

# *Tending to the Disconnect*

A Framework for Relational Accountability  
& Decolonizing in Relationship





As a provincial umbrella association, AMSSA acknowledges that B.C. is on the unceded homelands of First Nations who have stewarded this land since time immemorial. We recognize the privilege that we have as settlers on this land and acknowledge that AMSSA's operations are located on the unceded traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. As an organization, AMSSA is committed to creating a safe space for Indigenous voices.

# Acknowledgments

AMSSA extends deep gratitude to the members of our Indigenous Advisory Council, whose willingness to engage with us, share generously of their guidance, and offer their profound wisdom has deeply shaped this booklet.

In so many ways, this booklet reflects our time spent together — the story of us. It is through their kindness, patience, and generosity that we have learned what it truly means to engage in relational accountability.

We honour and thank each Elder and Knowledge Keeper for guiding us on this ongoing journey.

We would also like to thank Adriana Contreras, our graphic facilitator, who has graciously walked this journey alongside AMSSA. Adriana's thoughtful visual interpretations have brought our discussions and metaphors to life, and she has beautifully woven her creativity into every illustration and graphic design element of this booklet.



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# Foreword

This work begins with the recognition that **we are supporting settlement on lands taken without consent, lands whose rightful stewards have never relinquished their connection, responsibility, or sovereignty.** This acknowledgment is not symbolic, it is a call to action. To move with integrity, we must reckon with the systems we are part of, the histories we inherit, and the futures we help shape. Decolonization is not an add-on, it is an urgent, foundational responsibility. It asks us to re-examine how we live, lead, and belong on these lands.

Doing this work means engaging in active, sustained decolonization, not in isolation, but in **partnership with Indigenous Peoples.** That partnership must be approached **in a good way**—one that resists colonial patterns of control, extractiveness, and tokenism. It invites us to unlearn dominance and instead embrace **relationality, humility, and accountability.** To truly center Indigenous knowledge systems, governance, and ways of being, we must not treat them as strategies to adopt, but as worldviews to honour and learn from.

As Elder **Norm Leech** reminds us: “If you want to learn how to live here in a good way, ask the people who have lived here for 10,000 years.” This profound teaching speaks to the **place-based nature** of Indigenous knowledge, rooted in land, community, and story. Across what is now called Canada, there are **over 600 distinct Indigenous communities,** each with its own languages, protocols, and relationships. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. What we share here is not a template, it is an offering. A reflection of what has worked for us, grounded in relationships, and shared with humility.

At AMSSA, our journey with the Indigenous Advisory Council has deepened our understanding that decolonization is not a destination, but a **lifelong process of reorientation.** It calls us into reflection, demands integrity, and invites us to be shaped by the truths we encounter. Through our conversations with Elders, we have come to understand that this work is not linear. Like a river, it bends, flows, and gathers strength from many tributaries, each informed by story, responsibility, and care.

This is the beginning of a three-part series grounded in AMSSA’s ongoing journey with Indigenous Elders. The upcoming booklets will explore how internal systems, such as organizational protocols and workplace culture, are shaped, and how these foundations in turn influence the delivery of programs and services. Each instalment draws from relationships and lived experience, **offering reflections rather than prescriptions.** These are not how-to manuals, but invitations to think critically, act with care, and engage more meaningfully in the work of decolonization.

We offer this as a story of where we are and how we are **learning together, and in good faith.** If you are reading this, you are already somewhere along the river. Whether you are stepping in for the first time or have been paddling for some time, we hope these reflections remind you that you are not alone. Let this booklet accompany you, and be a reminder that relationships are powerful tools for change, and that choosing to walk gently, listen deeply, and act with care is a courageous and necessary path.

**May it meet you where you are and encourage you forward, one relationship at a time.**



## *Relationships are at the heart of this work*

At the heart of this work are the relationships we've been fortunate to build with the Elders on AMSSA's Indigenous Advisory Council. Each has walked with us, not out of obligation, but with a generosity of spirit that cannot be measured. Through their kindness, wisdom, and quiet strength, they have helped shape this journey, offering teachings that guide how we listen, how we lead, and how we show up in this work.

We wanted to take a moment to honour each Elder individually, not only to thank them, but to affirm the significance of relational

accountability. The reflections shared here are from AMSSA staff who have worked alongside the Council. They represent the gratitude we carry, and the deep respect we have for each Elder's presence and teachings.

This is not only a gesture of thanks. It is a recognition that this work cannot happen without the relational threads that bind us, and the Elders who continue to hold space for truth, transformation, and healing.

## Elder Mary Point

**Teacher, Cultural Knowledge Keeper, and Wisdom Bearer**

Our relationship with Elder Mary has profoundly shifted how we understand the practice of gift-giving. She taught us that gifts are never just objects, they are expressions of connection, intention, and spirit. A true gift, she reminded us, carries part of ourselves: our values, our gratitude, and the relationships we are tending to. Through her teachings, we've come to approach every offering, whether given or received, with greater care and mindfulness. Her reflections have helped us root our actions in meaning, reminding us that generosity is not transactional, but relational. This teaching continues to guide how we build community, honour others, and move with authenticity in our everyday work. Thank you, Elder Mary, for reminding us that what we give, and how we give, matters.



