

The Threads that Weave us Together: Partnering with Indigenous Elders in Research

7 May 2025

Acknowledgements:

The VCHRI Indigenous Health Research Unit would like to thank the VCH Indigenous Health Elders in Residence for their patient and kind guidance throughout the process of creating this document. This toolkit was their idea, and their words shaped the content. We would also like to thank the VCH Indigenous Health team for their close collaboration on this guide.

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Context

Historically, Western research has not provided any benefits or has been outright harmful to Indigenous communities, eroding trust in Western institutions and researchers. Indigenous Peoples also face the ongoing legacy of colonization including anti-Indigenous racism woven into the healthcare system and Canadian society. It is critical we reflect on and change how we approach health research and healthcare to avoid perpetuating harmful practices.

Indigenous Peoples have advocated for change for generations. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015), the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report (2018), and the In Plain Site Report (2020) are examples of these efforts to create change. We are on the first steps of our journeys towards truth and reconciliation, and to engage with Indigenous Elders, it is imperative we learn from the mistakes of the past and build meaningful, reciprocal relationships.

Elders play a critical role in Indigenous communities and are often asked by non-Indigenous researchers to participate in various non-Indigenous events and research projects. However, many non-Indigenous researchers are unfamiliar with how to engage Indigenous Elders meaningfully and respectfully in research, which can be harmful and lead to distrust. If you are interested in engaging with an Indigenous Elder, this toolkit will guide you on how to do so in a culturally safe, respectful, and good way. Please note, this information is based on the experiences and knowledge of the Elders in Residence and the Indigenous Health Research Unit and does not reflect the breadth of approaches and protocols across all Nations. This toolkit is not a step-by-step guide or checklist. Each experience with an Elder will be unique, and it is up to you to take the time to learn from them during each visit. Please be aware, it is not appropriate to ask Elders to share sacred knowledge at any point as it is highly protected information. Historically, researchers have taken Indigenous traditional knowledge and misunderstood or misinterpreted it, causing great harm to Indigenous Peoples.

Host Nations

Vancouver Coastal Health has the privilege of being situated on the traditional territories of several First Nations in what is now known as BC. These Nations are our hosts, with VCH being an uninvited guest on these lands. Each Nation has their own unique protocols and ways of knowing and being. This means each Nation will have different protocols for working with Elders. It is the responsibility of the researcher and their team to take the time to learn about the host Nations and how to respectfully and appropriately build relationships with Elders from those Nations.

More information on our hosts

Name	Description	Link or Citation
VCH First Nations Communities	Communities VCH serves	https://www.vch.ca/en/about-us/indigenous-health/first-nation-communities-we-serve

Values

Indigenous worldviews are guided by deep-rooted values. These values are woven throughout each facet of life, showing us the best path to take. Each Nation, community, and family will have their own values that reflect their experiences, traditional teachings, spirituality, and culture. These values guide our work and are woven throughout this toolkit. Some of the core values embodied by the Elders Circle and the Indigenous Health Research Team include (but are not limited to):

- Trust
- Relationships
- Reciprocity
- Respect
- Community-led
- Kindness
- Compassion
- Listening
- Humility
- Courage
- Honesty
- Centering Indigenous ways of knowing and being
- Following community-specific protocols

Anti-Indigenous Racism and Cultural Safety

Are you and your team members committed to cultural safety and anti-Indigenous racism in your research? This is a Call to Action to commit to your journey towards anti-Indigenous racism and cultural safety. Cultural safety is NOT something that can be achieved in a single course or workshop. It is a *lifelong* process that requires constant commitment to growth, change, and learning. There are many opportunities to increase cultural safety, so please consider the resources below as a place to start. Some of these will reflect the Nations or territories where they were developed, so look for ones that are appropriate for the territory you are on and the work you are doing.

Each Nation, community, and family will also have their own protocols and oral traditions. Most Elders speak from their own family, so check in with them to learn what is appropriate. Avoid questioning their ways or assuming they may know and understand the ways of another Nation. The ways of each family and Nation are unique, so it is important to value their truths. This is also true in other situations such as assuming they know another Elder from another community, or that they know the language and pronunciation of another Nation.

