

TWO-SPIRIT MÉTIS AWARENESS RESOURCE

A PLACE

IN THE CIRCLE

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING
TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE



Métis Nation
of Ontario 



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TWO-SPIRIT

MÉTIS PEOPLE

1.1 History of the Term Two-Spirit

The term Two-Spirit rose to prominence in the 1990's as a way for Indigenous members of the LGBTQ community to identify their unique experiences. Coined in Winnipeg by First Nation and Métis Elders, the term has grown in popularity over the past 30 years. Today the term is used by many First Nation, Métis and, sometimes Inuit, people who may also identify with other gender identities.

1.2 Meaning of the Term Two-Spirit

The term Two-Spirit has been used in different contexts and can have a number of meanings. In some cases, Two-Spirit is used as an umbrella term by Indigenous people who also identify with another gender identity (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, etc.). The term is also often used to refer to the specific cultural and community roles that Two-Spirit people play as individuals who are understood in many Indigenous traditions to embody both male and female energies.

Two-Spirit is an English term that is sometimes used in lieu of terms used in Indigenous languages. The vast majority of Indigenous languages spoken in North America have specific terms which refer to people whose gender identity does not fit within a male/female gender binary.

1.3 Traditional Roles and Responsibilities in Métis Communities

Truth Speakers

Historically, Two-Spirit Métis people were given protections by leadership in order to bring perspectives forward that might not be popular. This was because it was understood that Two-Spirit Métis people had unique insights into the needs of all community members whether they be male, female, or gender diverse.

Child Rearing

Early Métis communities maintained adoption practices which were common among First Nation relatives. These practices valued kinship systems above blood lines and allowed for children to be adopted by community members who might not have been genetically related to them. When children were orphaned by disease, conflict, or tragedy, it was often Two-Spirit individuals who would step in to raise them.

Mediators and Counselors

As Two-Spirit people were often understood to embody both masculine and feminine energies and perspectives, they often acted as mediators. In this role they would assist by facilitating effective communication between men and women.

Medicine People and Healers

Many Two-Spirit people had spiritual gifts which allowed them to heal others who were ill or suffering. Two-Spirit people were understood to be completely balanced energy which is central to Métis concepts of health and wellbeing. Their inherent balance allowed them to work with medicines and conduct ceremonies to heal and help others.

2 TWO-SPIRIT (2S) AND THE LGBTQ ACRONYM

2.1 Terms and Definitions

You have likely seen the acronym LGBTQ before and might be wondering what this represents. Each letter in this acronym represents a different gender identity. Two-Spirit is often represented by adding a 2S at the front or end of this acronym. Below is a list of what each letter represents and a brief definition of the terms.

L – Lesbian

Refers generally to women who are sexually attracted to other women.

G – Gay

Refers generally to men who are sexually attracted to other men.

B – Bisexual

Refers generally to someone who is sexually attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily at the same time.

T – Trans/Transgender

Term to describe someone who's gender identity doesn't match their sexual assignment at birth.

Q – Queer/Questioning

Queer was historically a derogatory term used to describe someone who was gay. It has been reclaimed by some in the LGBTQ community as an umbrella term for someone who is gender diverse. Q can also mean questioning which refers to someone who is unsure as to how they identify.



2.2 Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Gender identity and sexual orientation are different parts of a person's overall identity. A person's gender identity can be different from their sexual orientation.

Gender Identity

Each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a man, woman, both, or neither.

This is different from the biological sex assigned at birth.

Sexual Orientation

Toward whom a person's sexual attraction is oriented – toward only women, only men, nobody or irrespective of gender.

Homophobia, or the fear of someone because of their sexual orientation, stems from heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is the problematic belief that there are only two natural genders (male and female) and that men should be attracted to women and women to men.

Respectful Use of Pronouns

Gender-specific pronouns are the ways we refer to each other in the third person. People who are transitioning in some way might choose to change their pronouns.