## Norm Leech

**Knowledge Keeper, Advocate, and Thought Partner**

Norm brings grounded clarity and unwavering commitment to every space he enters. He's not only willing to speak the truth, he invites others to take meaningful steps toward change. For those beginning to explore how Indigenous knowledge systems can take shape in real, everyday practice, Norm offers a perspective that is rooted, practical, and deeply informed by lived experience. He has a remarkable way of helping you understand why you may feel left out by the systems around you, and why the process of decolonization is not just necessary, but deeply personal. Norm doesn't just open doors, he helps us see why they were closed in the first place, and what it takes to change that. Thank you, Norm, for guiding us with such insight, conviction, and generosity. At AMSSA, your presence has helped us move from ideas to thoughtful, relational action. You challenge us with care and show us what transformation can truly look like.



## Elder Glida Morgan

**Matriarch, Knowledge Holder, and Keeper of Calm**

Elder Glida brings with her a quiet strength and warmth that gently anchors our work. She embodies the kind of grandmother love that creates safety and belonging just by being present. Her presence reminds us to slow down, to breathe, and to approach each moment with intention. Her teachings, often shared with humour, tenderness, and soft authority, model what it means to hold space with care and grace. Rooted in intergenerational knowledge and lived experience, her words have shaped not only the conversations we've had, but the ways we show up for one another. Elder Glida has helped us see that decolonization is not only a political act, but a relational practice, a way of treating others with deep respect, care, and patience. Her contributions continue to guide our collective journey. Thank you, Elder Glida, for your kindness, wisdom, and the love you pour into this work.



## Elder Sharon Brass

**Educator, Scholar, and Relational Guide**

Elder Sharon brings an invaluable lens to our journey, bridging Indigenous scholarly work with lived experience in a way that feels both expansive and deeply grounded. Her encouragement to not just read the work, but to wrestle with it, reflect on it, and consider how it lives within us, has pushed us to move beyond performative learning and into personal accountability. She shares her experience with great generosity, never to centre herself, but to offer insight into how colonial systems have shaped not only our institutions, but our internal worlds. Through her guidance, we've been reminded that change begins with honest self-reflection and that knowledge is most powerful when applied with care. We are grateful for how she walks with us, with such openness, and reminds us that intellect, spirit, and emotion all have a place in this work.



## Why Is AMSSA Invested In This Work?

As a **settlement umbrella organization**, AMSSA provides **indirect services by supporting Settlement Provider Organizations (SPOs)** that work directly with newcomers and refugees across British Columbia. Many of these individuals arrive with little to no knowledge of the Indigenous Nations whose lands they now call home. We also recognize **that the settlement sector itself operates within colonial structures**. Over the years, we have received many questions from sector colleagues about how to develop relationships with Indigenous communities, questions that often seek a clear framework, a checklist, or a how-to guide.

The reality is that **relationship-building cannot be standardized**. There are variables at play: histories of harm, generational trauma, and community dynamics, which cannot be controlled or predicted. Providing a checklist would set organizations up for failure, as it would suggest that relationships can be built in a linear, prescriptive way. But like any other relationship, **this work is deeply personal, shaped by trust, reciprocity, and time**.

At the same time, we, along with other **Settlement Provider Organizations (SPOs)** that choose to engage in this work, exist **within a paradox: we strive to decolonize our internal systems while operating within the constraints of rigid colonial structures**. The very nature of our funding models & framework often **pits us against one another, fosters competition rather than collaboration, and restricts the scope of our activities** to predefined priorities that may not always align with community needs or, quite frankly, with our own organizational needs. This raises critical questions:

**How do we move beyond these constraints?**

**How do we honour relational ways of working while navigating structural limitations that define how we function as organizations?**

These are the complexities we must wrestle with, and this booklet is an opportunity to reflect on what is possible within these constraints.



## The Role of the Indigenous Advisory Council

The Indigenous Advisory Council at AMSSA was convened to **offer guidance, not to carry the burden of the work**. Their role is to walk alongside, not to lead at the expense of their healing. Too often, **Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers are expected to shoulder the emotional and intellectual labour of decolonization**, repeatedly asked to revisit trauma and provide direction without the balance of reciprocity, care, or shared responsibility. **The onus must remain with funders, organizations, and newcomers to do the work, to engage, listen, read, reflect, question, disrupt systems, and act within their spheres of influence.**

## What This Booklet Explores

This first booklet seeks to **set the context** by acknowledging and exploring the barriers that exist in relationship-building between Indigenous communities and institutions. Colonialism has left deep wounds, and engaging in this work means understanding the trauma embedded in these relationships.

Specifically, we explore:

- The grief caused by the **Great Disconnect of Colonialism**
- How this grief influences relationships between **funders, settlement organizations and Indigenous communities**
- The importance of tending to these relationships **with care, patience, and accountability**

Each booklet in this series is **influenced by the relationships AMSSA has built with the Elders on our Indigenous Advisory Council**. These Elders share their personal experiences as individuals and do not speak on behalf of their Nations or families. This work reflects **those specific relationships**, not a blueprint to be replicated.