Cultural Safety Resources

Name	Description	Link or Citation
San'yas	Foundational training for healthcare workers	https://sanyas.ca
BCIT Indigenous Awareness	Introduction to cultural awareness	https://www.bcit.ca/free-online-learning/mooc-0200-indigenous-awareness/
University of Alberta Indigenous Canada Course	Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)	https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html
UBC Faculty of Education Reconciliation Through Indigenous Education	MOOC	https://pdce.educ.ubc.ca/reconciliation/
IndigenEYEZ KinSHIFT training	A series of workshops and programs	https://kinshift.ca/
VCH Indigenous Health Cultural Safety Training	A foundational cultural safety course for VCH employees	https://one.vch.ca/dept-project/indigenous-cultural-safety/Pages/Indigenous-Cultural-Safety-in-person-workshops.aspx

Introduction

This toolkit was created at the request of and with the generous guidance of the Elders in Residence program that is situated within Indigenous Health at Vancouver Coastal Health. The Elders in Residence are from various Nations and offer culturally specific support, teachings, and ceremony to Indigenous patients, families, and staff members. If you would like to learn more about this program, or you would like to request to work with an Elder, please contact Indigenous Health.

Who is an Elder?

Indigenous Elders:

- Have done the work required to become an Elder
- Have extensive lifelong training in their community's ethics and protocols
- Have a deep knowledge of our histories, teachings, and interconnections
- Are lifelong learners
- Connect community members of all ages with intergenerational wisdom and knowledge
- Are recognized by the community as Elders and not self-selected
- Are not the same as Knowledge Keepers, who have training in particular teachings, but an Elder can also be a Knowledge Keeper
- Are not defined by a particular age

Additional information on Elders

Name	Description	Link or Citation
Vancouver Coastal Health Indigenous Health	VCH Elders in Residence Program	https://www.vch.ca/en/service/elders-residence#short-description--12046
Queen's University Office of Indigenous Initiatives	Definitions and descriptions	https://www.queensu.ca/indigenous/ways-knowing/elders-knowledge-keepers-and-cultural-advisors

How to engage with Elders in Research

Indigenous Worldviews

Indigenous Elders will approach research from an Indigenized perspective, so it is important to make space in the research process for this. Taking the time to start learning about Indigenous worldviews shows respect and may also enrich and deepen your research. It will also increase your understanding of Indigenous approaches to research, health, and wellness. Although there is no singular, pan-Indigenous worldview, there are some threads that weave us together, including:

- Relationality: All things are connected, in relationship with, and relevant to one another.
- Relationships are meaningful, ongoing, and they shape our reality
- Reciprocity maintains balance so that we all benefit
- The mind, body, heart, and spirit are all considered through a wholistic perspective. Some communities use the medicine wheel to show this perspective
- There is no singular truth, but many truths
- Many Indigenous Peoples have a wholistic, or circular, perspective and way of learning, where there is no beginning and no end. This contrasts with Western linear perspectives that have a beginning and end

Indigenous Approaches to Research

As mentioned, Elders are a critical part of Indigenous communities, yet they are often asked by non-Indigenous researchers to participate in tokenistic roles. Seeing Elders as leaders, whose knowledges can strengthen research projects, will help to move away from these colonial and harmful research practices. As you establish a respectful relationship with an Elder, ask them what their comfort level is and whether they would like to take on a leadership role in the research, and if so in what capacity. Be prepared to offer resources and support where required for the Elder to do their work.

It is necessary to incorporate research approaches and methodologies that resonate with and benefit Indigenous Peoples while avoiding potential harm. Acknowledging the strengths of both Indigenous and Western research approaches in health research will not only make your research more meaningful, but it also will also help create a safer environment for Elders' participation in research.