Gender-neutral pronouns

I saw Lauren come to work today and they seemed really happy. I wonder if it has anything to do with their weekend? I hope I see them soon to hear all about it!

I saw Lauren come to work today and ze seemed really happy. I wonder if it has anything to do with hir weekend? I hope I see hir soon to hear all about it!

Ask

You cannot tell someone's name or pronoun just by looking at them.

Respect

If someone takes the time to let you know their name and pronoun, use it and respect it. It's not up to you to decide someone else's identity.

Practice

If you have difficulty using someone's pronoun and name - practice. Ask co-workers, peers and friends to point out when you've made a mistake.

Hello, my name is _____ .

Start meetings with everyone introducing themselves and stating their pronoun. All name tags and name plates can also have a spot to show someone's pronouns. If you find yourself unsure of someone's pronoun, be attentive to how others refer to this person. If you are still unclear or concerned that people might be using the incorrect pronoun, politely and privately ask that person which pronoun they use.

(Source: The 519, 2014)

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE

3.1 Facts and Statistics

According to information collected by Egale Canada members of the LGBTQ community face higher instances of bullying when they are young, and are at a much higher risk for suicide. Here is some statistical information to consider:

- ∞ 33% of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth have attempted suicide in comparison to 7% of youth in general.
- ∞ In 2010 47% of trans youth in Ontario had thought of about suicide and 19% had attempted it.
- ∞ Adolescent youth who have been rejected by their families for being lesbian, gay or bisexual are over 8 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers
- ∞ 20% of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted because of their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation
- ∞ 68% of trans students, 55% of lesbian students, and 42% of gay students reported being verbally harassed about their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation.

(Source: Egale Canada, 2014)

3.2 Research on Two-Spirit Health and Wellbeing

The experiences of Two-Spirit have been historically overlooked by researchers for a variety of reasons. Prior to the turn of the 21st century many researchers lacked an awareness of Two-Spirit people and the uniqueness of their identity. It has only been recently acknowledged that the experiences of Two-Spirit people are different that those who are part of the broader queer or LGBTQ community. This difference lies in culturally specific understandings of gender identity that are unique to Indigenous Peoples.



3.3 Benny's Story

When I was growing up I didn't have Two-Spirit or LGBTQ role models to look up to. I was never really taught about people having gender identities other than male or female. Despite this, from the time I was young my parents encouraged me to express myself in ways that made sense to me. Growing up I didn't feel like a girl, but I knew I wasn't a boy, and the idea that I was neither a boy nor a girl upset me. While my parents loved and supported me, they didn't have the language to express or explain my experience to others. When I was born my sex assigned at birth was female, but it was clear to my parents and I from a very early age that my gender identity was not female.

At school when other kids talked about lesbian or gay people it was generally in an extremely negative way. This meant that in high school when I realized I wasn't attracted to men, I thought there was something wrong with me. I began to think that I was broken and eventually turned inwards. I became extremely lonely and felt as though I was keeping a dark secret. Never did it occur to me that being attracted to women was natural and okay. By the time I entered into my first year of university I was convinced that I was abnormal and would never have a meaningful or loving relationship with anyone. I attempted to end my life on numerous occasions and turned to alcohol to dull the pain I felt inside.

Over the next ten years in Ottawa I began to meet people who were gay, lesbian or had different gen-



Benny M

der identities than male or female. Slowly, I realized that gender and sexuality were two separate characteristics and I began to see myself as someone who understood the world in a unique but valuable way. This was also supported by teachings which were shared with me around the important role that Two-Spirit people play in our communities. Today, I identify primarily as a *tasta-ee-iniw* which means "a person in between" in the Michif and Cree language. I am also engaged to a woman who loves me very much.

The more that people can learn about gender identities other than male or female, the easier it will be to support two-spirit and other gender diverse people. Practicing good allyship means stepping out of your comfort zone and learning about things that challenge what you have been taught in the past. Together we can make a difference.