# CREATING MOMENTUM FORWARD

USING OUR *life force* TO BRING AWARENESS & CREATE CHANGE

GUIDED BY THE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE THE LAND OFFERS US

THE LAND IS OUR ORIGINAL GRANDMOTHER

HEALING MIND & SPIRIT ROOTED IN TRUTH

return to source

HEARTS COMING TOGETHER

EMBRACING OUR VULNERABILITY

OPEN MIND & OPEN HEART TO POSSIBILITY & TO ONE ANOTHER

PLANT SEEDS OF HOPE IN FERTILE GROUND

NURTURE CONNECTION TEND TO THE GRIEF OF THE RUPTURE & GREAT DISCONNECT COLONIALISM HAS CREATED & DEPENDS ON

nurture Deep Roots

RE-MEMBERING PUTTING OURSELVES BACK TOGETHER

LET SPIRIT GUIDE YOU SOULFULLY CONNECTING TO WHO YOU ARE & TO OUR INTUITION

HUMILITY IN LEADERSHIP OPENNESS TO LEARN & UNLEARN

BUILD A MUCH NEEDED COMMON UNDERSTANDING

OUR JOURNEYS TOWARDS COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING REQUIRES US TO DISRUPT THE SYSTEMS THAT KEEP US APART

WORKING WITH THE WILLING

COMMUNAL CARE

WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

LAND BACK TO ALL HUMANS

& RETURNING ALL HUMANS BACK TO THE LAND

EACH STORY A RIVER IN DIFFERENT TERRAINS

RETURNING TO OUR UNCOLONIZED STORIES

CONNECTING & LEARNING THROUGH

Story

COMING TOGETHER WITH INTENTION & RESPECT

ENSURING WE HAVE A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PATH WE ARE ON

ORAL TRADITION IS DYNAMIC & ALIVE

IT INVITES US TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE & WITNESS WITH OUR FULL BODIES

GUIDED BY THE NATURAL RHYTHMS OF TRUST & RELATIONSHIP

FOR THOSE OF US WHO WERE BORN IN OTHER LANDS, THERE IS DEEP HEALING WHEN OUR INDIGENITY CONNECTS TO THE LAND HERE

## Guiding Reflections

As you read this booklet, we invite you to sit with the following questions:

### How do you engage in the relationships you create?

Consider both personal and professional connections.

How do these relationships shape the way you lead, interact, and contribute to the spaces you inhabit?

What values guide your approach to connection and understanding?

### Where do you see yourself in the process of decolonization?

Reflect on your position within systems of power, privilege, and oppression. What role do you play in disrupting the status quo and advocating for change?

### What responsibilities do you have in creating space for healing and transformation?

Consider how you support environments that centre growth, reconciliation, and justice. How are you ensuring that marginalized voices are heard, respected, and empowered?

We encourage you to reflect on these questions both personally and organizationally. Personally, how do your values, experiences, and worldview influence your understanding of leadership and equity?

Organizationally, how do these questions relate to your mission, policies, and the culture you help shape? What influence do you have within your team, your organization, your family, and your community to lead by example and foster systemic change?

## Art as a Relational Tool

Throughout our meetings and ongoing decolonization journey, we have been supported by a **graphic facilitator** who has helped bring our conversations to life, visually capturing the **metaphors, emotions, and insights** that have emerged. These illustrations have made complex and abstract ideas more **tangible and accessible**, serving as powerful reminders of our shared learning and evolving relationships.

**Art holds a sacred and vital role in many Indigenous communities**, it is a vessel for storytelling, a tool for cultural preservation, and a bridge to spiritual connection. We are honoured to have collaborated with a **newcomer artist** whose fresh lens brings added depth and resonance to this work. By including their artwork in this process, we recognize and celebrate the **diverse experiences and perspectives** that shape our collective journey. It is also a reminder that **creativity and expression are integral to the work of decolonization**, not as decoration, but as a living language that speaks across cultures, histories, and identities.

# Understanding the Grief of Disconnection

Colonialism is not unique to one place, it is a **global experience** that has shaped the lives of Indigenous peoples across continents. While the **methods and timelines** of colonization vary, the impacts are often painfully familiar: land dispossession, cultural erasure, the suppression of Indigenous languages and governance systems, and generations of displacement. These realities are not history, they are ongoing.

For Indigenous peoples in what is now known as Canada, including the host Nations whose lands we live and work on, the grief caused **by the Great Disconnect** is woven into everyday life. It is a grief born not only from what was taken, but from what continues to be denied: sovereignty, belonging, safety, and dignity.

## Colonialism as a Global Experience

As a settlement organization that serves newcomers from around the world, we acknowledge that many of the people who arrive here also carry their histories of **colonial harm**, displacement, and cultural loss. While these experiences are not the same as those of Indigenous peoples on this land, they create important points of reflection:

**How do we recognize intersections of grief without collapsing unique histories?**

**How do we honour the experiences of others without losing sight of the host Nations' central place in this conversation?**

Our work must begin by recognizing that colonialism is **not simply a political or economic system, it is a rupture in relationships**. It is a disconnection from land, from self, from language, from community. That grief looks different in every place and every person.