As mentioned, there is no pan-Indigenous approach to research, but there are shared practices that support the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews, including:

- Slowing down the work and spending time building relationships
- Understanding storytelling and listening as critical and necessary practices
- The importance of intentional language and the weight of words
- Being present and bringing your whole self to the work
- Listening with an open heart and open mind

Resources on Indigenous Approaches to Research

Name	Description	Link or Citation
VCHRI IHRU Indigenous Health Research Foundations	Foundational workshop series for health researchers.	Course coming 2025. Check https://www.vchri.ca/services/additional-support/indigenous-health-research-unit for updates.
Decolonizing Methodologies	Critical reading in understanding research dynamics	Smith, L. T., & Bloomsbury Collections: All Titles. (2021). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples (3rd ed.). Zed Books.
Indigenous Storywork	An exploration of how Indigenous stories are part of research	Archibald, J. (2008). Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit. UBC Press.
Research is Ceremony	Research from an Indigenous perspective	Wilson, S. (2008). Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods. Fernwood Publishing.
Indigenous Methodologies	Incorporating Indigenous methodologies	Kovach, M. (2021). Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts (Second ed.). University of Toronto Press.
"I spent the first year drinking tea"	The importance of relationship building with the communities	Castleden, H., Morgan, V. S., & Lamb, C. (2012). "I spent the first year drinking tea": Exploring Canadian university researchers' perspectives on community-based participatory research involving Indigenous peoples. The Canadian Geographer, 56(2), 160-179.
Decolonize Myself: Unethical Research	Links to videos on research and Indigenous Peoples	https://www.decolonizemyself.ca/post/unethical-research

Protocols and Procedures

What can you invite and Elder to participate in?

Colonialism has significantly disrupted the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge – including Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing – which was traditionally shared by Elders. Given this critical role, Elders are highly revered and respected leaders within their communities and there is a widespread understanding that Elders' time is precious and must be protected. For this reason, it is critical to recognize that Elders serve multiple roles within their communities and that research may not be their priority. Therefore, it is critical to be respectful of Elders' time and be considerate of the types of research activities that they should be invited to, including:

- An event opening and welcoming to the territory.
 - A welcome to the territory can *only* be done by someone from the Nation on whose territory you are on. Openings can be conducted by Elders from other territories. Be sure you make connections with the local or host Nation first. Below are two websites that can help you learn who the caretakers of the land are.
 - Most Elders will offer a prayer at the opening and/or closing of events. After the host introduces the event, the Elder can be introduced to provide the opening. If they are offering a closing, the host can again invite the Elder up to close the event.
 - It is not always necessary to have these services. Events with guests from other territories, events of significance, multi-day events, and so forth, may require a welcoming or opening.
 - It is polite to invite the Elder to stay for the rest of the event if they are interested but be sure you can provide appropriate meals, honoraria and support.
- Providing support for research participants.
 - If comfortable and if they have the time and capacity, Elders can provide a safe space for participants to debrief and access cultural support. For various reasons, not all Elders will do this, so be sure to ask first.
- Leading, advising, or participating directly in events.
 - If interested, Elders should be invited to lead research activities, which can include advising on research priorities, deciding on research methodologies, as well as guiding knowledge synthesis, translation, and dissemination activities, among others.

Territory Information

Name	Description	Link or Citation
First Peoples' Cultural Council map of BC	Interactive territory map of BC	https://maps.fpcc.ca/
The Treaty Map	Yellowhead Institute map	https://treatymap.yellowheadinstitute.org/map/

What do you not invite an Elder to?

For some events, it is inappropriate to invite an Elder. We have provided some alternative suggestions to these when possible.

- **Land acknowledgements:** Land acknowledgements are respectful acknowledgements of the Indigenous territory or territories where a gathering is being held. They call attention to the colonial context of the territory, and the relationships between the land and the peoples. Below are some resources to help you create your own meaningful land acknowledgement. As uninvited guests it is important to take the time to learn the local protocols.
- **Potentially triggering projects or events:** Given our history and present, there are some research topics, situations, and locations that can be triggering. Provide content warnings when discussing potentially triggering topics and ensure sufficient supports are in place for Elders who may be coping with trauma. Ensure research activities are conducted in neutral venues or known safe spaces.
- **Events or projects involving alcohol or drugs:** Some Elders may not feel comfortable participating in events that serve alcohol, or that focus on topics that include drugs and alcohol. However, given the disproportionate impacts of substances on Indigenous communities, some Elders also may be interested in speaking on or supporting these issues, so be sure to ask their preferences.