4 INTERSECTIONALITY AND COLONIZATION

Intersectionality is a term that is used to describe the multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) that overlap.

Colonization is a term that describes the settling of Canada by non-Indigenous peoples and the subsequent government policies intended to assimilate First Nation, Métis and Inuit people.

4.1 Why Culture and Ethnicity Matter

Métis communities were established long before Canada became a country. In the process of colonization, the Canadian government actively worked to dispossess Métis people of their lands and dismantle Métis communities. Many aspects of Métis culture became subject to ridicule, prejudice and even illegal to practice. Canadians viewed Métis people as traitors after the 1870 and 1885 resistance movements led by Métis leader Louis Riel. This was discrimination faced by all Métis people. Two-Spirit people, however, faced additional discrimination because their gender identity didn't conform to the generally held Christian belief that there are only two genders – male or female.

4.2 The Impact of Colonialism on Two-Spirit People

Prior to effective colonial control Two-Spirit people held many highly valued roles within the community. Today, however, teachings around the signifi-

cant spiritual gifts of Two-Spirit people and their traditional roles are often not passed down. This is due to the influence of the church within Métis communities, and impact of generations of Métis children attending church-run day schools or residential schools. All of this means that many Two-Spirit youth are no longer taught that their difference is their gift. This can be linked to low self-esteem, depression and suicide.

Today there are very few Two-Spirit Métis knowledge keepers who are willing to openly discuss their experiences. This means that passing on teachings about the integral part that Two-Spirit people play in the Métis community is more important than ever.

The role of non-Indigenous people who choose to practice good allyship is also important. The more people who take the time to learn about Two-Spirit people, the less Two-Spirit people will be subjected to discrimination, prejudice and harassment.

SUPPORTING TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE

5.1 Definition of Allyship

Allyship is “an active, consistent, and challenging practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to work in solidarity with a marginalized group”

(Source: PeerNetBC and Anti-Oppression Network, 2019)

Allyship in the context of supporting Two-Spirit Métis people means unlearning what you have been taught about gender identity. Allyship requires that you challenge stereotypical ideas about Two-Spirit or LGBTQ people. It also means accepting that there are many ways a person may express their gender identity and that gender and sexuality are different characteristics.

Allyship is not an identity – Allyship is something you practice, not become.

Allyship is not self-defined - it is only the community you are wanting to support that can determine if you are practicing Allyship in a good way.

(Source: PeerNetBC and Anti-Oppression Network, 2019)

Example: Someone might identify as an “ally” to Two-Spirit or LGBTQ people, but then use terms that are offensive or incorrect when referring to members of this community. Practicing good allyship would mean actively seeking to use correct, appropriate, and respectful language.

5.2 How to Practice Allyship

Practicing Effective Allyship means we must:

Acknowledge Privilege: Acknowledging when we have privilege and someone else does not is an extremely important part of practicing Allyship. Because when we are not aware we can continue to support systems which oppress others.

Accepting Criticism: In order support Two-Spirit people and other LGBTQ Indigenous people, people outside of these communities have to acknowledge that while they may have good intentions, it might not always be what is best for Two-Spirit people.

Listen: Listening more and speaking less creates an opportunity to learn and think about different perspectives. It's important to think about how much space we are taking up at meetings, conferences or gatherings. If the focus of the conversation is on Two-Spirit experiences, it should be Two-Spirit people who get the most space to discuss the issue.

Sit with the discomfort: Sometimes when we are learning about something new it can make us uncomfortable because it challenges what we have been previously taught. When this happens, it is important to try and not react immediately, but to sit with new information and try to understand it, even if it is difficult.

Take Opportunities for Learning: Make sure to take opportunities to learn more on your own time. Read literature, take workshops and watch documentaries. By learning in this way, you are ensuring that your Two-Spirit friends won't be over-taxed.



