



# Wise Practices for Building Authentic Relationships

*Centring Relationships to End Violence*

## Introduction

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*In order to understand the causes of violence and to make the changes necessary to end violence, we must recognize the power and responsibility of relationships.<sup>1</sup>*

- *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

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In 2021, the provincial association leaders (PALs) of the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association (ANFCA), the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS), and the Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Services (AASAS) came together to form the Centring Relationships to End Violence project. Inspired by the quote above from *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, the project seeks to build authentic relationships at the provincial and local levels to reduce barriers to services for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ survivors of gender-based violence. The project was funded in September 2021 by Wage and Gender Equality Canada and the PALs spent the next six months developing a collective vision and collaborative process for shared governance.

The Centring Relationships to End Violence project was officially launched in March 2022. Since that time, the PALs have dedicated themselves to building authentic relationships with one another. The authentic relationships they have developed reflect true care for one another as people. They bring their whole selves to each interaction and have open and honest dialogue to learn about one another and how they can support each other. They are able to be vulnerable and accept one another for who

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<sup>1</sup> National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, Volume 1a*. [https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final\\_Report\\_Vol\\_1a.pdf](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a.pdf)

they are. They engage with one another with tremendous empathy and respect. These authentic relationships will establish a firm foundation for the transformational change they seek to create.

## *Impact of Authentic Relationships*

Throughout the Centring Relationships to End Violence project, the PALs reflected on the impact that their authentic relationships with one another had on them personally and professionally. The most significant impacts of these authentic relationships include:

- Providing camaraderie and support to help them overcome difficulties and celebrate successes
- Generative thinking to help them see opportunities and develop creative solutions
- Leveraging each other's strengths and wisdom to collaborate on issues and opportunities related to Indigenous survivors of gender-based violence
- Working together more efficiently and effectively to achieve individual and collective goals
- Building relationships among member organizations at the local level that directly affect Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ survivors of gender-based violence

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*I would love to see this kind of relationship in all our mutual communities where those staff members would feel the same companionship and trust with one another. Because I think at the end of the day, it lifts us up. The survivors are always top of mind for all of us in our unique ways that we address gender-based violence. We all address it very differently, but very uniquely so we all need each other to support them.*

- Provincial Association Leader

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## **Wise Practices**

The authentic relationships the PALs have built did not come quickly or easily. They took significant intentionality and investment. These are the wise practices that the PALs discovered helped them in their journey to develop authentic relationships.

1. **Put RELATIONSHIPS first.** As the PALs began their work together in the Centring Relationship to End Violence project, they started out thinking of the authentic relationship they were building as a way to accomplish their goals. In other words, the relationship was the means to an end. They soon realized, however, that the most valuable outcome they could achieve was the relationship itself. This realization led them to centre their relationship as the primary focus of their work together. They set aside the work plan, deliverables, and reporting requirements to

focus primarily on the relationship. Although their authentic relationship took a significant amount of time to develop, it is yielding returns that far outweigh the time they invested. Their relationship facilitates collaboration that is grounded in trust and an understanding of one another's strengths and needs. This makes their work together more efficient and effective now and in the years to come.

2. **Dedicate QUALITY TIME.** One of the most important things the PALs did to centre their relationship was to schedule regular time together far in advance. They carved out 90 minutes at a consistent time every other week and booked it on their calendars for the entire year. This simple act demonstrated that their relationship is a priority. They also made a commitment to each other to be fully present during their time together. Since the Centring Relationships project started during COVID and the associations were headquartered in different cities, much of their relationship-building happened virtually over Zoom. Recognizing that face time is an important component in building relationships, the PALs also scheduled an annual in-person gathering with a few days spent face-to-face, which had tremendous value.

One of the big lessons the PALs learned on their journey is that the amount of time it will take to build authentic relationships is not predictable. It can't be work-planned or held to a schedule. It must happen organically and take as long as it takes. This means that building relationships may take longer than a grant agreement might allow. It requires appropriate expectations, adequate resources, and flexibility to extend or shift the grant along the way.

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*You have to be able to make time to build relationships. It's so easy to take off your list when you have so much to do especially when people are walking through the door in crisis.*

- Provincial Association Leader

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3. **Make GENEROUS assumptions.** In her book *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown defines generosity as "extend[ing] the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others."<sup>2</sup> This idea resonated with the PALs at the beginning of their work together and they adopted it as one of the guiding principles by which they operate. In practice, it means that the PALs assume that everyone in the relationship has each other's best interest at heart and that what is said or done is meant to be helpful rather than hurtful. This orientation creates a space where judgment is suspended to facilitate vulnerability and open, honest conversation to promote deeper learning about one another.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, B. (2015). *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* Random House.