Land acknowledgements resources

Name	Description	Link or Citation
University of British Columbia Xwi7wa Library	Information on land acknowledgements	https://guides.library.ubc.ca/distance-research-xwi7xwa/landacknowledgements
Simon Fraser University	Traditional territories: SFU's land acknowledgements	https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/academic-integrity/indigenous-initiatives/traditional-territory

Before contacting an Elder...

In addition to the guidance above, there are several aspects of your research, intent, and purpose to consider before inviting an Elder to participate in research.

- It is important the entire team commit to lifelong learning regarding Indigenous cultural safety, and everyone should take at least one course or workshop before connecting with an Elder. Remember, taking one course is not enough; this is a lifelong learning process, so it is important for the team to continue their learning.
- Some critical areas for ongoing learning:
 - Gain a foundational knowledge of the impacts of medical and research colonialism on Indigenous Peoples, acknowledge our complicity in it, and recognize the importance and validity of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.
 - Learn how to pronounce the name of the territory you are on and other appropriate words (e.g., the preferred name of members of the host Nation or the name of their language). Mispronouncing our languages is a behaviour of erasure, so please take the time to learn before reaching out.
 - Understand that Elders should not be asked to represent or speak for all Indigenous Peoples.
- As you embark on your learning journey, ask yourself:
 - Why are you including Elders in this work? Is it tokenistic or is it meaningful?
 - Does the organizer understand the Elder's role and know the Elder's schedule for the event?
 - Does everyone helping to organize understand the Elder's role? Are they able to answer any questions the Elder may have?
 - Is your work reciprocal? How will it directly benefit Indigenous Peoples?
 - Are you asking for emotional labour from the Elder? If so, how are you balancing or accounting for this?
 - It would be helpful to have additional supports to offer participants, and even to the Elders. Ask the Elders if they feel they will need additional support.
 - Are you asking the Elder for advice, to help plan, or how to make the event culturally safe? Take care of these things before contacting the Elder, as this is not their role.

When do you invite an Elder?

As respected community members, it is very important you invite an Elder as soon as you are able. If you were inviting a respected non-Indigenous PhD or medical doctor to your event, you would likely allow for as much notice as possible considering how busy they are. Therefore, inviting an Elder to an event with short, little, or no notice is not respectful.

In some cases, an Elder may not be able to or may choose not to participate. It is important to be appreciative of their consideration and respectful of their wishes. Under no circumstances should you attempt to coerce, convince, nor persistently ask an Elder to participate or be involved in your research.

How do you invite an Elder?

It is important to tailor your outreach to the Elder and follow the appropriate protocols. You are establishing a reciprocal relationship with the Elder(s) rather than a business transaction.

- It is generally respectful to address the Elder with this title followed by their first name (e.g., “Hello, Elder Jane, how are you today?”).
- Be ready to provide the Elder with the background on the event to which they’ve been invited. This allows the Elder time to decide if they want to participate, and to prepare in advance.
 - This includes information on the organization or team, who the opening is for, the purpose of the gathering, the agenda, the expected audience, and if necessary, the project summary, slides, papers, etc.
- If appropriate, ask the Elder if they would first like to meet in-person for coffee, tea, or lunch to discuss the work before deciding if they’d like to be involved.

If you already have the Elder’s contact information:

- When sending an email, be clear and concise. Avoid jargon or lengthy explanations.
- Phone calls should be made between regular business hours. Messages should state your name, where you are calling from, why you are calling, and how you can be reached.
- If you have not met the Elder before, take the time to introduce yourself and explain who you are and the intentions behind your work.
- If you are posting an open invitation to an event online or on social media, be aware you may not reach as many Elders this way.

If you don’t know how to find an Elder:

- To reach an Elder from a particular Nation, call the band office and ask if they could connect you. They may also be able to let you know if there are certain gifts or honoraria Elders prefer.
- Friendship Centres may be able to connect you with Elders from other communities.
- Métis Elders may be reached through Friendship Centres or their respective Métis chartered community office: <https://www.mnbc.ca/citizens-culture/chartered-communities>

Once you have sent the invitation:

- If you do not receive a reply after one week you may follow up to see that they received the invitation. In some cases, if you have not received a reply at this point you may take that as a sign that the Elder is not available.
- If the Elder has agreed to your event, make all plans clear with them. Connect with them again one or two days before the date of the event to reconfirm plans and to see if they need anything else.

