

Finding Our way through a Pandemic

“Everyone in the camp had died from that illness, everyone except your Grandma, she was only four, but she stayed inside the tent as her Grandma told her to do and that is why she survived. She kept the fire going, they don’t know exactly how long she was there alone, but she survived and that is who you come from, don’t forget who you are and where you come from. That is the strength that is within you.” ~ Personal Story told to Author

As Yukon First Nations people, many of us grew up hearing stories of unparalleled resilience and strength demonstrated by our grandparents and ancestors to persevere through massive upheaval and challenges, against all odds in order to survive and to live. Colonization, epidemics, legislated cultural genocide, immense change and threats to our very existence have been constant and systematic. It is truly miraculous that we have endured through these crisis’s and persisted on, left with a still recognizable community, with our ways, culture, language and land-based life fairly intact and with a strong aptitude to heal, grow and continually move forward.

2020 has proven to be one of the most threatening and terrifying years in the last century facing our people and community with the unforeseen and rapid advancement of the COVID-19 virus. A phenomenon which has completely shifted the globe upside down with its remarkable impact on countries, human beings, the economy and the environment. This type of threat has been present many times prior and throughout human history and in our particular recent history. In fact even more virulent diseases have rampaged through the Yukon Territory wiping out great numbers of the Indigenous populations. Despite the dire outcomes of these epidemics, Yukon Indigenous people persevered – and in these turbulent and uncertain times we wonder how did they do this? Quite simply, the answer lies within a strong conviction to endure. Strength is derived from somewhere, our strength is embedded within our own teachings and guidelines, following them has always provided a way to survive. Just like much of our culture, we have been displaced away from our teachings, we can reclaim them back and live by them, it is currently the perfect time and opportunity to reset who we are and how we live our lives aligned with our true indigenous identity.

Yukon First Nation History with Pandemics

The impact and death rates of prior epidemics to Yukon Indigenous people were extremely high decimating families, clans, communities and nations. Losing people at such high rates and in rapid time frames not only changed the very core and functions of society but initiated tremendous grief and trauma cycles never known prior to these diseases arriving in the Yukon. The trauma of these great losses continues today. A long list of diseases were present since the time of contact and onward: influenza, measles, dysentery, jaundice, whooping cough, mumps, tonsillitis, meningitis, diphtheria, scarlet fever, etc.

Just like COVID-19, people did not have immunity to the diseases and literally were annihilated by them because they were instantly and abruptly thrust upon them. This is referred to as “virgin soil epidemics” (Coates, 8). It is hard to imagine entire families wiped out and most of the community gone, but this was our reality over and over again. Today, we have knowledge and strategies in place to keep our communities safe. One of the most devastating worldwide pandemics, the Spanish Influenza of 1918, killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people worldwide.¹ We have learned a great deal from this, mainly the importance of being strategic, being prepared and keeping populations isolated from each other, this is why it is imperative that our communities follow these instructions now while COVID-19 is fairly contained in the Yukon.

Taking a Positive Approach

Despite the stress and uncertainty the pandemic is creating we can view our forced isolation as a time to self-reflect and reinvent ourselves, our lives and our vision for the future as a community because our existence may never resemble where we were prior to COVID-19. Isolation in itself, is not a foreign concept to us. One good example was the seclusion ceremony during rights-of-passage for a girl, as she transitioned from a child into a young woman. She spent months or years alone strengthening herself spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally to be ready for her life to come. The same held true for our men who would spend much time alone on the land, hunting, providing, protecting and leading. We can utilize this time and this practice to re-strengthen ourselves by reclaiming our own teachings to provide guidance as to how and enacting them into the transformation of self.

¹ Schelden.

<https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=228841> What 1918 Spanish Flu Death Toll Tells Us About COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic

All of our teachings are based on principles or guidelines for living life in a good way²: How can we put these values/virtues into play now during this time of crisis and further into our reclaimed mindset? Here are some suggestions:

Selflessness: I will protect the people I love by sacrificing during this time, I am putting others before myself by putting aside my own personal agenda for the betterment of the all.

Honour: It is honourable to walk through this with dignity and with good intentions and not to go to a place of negativity and blame to those around me.

Respect: I can demonstrate respect by showing kindness and patience towards others, by being supportive to our leadership and to each other.

Courage: I will have courage to keep living and fight for our wellness and health, I can do this by self-isolating and practicing physical distancing.

Integrity: I am responsible for myself, I am responsible to my family, clan and nation. My actions reflect all of them so I must walk through this crisis remembering who I am and all those who stand with me.

Knowledge: It is important to me to understand the science, medical guidance and true facts of the situation and not believe and act on hearsay or gossip.

