



Dealing with Tough Stuff

Discussing the history of residential schools frequently involves students being confronted by stories of traumatic experiences, such as separation from family, mistreatment and neglect, abuse of many kinds, and children who did not survive. This kind of content can be referred to as 'difficult knowledge' or 'tough stuff.' While these experiences may seem to come from the distant and far away past, the emotions that arise in response can trigger strong feelings and feel close to home. Sometimes, strong feelings well up unexpectedly or seemingly without explanation. Strong feelings may connect to experiences individuals have had themselves, or manifest as 'vicarious trauma' (the transfer of trauma from the actual victim/survivor onto the 'witness,' or person who is hearing their story).

The impacts of residential schools continue into the present and can be seen in some Northern families and communities, and can manifest in a variety of ways including a lack of parenting skills, domestic abuse, substance abuse/addictions, disconnection with family, lack of language and/or cultural skills, and suicide, among others. It may be difficult to raise these issues in the classroom when there are students who are, or may be, directly affected. However, naming and talking about these issues openly is part of breaking the cycle of trauma and may help students, families, and communities understand what is happening, as well as encourage them to access healing supports.

Many former students have shown courage in speaking out, resiliency in their healing journeys, and willingness to participate in the reconciliation process. They have given us – all Canadians – their memories and stories as gifts, so that we can be better informed in the present, and contribute to constructing a better future. While it is sometimes difficult to make sense of what happened, simply listening is an important gesture of respect and support. The activities in this module are intended to help students recognize the strength that individuals have shown in the process of seeking truth and reconciliation, and to connect to their own strength.

Teacher Self-care

It is important that teachers practice self-care because they are responsible for facilitating this material and supporting students through it. As an adult, and possibly as a parent, you may perceive the significance and difficult realities of these stories differently than your students. You may worry about bringing these stories and intergenerational impacts to the surface, particularly when your students know the individuals involved or feel directly involved themselves. It is not uncommon to have emotional, physical, behavioural or spiritual reactions, so it is helpful to have a plan for taking care of yourself.

Consider the following steps for self-care, even if you have taught this kind of material before:

- View the videos about vicarious trauma found on the DVD in the *Before you Begin* section.
- Regularly check in with yourself or with someone you trust and tell them how you are feeling.
- Make a plan for how to take a break or ask for support from another staff member if it is needed.
- Preview the material – audio, video and written – to help you be prepared for handling your emotions in class.
- If any reactions persist and become difficult, access supports through health services in your community, through Health Canada or through Employee Assistance. Health Support Workers (HSWs) are local resource people who have been trained to offer support in regards to residential school healing. Many HSWs are former students of residential schools.
- Be kind to yourself and be comfortable with showing emotion to your students. Your own emotional honesty may be part of helping students work through some of the issues that are raised.



Student Supports

It is important that students are given the opportunity, and a safe environment, to speak openly about how they feel during this module. Such opportunities need to be balanced with trying not to put individual students on the spot before they are ready to speak. In some cases, such as during a talking circle (where students share one at a time without interruption) open discussions can be a positive learning experience for the whole class. In others cases, individual students may need one-on-one attention.

Consider the following steps for student support, in addition to the usual student support measures/protocols taken in your school.

- Don't avoid or hide the possibility that emotions may arise during this module.
- Open the module by talking about how this material may be difficult and requires special consideration in terms of the way the class learns together. Remind students periodically that they need to support each other and listen respectfully.
- Make a plan/agreement with your students about what to do if they need to take a break from class.
- Be prepared to listen to your students as long as they need to talk and try to be flexible and responsive to their needs.
- Ensure other staff members are aware that supports may be needed.
- Remember that learning how to cope with difficult feelings is part of helping students learn resiliency and strength, an important objective for this module.
- Give students a variety of ways to express themselves, including writing and art.
- Ensure students know how to access help if strong feelings arise when they are not at school, such as from local health services, using Health Canada's help line – 1-866-925-4419. Health Canada's Northern Region # is 1-800-464-8106. This office

is in Whitehorse and if former students or family are seeking counseling, let them know that it is coordinated through this location.

- If you suspect a student may hurt themselves or others, do not leave them alone. Follow the protocol in your school/community for dealing with such issues.

Teachers may find this role to be emotionally difficult or burdensome. Please keep in mind that this module can be an important part of a learning, reconciliation and healing process, and by asking for support and assistance from colleagues and other community members, this learning experience can be a safe and a powerful one for everyone.

Family Supports

Some of the questions and materials that students bring home during this module of study may provoke strong emotions and concerns from among their family members. Supports and information are available. Health Canada's Northern Region toll-free # is 1-800-464-8106.

"Not only has this been a tremendous healing and learning experience for my students but for me as well. I now understand something monumental about the community I teach in. I am learning to look past symptoms and see both past experiences and possible future outlooks. I am learning that healing IS possible and within reach for many. Not only am I taking something significant from this module as a teacher, but as another human as well."

Pilot Teacher