastly, our organization is hurting, if Winnipeg Free Press headline terminology like “fractious” and “turbulent” can be believed. Our own employees may have experienced—or may be experiencing—workplace trauma and grief, and as an employer we need to look to facilitate healing at McMaster House and Bradley Square.

Each of the five days began and ended with a sage smudge. Sage cleans impurities. Sage is antimicrobial, repels insects, and is believed to clear out spiritual impurities. It can also help people achieve a healing state – to solve or reflect upon spiritual dilemmas. Burning sage can also rid yourself and your space of negativity, including past traumas. It is a traditional medicine for stress, anxiety, depression, and pain.

Each day also began and ended with being “in circle”. Being in circle levels hierarchies—it is interdependent on many voices whose ideas exist on the same level, therefore all voices are equal. Knowledge grows by weaving together perspectives and lenses. In some ways, being in circle was a challenge for me. One morning, we sat in circle the entire morning session, which was just one round of sharing (we passed a talking stone as we took turns clockwise). This is a different learning style than most professional development I’ve attended. It is separate from the “book learning” portion of the course, and indeed there is a 168-page binder of course content and a copy of [A Little Book About Trauma-Informed Workplaces](#) (N. Gerbrandt, R. Grieser, & V. Enns, 2021). But going back to the course name, we can’t help people with their trauma or grief if we don’t sit together with them. Learning to sit together is a skill.

In addition to sitting in circle, we also used painting, drawing, music, conversation, and self-reflection throughout the week. We spent time daily with the course materials, but were also left with the message that we can go through this information as a tool individually; while we are together, we should be learning with and from the group. We learned not just what grief and trauma are, but also coping strategies, and how to sit with people who struggle.

Helping others process their grief and trauma means also having to process your own grief and trauma. As such, the course takes a look at being a helper to others but also looking inward. Themes studied around grief were: self-care, the relationship with time, experiencing and expressing the pain of loss, becoming the expert on your grief, imagination, connection, and being kind to yourself. Loss is simply defined as “a change in a valued relationship” – losses can be physical or psychological; grief is the “natural package of emotions that accompanies the loss of something or someone valued.”

While we are all likely familiar with the “five stages of grief” (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), these came out of research on people with chronic conditions (Kubler-Ross, 1973). Worden (1983) describes the “tasks of mourning” that need to be accomplished while working

through grief: accepting the reality of the loss, embracing the pain of the loss, adjusting to the new “normal”, and withdrawal from the loss and reinvestment in life. It’s important to note that neither of these are really linear, two things can be true at the same time, and acceptance may never be reached. From a two-eyed perspective, part of the grieving process is the creation of a new reality. In moving towards it, there’s a back-and-forth dialogue between the event story (the loss) and the relational background story that eventually merge into something new. [When thinking about loss, I reframe often thinking about the losses/“changes to the valued relationship” that we/staff/members have experienced at MTS. Recall that grief isn’t only about physical loss.]

Key qualities in supporting grief: validation, curiosity, empathy rather than sympathy, supportive listening, patience, being nonjudgemental, prepare to hear difficult experiences, be comfortable with a wide range of emotions, and reflect on your own experiences with grief. To walk alongside others, keep the following ideas with you: inquire into current and future needs, ask permission and offer support (“Is it okay if I...”), sit with the person, check in, share stories or experiences of the loved one, ask about the loved one directly (“Tell me about...”), and help mobilize resources.

We discussed the relationship between grief and time, including preparing for “firsts” and setting time aside for grief. We discussed emotional pain as a messenger and using curiosity to reflect on what it has to say.

Trauma, different than grief, is a wound that injures us emotionally, psychologically, physiologically, and spiritually. Trauma can result from violence or the violation of a boundary, and the source of it may even have occurred during past generations. We are equipped to be able to orient, survive, and adapt to a wide range of experiences, but we find it more difficult to adapt in situations where we do not feel safe, and our reactions will be more automatic and instinctual as a result. Trauma experiences may fall into one of the following categories, or may overlap categories, and there may be multiple layers of trauma in one’s history: developmental trauma, shock trauma, relational trauma, systemic or structural violence, sustained community-based traumatic stress, intergenerational/historic trauma, secondary trauma, and vicarious trauma.

As is the nature of the course, we talked about the role of the helper. Attend to your own balance and groundedness, provide collaborative and trauma-informed guidance, and acknowledge that people heal in many ways – individually and collectively. We talked about co-regulating with those we are helping. We first hope to reduce or buffer the suffering and not add additional stress, and then we hope to be instrumental for creating the best conditions for individuals, families, and communities to rebalance, recover, heal, and flourish.

The “book learning” “contained more information than time permitted us to cover. We spent time on relational pieces often throughout the course, as we would be taking the texts home with us to have as resources once the program was over. Post-trauma growth and resilience, healing from trauma, vicarious trauma, vicarious transformation and resilience, and impact of resonance with traumatic suffering are among the topics that I now have a resource so that I can continue my own learning journey.

I’m not sure how to quantify what the fruit of this certification could, should, or might be – it is what I thought it would be, but also more than I thought it would be. The byline of the Crisis and Trauma

Resource Institute is “We Envision a World Where Everyone Is Trauma-Informed”. We work with—and for—a myriad of people in our various roles, and having more “tools in the toolbox” is a welcome benefit. Having a greater understanding of what it is to be trauma-informed will add to how I use my voice and position to advocate for those in need in the education system, and within MTS. Within this learning there are also principles and understandings that support my and our (MTS’s) work on reconciliation practices, including decolonizing and/or indigenizing the ways in which we engage with people. As Maya Angelou has stated, “...when you know better, do better.” I feel that this governance training has made a permanent change in how I approach the work, and I am excited to continue to look for additional ways to grow in this area.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to be 'Joel Swaan', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Joel Swaan
Provincial Executive