## The Diversity of Grief

There is no singular story of grief. The loss of language for one community may mirror the forced relocation of another. For some, the grief is ancestral and passed through generations. For others, it is lived and immediate. Some carry the weight of erased family histories, while others navigate the silence of stories never told.

This diversity of grief reminds us that relational work cannot rely on assumptions or broad strokes. It requires deep listening, cultural humility, and a willingness to **sit with discomfort without rushing toward solutions**. It also demands that we reflect on how **systems of power** have failed to recognize, name, or address this grief, and how they continue to reproduce harm in funding structures, policies, and service delivery.

# Planting seeds of hope

While we name grief, we also speak to the possibility of **hope**, not as a **vague ideal**, but as a **deliberate act of care**. Hope, in this context, is not passive. It is relational. It grows in the spaces where people meet one another with humility, honesty, and commitment.



## We plant seeds when we:



**Acknowledge grief without defensiveness**, recognizing pain without trying to explain it away or minimize it



**Prioritize relationships over timelines** valuing depth, trust, and reciprocity over quick outcomes



**Create room for Indigenous voices in decision-making**, ensuring those most impacted are leading the way



**Make space for cultural practices, teachings, and language to return**, recognizing these as vital to healing and community well-being.



**Create and maintain safe spaces to have difficult conversations**, understanding that healing requires honesty, discomfort, and the courage to sit with hard truths.

These seeds don't grow on their own, they require ongoing tending, listening, and adjusting. But even in the soil of disconnection and harm, healing can take root when we show up with care and consistency.

In this booklet, we incorporate **storytelling and visual metaphors** to reflect and honour our journey. These are not just communication tools; they are rooted in **Indigenous knowledge systems**, where meaning is shared through ceremony, oral tradition, and relationship.

However, **we recognize the danger of romanticizing or appropriating** these expressions. Indigenous knowledge is not here to inspire us; it is here to transform us, if we are ready.

**As settlers and newcomers, we must ask ourselves:**

**Are we preparing to receive these teachings in a good way?**

**Are we approaching them with respect, humility, and responsibility—or with entitlement and expectation?**

Using these forms of knowledge requires us to show up differently, not as passive recipients, but as active, accountable learners.

***“The first step in planting seeds is to identify your fertile soil.”***

— Norm Leech,  
Member of AMSSA's Indigenous Advisory Council

This quote reminds us that before we can truly engage in the work of growth and reconciliation, we must each reflect on the ground we're working with—our assumptions, values, readiness, and relationships. Only then can we begin to plant with purpose.

Let this be a reminder: before we move into action, we must **understand the grief**. And in doing so, we begin to **rebuild the ground** where trust and hope can grow.

# The Canoe Metaphor: Our Roles in Rebuilding Relationships



In our conversations with Elders, the **canoe** emerged as a powerful metaphor for the journey of relationship-building and decolonization. A canoe does not move forward by the effort of one person alone, it requires many paddlers, each with a role, rhythm, and responsibility.

This metaphor invites us to reflect on how **each of us shows up** in this shared canoe:

- Who is paddling?
- Who is steering?
- Who is still learning how to hold a paddle?
- Who is setting the rhythm and the pace?
- Who is resting, healing, or navigating from memory and lived experience?

In this journey, **no one is left behind**, but getting in sync takes time. As we paddle together toward a future grounded in justice and care, we will inevitably encounter **rapids, those moments of tension, misunderstanding, or resistance**. It is in navigating those waters together, when we create and maintain **safe spaces to have difficult conversations**, that trust is built, and deeper understanding begins to form.

## Everyone Has a Role

Decolonization and reconciliation are not the work of one person or one community. They require each of us, **settlement workers, funders, community members, Elders, newcomers, and organizational leaders**, to know where we sit in the canoe and what role we are playing.

Some of us are holding paddles for the first time. Some are adjusting their rhythm. Others are looking back to remind us of where we've come from. Each role matters, and **none is more important than the other.**

But paddling out of sync can slow or capsize the canoe. This is why **relational work requires humility, patience, and accountability.** It's not just about showing up, it's about being attuned to how others are moving and adjusting accordingly.

## The Rapids and Rough Waters

We will face **rough waters.** There are rocks beneath the surface, hidden or visible, representing the many challenges we must navigate:

- **Rigid funding structures** that don't allow time or space for relationship-building
- **Burnout and compassion fatigue** from carrying too much, too fast, with too little support
- **Cultural misunderstandings** rooted in language, worldview, or historical context
- **Fear of making mistakes,** which often prevents people from engaging at all

These challenges are real. But they are also **part of the journey.** When we avoid the rapids, we also avoid the growth, learning, and connection that come from moving through them with care.

## Paddling in Rhythm: What Does It Take?

- **Listening deeply** to those who have navigated these waters before
- **Respecting different roles and paces,** not everyone will move the same way or at the same time
- **Creating and holding safe space for difficult conversations,** allowing discomfort to coexist with growth
- **Committing to the journey,** even when the path is unclear or uncomfortable
- **Supporting one another,** especially when someone needs to rest or recover

# The Roles in the Canoe

In this shared canoe, each group plays a unique and evolving role. The canoe moves forward when these roles are **understood, respected, and balanced**, rather than **siloes or imposed**. This is not a **hierarchy**, but a reflection of different responsibilities, rhythms, and vantage points.