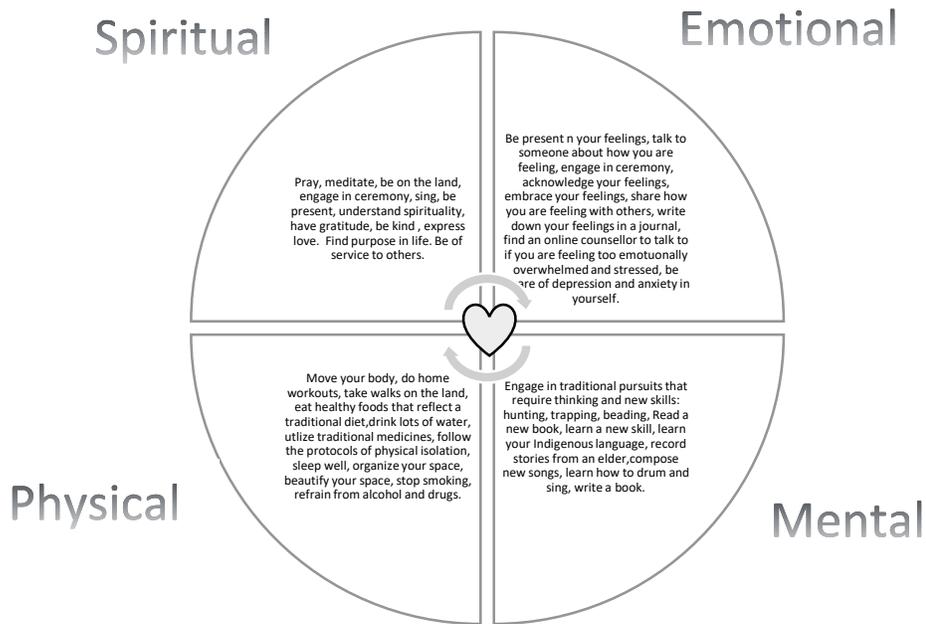
Compassion: I can feel love and sadness for those how are being directly impacted by this pandemic and in other challenging situations of life. I can show support to them by helping any way I can.

Honesty: All healing begins at a place of truth, I can speak my truth and share my feelings without hurting others and with kindness.

Taking Care of Yourself: Mind, Spirit, Body, Heart

Although spending time at home in isolation or in quarantine may at first sound like a dream come true for some people, it in fact can become extremely depressing and wearing for people after a long period of time. We are social beings and need each other, especially evident in small indigenous communities who are clan and family based. It is important to be in charge of your own well-being and health during the pandemic. Our teachings tell us that we are complex beings and our wellness is based on the balance of our whole parts which are: spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. The following illustration provides ideas based on our traditional practices and pursuits to facilitate wellness during the pandemic. Try to engage in these activities as much as possible to keep your wellbeing strong.

² These are the virtues/values in CTFN's Book Two of the Family Act.



Taking Action

Our ancestors did not sit idle waiting for things to happen to them, they were proactive and intentional in purpose and took action following our own laws for behavior and for survival. This is our example now to look to and to follow to ensure our ongoing survival. These actions take us beyond our own personal interests and for the security and wellness of the whole, our entire community. It is important to remain calm as the ancestors were trained to do in times of crisis and danger. Panicking could cause death when faced in a critical situation. As we were taught, we must protect and support our most vulnerable citizens; elders, young, homeless, and those with prior health conditions.

Guidelines to Lesson the Transmission of COVID- 19

- Stay home and self-isolate
- Wash your hands frequently with soap for 20 seconds
- Use hand sanitizer
- Wear a non-medical mask when you have to go out into the public
- Stay 6 feet away from other people
- Do not travel out of your community unless absolutely necessary
- Do not have gatherings outside of your immediate family

A fundamental teaching is sharing, everything we had was distributed among the community, we can still practice this especially by being mindful to not hoard essential items in the stores and ensuring everyone have what they need.

It is a particularly difficult time for those in leadership roles because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of COVID-19. Governments and Leadership are making their best efforts and working diligently to provide sound instructions and lead the way, we must be supportive and empathetic to them. They too must act with focus, intention and be an extraordinary example to guide community members to follow the instructions and protocols.

A Deeper Connection

One incredible gift and blessing we can embrace stemming from our forced isolation is a new type of connection based on gratitude and separation. It is a time for us to remember how precious our people are and how we absolutely need each other. Our new perspectives can help us to connect with each other on a much deeper and profound level – absence makes the heart grow fonder. Connecting must happen at a distance however, this can effectively happen over social media and video conferencing, over the telephone and good old fashion letter writing. Making extra efforts to check in on each other and have deeper conversations about life, how one is feeling and how we can make our world a better, more just, and kinder place help us to feel productive and with much needed purpose.

Pandemics and epidemics have greatly impacted our communities, reduced our populations and been with us since first contact with Europeans. If we follow the historical patterns of our grandparents and parents, Indigenous people in the Yukon will make it through this pandemic but it will require tremendous commitment and strength particularly in following the guidelines to lessen the transmission of the virus within our communities. With all difficulties and challenges there comes opportunities to create positive changes. We can reset ourselves and our communities by reclaiming and embodying our own values/virtues and teachings. They contain wisdom and have guided our people through massive challenges and difficulties allowing an unwavering commitment to survive and live on.

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Resources

For more information on COVID-19:

In Yukon: <https://yukon.ca/COVID-19>

In Canada:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html>

References

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