4. **Start with PURPOSE AND VALUES.** One of the first steps the PALs took together was spending time creating a common vision and purpose to guide their work together. This started the relationship with a common vision to work toward and a common language to work from. It also helped the PALs understand each other's desires for what is to come from the relationship. This gives them something to refer back to when questions arise or difficult decisions must be made so they can determine if what they are considering helps serve the purpose they intend and is congruent with the values they agreed upon together.
5. **Get to know each other as PEOPLE.** Long before discussing information about their associations and the deliverables for the project, the PALs got to know each other as people. They learned about each other's families, travel adventures, and embarrassing moments. They laughed together and cried together. Their common experiences help them see themselves in one another and that binds them together. Knowing each other on a personal level helped to build trust that fosters every other aspect of the relationship and the work to be done together.
6. **Invest RESOURCES.** Relationships aren't free. The PALs dedicated significant time to building authentic relationships which took them away from other important work required to lead their organizations. They could not dedicate this time without shifting responsibilities or adding resources to support the work. The time spent to build relationships also requires coordination to ensure things move forward and to redirect if a course correction is needed. All of this requires human and financial resources to create a space where other aspects of their work won't be compromised and people can be fully present.
7. **EDUCATE partners.** The PALs recognized early on that building authentic relationships requires a supportive environment and that takes education and negotiation. These relationships are much more than the typical partnership. Creating transformational change requires a shift from opportunistic, superficial partnerships to meet a funding requirement to meaningful, long-term collaborations rooted in authentic relationships. Funders need be educated about the purpose and value of authentic relationships so they can adjust their expectations and offer the flexibility needed to build these relationships. The PALs are fortunate to be leaders who can make adjustments in their organizations to create time and space for them to build relationships. When frontline workers are building relationships, their organizational leaders must be involved to ensure that relationships are prioritized, and space is created to allow staff the time to cultivate authentic relationships.
8. **Provide tangible ALLYSHIP.** The circumstances faced by the PALs in this project were emblematic of the circumstances faced in day-to-day life where a greater burden is too often placed on Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ survivors of gender-based violence and the organizations serving them. A key lesson the PALs learned from their authentic relationship is that organizations focused on serving Indigenous

clients like the Friendship Centres must address a vast range of issues and must do it with very limited staff and resources. Employment, housing, transportation, and racism are social determinants of health and are all intertwined with gender-based violence. All organizations serving Indigenous survivors of gender-based violence must be prepared to provide holistic support for a broad range of needs to effectively serve Indigenous clients even if their organization typically has a much narrower scope. This is the heavy burden we all must carry to overcome the devastating effects of an intergenerational colonial history.

Given the weight they must carry, being in an authentic relationship with the staff of Friendship Centres requires tangible allyship to combat racism. It is critical to develop a deep understanding of the historical context, the scope of Friendship Centres' work, and the interconnected nature of the systemic injustices that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ survivors face to provide the holistic support they need. This understanding will enable those in the relationship to provide the types of support Friendship Centres need to do this difficult work.

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*When you start to care about each other, you start to understand each other, and you start to see ways you can help without even being asked.*

- Provincial Association Leader

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9. **Create TRANSPARENCY.** As their authentic relationship grew stronger and they were ready to move into the next phase of the Centring Relationships project, the PALs discovered that they needed to establish systems to ensure they all knew what was happening, why, and how they could contribute. They also recognized the value of the relationship they had built with one another and were cautious to ensure the relationship was still at the fore as they got down to business. To keep their relationship centred, their meeting agendas include ample time to check in with one another and have informal conversations to help deepen and strengthen their relationship in addition to the necessary business items. They also make time for open and transparent conversations about issues to ensure Indigenous women are effectively supported.

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*There is a sense of safety amongst us. You can say things and know it's not going to go anywhere else and that there's not going to be backroom conversations. It's all kind of on the table.*

- Provincial Association Leader

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**10. SUPPORT each other through adversity and CELEBRATE successes together.** One of the most impactful factors that helped the authentic relationship develop between the PALs is that they all have an in-depth understanding of what it means to be a woman leading a provincial association working to end gender-based violence. Few others understand their world in the same way. This unique forum provided a place for them to share their challenges and frustrations as well as their successes and proud moments with people who truly understand. This was also venue where they could come together to see possibilities for collaboration rather than competing against one another for the same pool of funding.