## Indigenous Elders & Knowledge Keepers

Navigators at the bow and stern

- Elders are **positioned with perspective**, some at the front of the canoe, pointing out what's ahead, and others at the back, steering with memory, teachings, and lived experience.
- They guide the direction of the work, not with force, but with **relational insight and cultural grounding**.
- It is not their job to paddle hard for everyone else; they are **not here to pull others forward**, but to **offer vision, clarity, and reminders of our responsibilities**.

*They lead through presence, not pressure. They are not carrying the canoe; they are keeping it aligned with the river's spirit.*

## Funders

Suppliers of provisions and  
balance-keepers near the center

- Funders are in the **heart of the canoe**, holding weight and responsibility.
- Their support must be steady, not sudden movements that destabilize the whole group.
- When funders **listen to direction from Elders and paddlers**, they help distribute resources in a way that keeps the canoe balanced and moving.
- If funders pull too hard in their direction, or expect outcomes without rhythm, they risk tipping the canoe.

*Their role is not to steer or command, but to provide steady support that honours those leading the way.*

**Show respect to all people  
but grovel to none.**

— Tecumseh

Tecumseh's words remind us of the mutual respect required among all participants in the canoe, ensuring harmony and balance.

**Service Provider Organizations (SPOs),  
including AMSSA**

Paddlers in the middle

- SPOs are **actively paddling**, working to move things forward alongside others.
- They translate vision into action while navigating pressure from behind (funding bodies) and listening to guidance from the front (Elders and communities).
- Their role is also to **sync with others**, not to paddle ahead or lag, but to create cohesion in the movement of the whole canoe.
- AMSSA, as an umbrella organization, helps **coordinate rhythm** across the sector.

*They must paddle with care, be attuned to those around them, be responsive to the current, and be ready to pause or adjust when needed.*

**Newcomers to BC**

New paddlers joining mid-journey

- Newcomers are learning how to paddle while already on the river.
- They may not know the history of the land or the canoe's journey so far, but they are vital passengers with their wisdom, resilience, and experience.
- With time, they become paddlers—contributing meaningfully once they understand the rhythm and respect the protocols of the canoe.
- Their presence reminds us of the need to slow down, welcome, and teach so that the canoe can move forward together.

*They are not passengers to be carried, they are future paddlers and relationship-builders who bring new rhythm and strength when invited with care.*

**What role are you playing  
in the canoe right now?**

**Are you paddling in rhythm with others,  
or are you moving at a pace that makes it  
harder for the team to stay aligned?**

**What would it take for your organization  
to move through rough waters  
with more intention and care?**

# Rapids & Rough Waters: The Challenges We Face

Just as a canoe journey isn't always smooth, the path toward decolonization and meaningful relationship-building includes navigating rapids and rough waters. Beneath the surface, hidden or visible, are the rocks, the challenges and barriers that threaten to disrupt our progress, capsize our canoe, or halt our journey altogether.

To move forward, we must first acknowledge these challenges openly and courageously. Only then can we chart a path through them.

## What Are the Rapids?

The rapids we face in this relational journey are real, systemic, and personal. They include:

### Rigid Funding Structures

- **Short-term funding cycles** leave little room to build trust, deepen relationships, or respond to community priorities.
- **Competition over collaboration** fosters mistrust between organizations rather than collective action.

***“Colonialism remains embedded in structures of funding and service delivery — unless challenged intentionally, these structures reinforce rather than dismantle inequities.”***

— Adapted from Linda Tuhiwai Smith  
*Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012)

***“Caring for oneself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”***

— Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (1988)

### Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

- Service providers and leaders feel exhausted and overwhelmed from navigating institutional rigidity, resource constraints, and emotional strain.
- Limited capacity to truly engage in meaningful, sustained relational work, causing relationships to suffer or stall.

## Cultural Misunderstandings and Barriers

- Language barriers and differing worldviews can create moments of tension, confusion, or discomfort, slowing relationship-building or unintentionally reinforcing harm.
- The lack of culturally safe spaces for honest, vulnerable dialogue leads to superficial engagement rather than transformative conversations.

***“Misunderstanding arises when people fail to recognize the different worldviews they carry.***

***True understanding requires openness to seeing from the perspective of others.”***

— Dr. Marie Battiste  
*Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (2000)

## Fear of Mistakes and Paralysis

- Fear of “getting it wrong” stops people from engaging at all, which reinforces silences and missed growth opportunities.
- Acknowledging that mistakes will happen is essential but learning to navigate them openly and respectfully is critical to moving forward.