Planning the Event

There are a few other things to consider when inviting an Elder to ensure a safe environment.

- Some Elders work in pairs or small groups or will bring a helper/support worker with them. Be prepared to offer honoraria, support, and a gift to this person or people as well.
- Will the Elder need additional supplies? Is this something you can pay for?
- Offer water, food, and coffee or tea. Check for dietary restrictions or medication needs, and plan multiple breaks and meals for longer events.
- Ask about the Elder's mobility and accessibility needs, including dietary restrictions or preferences.
 - E.g., some Elders are diabetic and need to have juice or snacks on-hand.
- Is the event taking place in a safe space? (e.g., not in a potentially triggering location)
- How is the Elder getting there? Do they need a taxi or can someone pick them up?
 - Please follow-up to confirm that the taxi or driver has picked up the Elder and/or delivered them safely to their destination before or after an event.
- If the meeting or event is being held virtually, ask the Elder if they have the technology, internet, space, and any other resources they need to call in, and support for doing so. Be prepared to offer additional support or troubleshooting as required.
- If there are any changes to the event or you have any questions regarding protocols, it is okay to ask the Elder for guidance. Each Elder will have their own teachings and protocols from their own Nations and communities, and we recognize we are all learning and growing together.
- The words of Indigenous Elders are intellectual property. If you are conducting research that involves an Elder (e.g., interviews, storytelling, supporting participants), it is important to have a research agreement that appropriately protects Indigenous intellectual property and data (which includes teachings Elders may share with project teams or event attendees), and respect Indigenous communities' or Nations' rights to self-determination over their own data.

At the Event

Once you are at the point of doing the work or hosting the event with the Elder, there are some other considerations:

- Have someone meet the Elder at the parking lot and walk them to the location of the meeting or event. Find out in advance if the Elder has mobility or health issues and be prepared to adjust as needed.
- Have at least one support person or Elder Assistant, if not more, to bring them food or drink, show them where things are, offer general assistance, and support them throughout the duration of the research activity or event.
- In many communities, when serving meals, the Elders eat first and are often served by someone else. Find out in advance if the Elder has any dietary restrictions or needs. Have a team member ask what the Elder would like and how much and then bring it to them.
- If it is a longer event, take regular breaks and check-in with the Elder. Be sure there is a place for them throughout the event, so they are included and taken care of the entire time, as this is a large time commitment for them.
- Create a safe place in a separate room for Elders to take breaks in, or to speak with others if an issue arises or someone needs their support. This is a good place to have drinks, snacks, and materials for smudging or cedar brushing if possible. It is okay to ask the Elder for their preferences.
- As mentioned, Indigenous Peoples have different worldviews and values than non-Indigenous people. Please show respect by allowing for extra time or resources, and never interrupt, cut-off, or request an Elder to stop sharing.
- Check to see if the Elder prefers that the research team or participants wear masks or if anything other protective health measure would make them feel more comfortable. If a team member is sick, they must stay home to protect the Elder's health and well-being.
- Avoid asking the Elder for additional labour. Treat the verbal agreement on what the Elder will do like a contract. For example, if the agreement was to provide a welcome, it would be inappropriate at the event to ask them to also sing a song.
 - Additional work requires a higher payment. Elders hold generations of knowledge, and it is disrespectful to ask for access to it for free. Elders also need time to prepare to do work in a good way, so last minute requests should be avoided.
- If the Elder is unable to make the event at the last minute and there are other Elders in attendance, do NOT ask them to do the welcome or opening prayer in their place.
 - If the Elder is running late, wait a few minutes before starting the event, then invite the Elder up when they arrive and are ready.

Payment

Indigenous protocols for payment differ from Western institutional guidelines, which can cause delays in payments. This is problematic for Elders and creates barriers to building meaningful relationships between researchers and Indigenous Peoples. It is also important to remember Elders are not volunteers; they are being asked to share their time that could be given to their community, and to share generations of wisdom that they spent a lifetime learning. If the event is UBC related, the UBC Indigenous Finance Guidelines (below) are helpful.