***“To engage in decolonizing work means embracing vulnerability — acknowledging mistakes openly, learning, and continuing to move forward.”***

— Leanne Betasamosake Simpson  
*As We Have Always Done* (2017)

## Naming the Rocks

As we name these rocks beneath our canoe, we take away some of their power. It's not about eliminating every obstacle, some will always remain, but learning how to move through them thoughtfully and collectively. This process includes:

- Creating safe and brave spaces for difficult conversations.
- Being willing to slow down, reassess, and adjust our paddling rhythm.
- Fostering trust by being honest about our limitations and vulnerabilities.

## Moving Through Together

The presence of rapids doesn't mean the journey is impossible. On the contrary, rapids invite deeper collaboration and stronger trust. They require us to:

- Listen and respond to the guidance of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers who have navigated these waters before.
- Share leadership and responsibility, ensuring no one group shoulders the burden alone.
- Advocate for systemic changes in funding models, organizational policies, and sector priorities to better align with relational and cultural realities.

***“We must find ways to paddle together, in rhythm, through these rapids—not alone, but alongside those who have guided us and those who journey with us now.”***

— Elder Glida Morgan  
AMSSA Indigenous Advisory Council

**Which of these challenges resonate most strongly with your experience?**

**How can your organization shift its practices or expectations to navigate these challenges more effectively?**

**What resources or support do you need to confidently navigate through rough waters?**

# Moving Toward a Shared Goal: What Is Your Choice?

Moving toward reconciliation and decolonization requires each of us to make deliberate choices about how we show up, how we build relationships, and how we use our power and resources. Funders, settlement providers, communities, and newcomers each have crucial choices to make in how they participate in and support this relational journey.

## The Role of Funders in Healing

Funding has historically been a tool of extraction, competition, and short-term outcomes. To move toward genuine healing and reconciliation, funding must become a tool for relationship-building, guided by trust, flexibility, and reciprocity.

This means funders choosing to:

- Shift from transactional relationships to partnerships grounded in shared vision and mutual accountability.
- Support long-term relationship-building rather than short-term projects.
- Allow communities and organizations the freedom to determine their priorities.

***“Funding that centers relationship-building over measurable outputs is funding that heals, rather than harms. It restores trust and dignity.”***

— Adapted from Edgar Villanueva  
*Decolonizing Wealth* (2018)

## Community-Led Approaches

True relationship-building means shifting from top-down funding structures toward community-led and relational approaches. It recognizes that communities understand their own needs and solutions best.

Community-led funding looks like:

- Prioritizing community-identified needs rather than externally imposed goals.
- Building long-term partnerships based on listening, trust, and responsiveness.
- Investing in community strengths, recognizing existing expertise, and supporting collective growth.

***“Communities know what they need; the job of funders and organizations is not to prescribe solutions, but to listen, learn, and follow community leadership.”***

— Inspired by Cindy Blackstock  
Indigenous rights advocate

## What Does True Support Look Like?

Genuine support involves more than just financial resources. It means centering Indigenous knowledge, governance, and decision-making. True support is relational, respectful and recognizes Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

True support includes:

- Allowing Indigenous voices to guide decision-making processes.
- Valuing Indigenous ways of knowing, governing, and healing.
- Creating space for meaningful Indigenous leadership and participation at every level.

***“Real support is not doing things for communities, it’s doing things with communities, following their direction, and honouring their vision.”***

— Adapted from Dr. Shawn Wilson  
*Research is Ceremony* (2008)

**As a funder or organization, how are your funding practices currently reinforcing extraction or competition, and how can you shift toward healing relationships?**

**What practical steps can your organization take to support community-led decision-making more genuinely?**

**How can you actively center Indigenous knowledge, voices, and decision-making in your work?**

# Accessibility & Inclusion: Making the Journey Available for All

For our collective journey toward transformation and decolonization to truly be inclusive, we must intentionally create spaces and resources that are accessible to everyone—acknowledging the diversity of ages, abilities, languages, and lived experiences. Accessibility is more than accommodation; it’s an active practice of ensuring that no one is left behind or excluded from the conversation.

## Who Is Left Out? Recognizing Gaps in Access

Before we can truly build inclusive spaces, we must first identify who is systematically excluded. Recognizing gaps means asking ourselves tough questions:

- Who does the current system inherently exclude or overlook and why?
- Who faces barriers in participating fully due to age, ability, language, or technology?
- What assumptions are embedded in our practices, resources, and spaces?

Only when we name these gaps openly can we begin to address them meaningfully.

***“If we don’t ask who is missing from the table, we risk creating solutions that serve only some, rather than truly including all.”***

— Inspired by bell hooks,  
*Teaching to Transgress* (1994)

## Language, Audio, and Digital Access: Ensuring Inclusion Across Generations & Abilities

Inclusion requires providing multiple points of access. To ensure everyone can engage meaningfully, we must:

- Offer multilingual resources, interpretation services, and plain-language materials.
- Provide audio resources, including narration or podcasts, to support diverse learning styles.
- Ensure digital accessibility, making on-line content navigable for those with visual, auditory, or mobility impairments.

***“Accessibility means meeting people in their language, their formats, and their methods of communication. It’s about honouring human diversity.”***

— Adapted from Judy Heumann,  
Disability Rights Advocate, *Being Heumann* (2020)

## Meeting People Where They Are: Adapting to Different Learning Styles

True accessibility means being flexible enough to meet people exactly where they are. This involves:

- Creating resources suited to different learning styles: visual, auditory, interactive, experiential.
- Offering both digital and physical engagement opportunities to accommodate diverse needs.
- Recognizing and valuing intergenerational differences by engaging Elders, youth, families, and community members according to their preferences and comfort levels.

***“Meeting people where they are requires humility and understanding that how we teach and share matters just as much as what we teach and share.”***

— Inspired by Indigenous pedagogy, as described by Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain* (1994)

## Including Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Voices

Accessibility must also ensure that Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community members feel seen, heard, and respected. This involves:

- Explicitly welcoming and affirming Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ identities.
- Providing inclusive spaces that recognize diverse gender expressions and sexual identities.
- Engaging Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ leaders in guiding inclusion practices.

***“True inclusion requires intentional care. We must actively protect, honour, and celebrate the diversity of all identities.”***

— Harlan Pruden, Two-Spirit Activist and Educator

**Who is currently excluded or under-served by your organization’s practices or resources?**

**How can you expand your current accessibility strategies to include diverse languages, ages, abilities, and identities?**

**What practical steps can your organization take to adapt resources to different learning styles and ensure genuine inclusion?**

# Nurturing Deep Roots: Belonging, Community, & Collective Care

When newcomers arrive on these lands, they often journey without familiar anchors—family, community, or culture. To nurture true belonging, we must look toward principles deeply rooted in Indigenous teachings: community, interconnectedness, and collective care. Building these deep roots supports newcomers, strengthens community resilience, and moves us collectively toward reconciliation.

## Deep-Rooted Belonging

Belonging is more than feeling welcomed—it's about feeling deeply connected, safe, and valued within a community. To nurture this kind of belonging for newcomers, we must:

- Ground our work in mutual respect and shared responsibility.
- Move beyond surface-level inclusion, prioritizing genuine relationships that acknowledge newcomers' identities, histories, and contributions.
- Create spaces where newcomers can safely bring their full selves, culturally, spiritually, and emotionally.

***“True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”***

— Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (2017)

## Community as a Source of Strength

Drawing on Indigenous teachings, community is understood not simply as a collection of individuals, but as an interconnected web of relationships. Community care means:

- Recognizing our interdependence—no one stands alone, and each person's well-being is tied to the collective.
- Building networks of care that extend beyond immediate families, creating relationships of mutual support and accountability.
- Understanding that healing and resilience happen through connection, not isolation.

***“We are stronger when we see ourselves as part of a circle, rather than isolated points. True community care means recognizing that our health and strength are interwoven.”***

— Inspired by Richard Wagamese,  
*Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations* (2016)

## Collective Care and Shared Responsibility

Collective care is central to Indigenous worldviews, guiding how communities respond to newcomers, trauma, and reconciliation efforts. It means actively practicing care through:

- Shared responsibilities: everyone contributes according to their strengths and abilities.
- Prioritizing relationships and trust over efficiency and quick solutions.
- Creating safe spaces to hold difficult stories, honouring vulnerability, and making room for healing.

***“Collective care moves beyond individual comfort, it calls us into accountability, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.”***

— Adapted from Robin Wall Kimmerer  
*Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013)

## Learning from Indigenous Wisdom: The Blanket Exercise

One meaningful practice for nurturing belonging and collective understanding is the Blanket Exercise, which invites participants into powerful, experiential learning about Indigenous history, colonization, and resilience. This practice emphasizes:

- The power of collective learning and emotional understanding. Building empathy and deeper relationships across differences.
- Strengthening community bonds through shared experience and reflection
- Understanding that healing and resilience happen through connection, not isolation.

***“The Blanket Exercise is not just about teaching history; it’s about transforming relationships, opening hearts, and building communities rooted in truth.”***

— KAIROS Canada, creators of the Blanket Exercise

**How does your organization currently nurture belonging and community care for newcomers?**

**How can you embed Indigenous teachings on collective care and interdependence into your practices?**

**How can experiential tools like the Blanket Exercise help deepen your team’s understanding and foster stronger community connections?**

# Calls to Action: Shifting from Learning to Doing

Learning is the essential first step, but real transformation comes through action. The following calls to action provide concrete ways to move from understanding toward meaningful, accountable practice. Each call encourages intentional reflection, courageous conversations, and committed transformation—whether you are a funder, part of an organization, or acting as an individual.

## For Funders:

### Practicing Relational Accountability

Funders hold significant power and thus are uniquely responsible for transforming funding practices to support relational healing and decolonization.

Funders can practice relational accountability by:

- Prioritizing multi-year, flexible funding that allows relationships and trust to flourish.
- Valuing relational outcomes and community priorities over short-term, measurable outputs.
- Engaging Indigenous communities meaningfully in decision-making, shaping funding priorities according to their guidance.

***“Accountability isn’t just about money, it’s about consistently showing up in relationship, letting communities guide your actions, and sharing power rather than wielding it.”***

— Adapted from Edgar Villanueva  
Decolonizing Wealth (2018)

## For Organizations:

### Centering Indigenous Leadership and Decolonizing Organizational Culture

Organizations play a crucial role in ensuring Indigenous voices genuinely guide their work. However, true transformation requires more than policy changes. It demands meaningful conversations and shifts in organizational culture at every level.