Here are some things to be aware of when you are planning for your event or project to help Elders receive their payments and gifts in a timely and simplified manner:

- When you are writing your research proposal or putting together your event plan, be sure to include the costs of payments for Elders and support workers in your budget.
- In many Nations, it is customary to pay someone immediately for their work. Depending on your financial procedures, it may be helpful to submit the required forms well in advance to ensure Elders can be paid at the event.
 - VCH Indigenous Health has their own payment procedures for the Elders in Residence, so please confirm the process with them.
- Check with the Elder or community to find out what is an appropriate payment. One helpful guideline is to think about how much you would pay a medical doctor, PhD, or respected speaker for attending an event of the requested duration of time—or what the equivalent hours of service to profession would be paid. Although institutions may have conventions on payments, these Western standards are colonial and have not taken into account Elders' lifetimes of training. Whenever possible, please consider paying Elders more than what institutional standards might dictate.
 - VCH Indigenous Health has their own rates for the Elders in Residence. Please check with them for current rates.
 - Additional rates for specific ceremonies and urgent requests vary, so please check in advance.
 - Be sure to check what type of payment is preferred. For example, some Elders like cash while others prefer an electronic transfer, a pre-paid credit card, or direct deposit.
- In most cases it is expected that the cost of travel and meals will be included in payment.
 - Travel, meals, etc. are in addition to honoraria.
 - This includes parking fees, gas/mileage, and taxi fares.
 - Check to see if there are other costs associated with their travel.
- Some Elders may not have a SIN or are not able to sign finance forms in advance. Discuss options with finance (e.g., perhaps you can sign for them) or whether cash honorarium or gift card is preferred.

Gifting

Gifting is different than payment and protocols vary. Generally, gifts are an acknowledgement of the work and a show of appreciation and respect for the Elder. Gifting is an important part of fostering a reciprocal relationship. The gift can be something simple or something cultural. Check if they have a preference.

- Some Elders prefer to be gifted a medicine from their territory, and some may avoid certain medicines. For example, some Elders prefer to be presented with tobacco as that is part of their teachings, while others may prefer sage or sweetgrass. Check for Indigenous-owned businesses in your area for these medicines. You can also ask the Elder what their preference is.
- Consider something different, unique, or useful.
- If you are able, purchase your gifts from an Indigenous artist or small business in your area.
 - UBC has an Indigenous supplier list: <https://finance.ubc.ca/doing-business-with-ubc/inclusion-in-procurement/indigenous-suppliers/>
- If you are unable to prepare a gift, that is also okay as long as you are still working to establish a safe and reciprocal relationship. You could also offer a thank you card.
- When you are writing your research proposal or putting together your event plan, be sure to include the costs of gifting for Elders in your budget.

Helpful Finance Guidelines

Name	Description	Link or Citation
University of British Columbia's Indigenous Research Support Initiative's Finance Guidelines	A set of guidelines for working with Indigenous Peoples developed by UBC	https://irsi.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Indigenous%20Finance%20Guidelines%20-%202012-10-2021_3.pdf

Other Resources

Here are some resources from other institutions. Please note, some of these focus on Indigenous Peoples and communities from different territories, so be sure you are following the appropriate protocols for the territory you are in.

Name	Description	Link or Citation
First Peoples' Cultural Council Working with Elders	Guidelines for working with Elders	https://fpcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FPCC-Working-with-Elders_FINAL.pdf
Concordia University's Indigenous Elder and Community Protocols	Website and PDF document	https://www.concordia.ca/indigenous/resources/elder.html
Carleton University's Guidelines for Working with First Nation, Metis and Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers	Guidelines for working with Elders and Knowledge Keepers	https://carleton.ca/indigenous/policies-procedures/guidelines-for-working-with-elders/
Justice Institute of BC Guidelines	Guidelines for working with Elders	https://www.jibc.ca/sites/default/files/2020-09/OI%20Elder%E2%80%99s%20Guidelines%20and%20Protocols.pdf
First Nations' Health Authority BC Elders Guide	Guide for partnering with Elders in BC	https://www.fnha.ca/WellnessSite/WellnessDocuments/BC_EldersGuide.pdf
Western University's Indigenous Initiatives Guidelines	Guidelines for working with Indigenous community	https://indigenous.uwo.ca/initiatives/docs/working_with_indigenous_community.pdf