Organizations can actively move toward genuine decolonization by:

- Ensuring Indigenous leaders hold positions of authority and influence within governance and decision-making processes.
- Creating consistent opportunities for staff to openly discuss and challenge racist rhetoric, unconscious biases, and colonial mindsets in the workplace.
- Recognizing that policy alone does not guarantee equity or inclusion—policy is only as effective as the culture and attitudes underpinning it.
- Fostering an organizational culture that actively listens to Indigenous voices, values relational ways of working, and prioritizes accountability and collective care.

***“Policy alone can’t dismantle racism or colonialism. True decolonization emerges when we confront and challenge harmful rhetoric, behaviours, and assumptions embedded in our everyday practices and relationships.”***

— Inspired by Ibram X. Kendi  
*How to Be an Antiracist* (2019)

## **For Individuals: Deepening Self-Awareness and Action**

Decolonization is deeply personal. It requires individuals to engage in ongoing self-reflection, humility, and courageous action.

As individuals, you can deepen your self-awareness and action by:

- Reflect honestly on your own biases, privileges, and roles within colonial systems.
- Committing to ongoing learning about Indigenous histories, contemporary realities, and your positionality.
- Taking concrete actions within your sphere of influence — at home, at work, in your community — to actively challenge colonial mindsets and structures.

**As a funder, what relational shifts can you begin making today in your funding processes?**

**As an organization, what specific policies or practices need to change to center Indigenous leadership meaningfully?**

**As an individual, what concrete action steps can you commit to that deepen your journey toward decolonization?**

***“Decolonization begins within. It’s not a checklist, it’s a daily practice of self-awareness, learning, accountability, and courage.”***

— Inspired by Paulette Regan  
*Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010)

# Closing & Resources

As we conclude this booklet together, let's remember that **decolonization, relationship-building, and healing** are not destinations, they are ongoing processes rooted in respect, humility, and care. We must also acknowledge a difficult truth: relationships alone will not dismantle colonialism.

Colonialism did not happen because of bad relationships, it happened because of land theft, enforced systems of domination, and erasure of Indigenous Peoples.

While trust and dialogue are essential, we must also commit to **structural change, reparative action, and accountability**.

Doing this work **in partnership** with Indigenous Peoples does not mean sharing the burden equally. This is a journey of **parallel mutualities**: we walk side by side, but not with the same weight. **Settlers carry a greater responsibility** to address the systems and benefits they continue to inherit.

Future booklets in this series will explore in greater depth what **transformative accountability** looks like, for funders, organizations, and individuals.

## Closing Reflections: A Journey, Not a Guide

As we close this first booklet in our series, we do so not with finality, but with a deepened commitment to continue paddling forward — **together, intentionally, and with care**.

Our hope in offering this booklet is not to position ourselves as experts, but to **share what we have learned** through relationship, humility, and practice. We know there is no single roadmap, and we are not here to provide a checklist. **Decolonization is not a model, it is a transformation**. One that is ongoing, place-based, and deeply relational.

This work is hard because it should be. It invites us to examine not just the systems we work within, but the values and stories we carry. It requires us to **challenge colonial habits of control, performance, and extraction**, and instead **lean into Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating**. These teachings are not something to be used; they are something to be honoured. And before they can shape our work, they must first transform our hearts, our language, and our actions.

As settlers, newcomers and long-established, we carry a **greater burden of responsibility**. Our work is not just to build good relationships, but to take **meaningful, sustained action** that supports Indigenous sovereignty, cultural resurgence, and systemic change. And we must do this in partnership, but with clarity that **partnership does not mean parity of responsibility**.

**Before we can begin fighting for our rights as newcomers and settlers on this land, we must first honour the rights of those who have stewarded this land since time immemorial**. Recognizing this is not an act of charity or allyship, it is a fundamental step toward restoring balance, integrity, and justice in our collective work.

Throughout this booklet, we have shared stories, questions, metaphors, and challenges. These are not instructions, but invitations. We invite you to reflect on your own journey and the context from which you do this work:

As you continue this journey, ask yourself:

What stories are guiding your actions?

What relationships are you nurturing, and how are you showing up in them?

Where are you willing to be uncomfortable and still stay in the canoe?

This is just the beginning. **This booklet is the first in a three-part series** that explores our journey of decolonization through a relational lens. The next two booklets will focus on how **organizational policies and procedures are shaped**—what informs protocol and workplace culture—and how those learnings extend into **program and service delivery**, shifting how we engage with communities.

In doing so, we will continue to examine what **transformational accountability** looks like: how funders can change the rhythm of resourcing, how organizations can decolonize their internal structures, and how individuals can disrupt the legacies they've inherited.

***“Decolonization is not a metaphor. It is a daily act of courage, a commitment to honour Indigenous sovereignty, and a call to dismantle the systems that have disconnected us. It is how we begin to live differently, lead with integrity, and walk in right relationship, together.”***

— AMSSA, with gratitude to our Indigenous Advisory Council

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## Quotations & Teachings

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