

Indigenous Protocols

Introduction

Throughout this document the following terms will be used: Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers and Old Ones. These people are all important and play key roles in the Indigenous Communities they serve. Other terms will be defined as well as required. Each play a different role, are well respected, and are very different in what they do.

Elders:

- In the past this was a term that was used to describe a traditional person who held and played a role in guidance and from whom individuals, the community, leaders, and others asked guidance from. They were usually pipe holders or lodge holders.
- Now the term Elder is used for all individuals who are older or have reached a certain age, but they may or may not be a traditional person. They are still respected and may have a lot of wisdom to share but usually they are not holders of a ceremony pipe, do not conduct traditional ceremonies or hold lodges. They still hold wisdom, and it may be traditional; however, they are not a “knowledge keeper”.

Traditional Knowledge Keepers and/or Old Ones:

- An individual that holds the ability to conduct traditional ceremonies. The Knowledge Keepers are usually holders of the ceremonial pipes and hold the ability to preside over ceremonies such as lodge ceremonies. For example: Sweat lodges, sun/thirst dances, chicken dances, horse dances, round dances etc. The Knowledge Keepers are the individuals that people seek council from for spiritual and personal direction.
- Knowledge Keepers can be any age as long as they have followed the path to being a Knowledge Keeper and have gone through the steps to become a pipe holder first to be able to conduct ceremonies. Usually, after they receive the pipe the Knowledge Keeper will start by using it for themselves and close family before using it in public or larger gatherings.

Elder Helper:

- Usually if the Elder is asked to do an event they will bring with them an Elder Helper.
- It is this individual’s job is to assist the Elder/Traditional Knowledge Keeper and or Old Ones. The helper is usually an individual who has chosen to learn to be a future Elder/Knowledge Keeper and is in training.
- The job of the Elder Helper is to make sure that the ceremony or event goes smoothly and that the Elder and or Knowledge Keeper has everything they need on hand.

Please Note:

- It is important to note that most true Knowledge Keepers and Elders do NOT advertise who they are; and are very humble and respectful. Many do not feel they are worthy to be called Knowledge Keepers or Elders, especially if they feel they are “too young”.

- The true Elders, and Knowledge Keepers do not promote themselves as such, they are kind, gentle, they live their lives in a positive healthy way they have learned the ceremonies, songs, stories and how to conduct themselves and ceremonies from other Knowledge Keepers.
- Sometimes people will advertise themselves as Elders/Knowledge Keepers and they may know about some of the traditions, ceremonies and culture, but sometimes they have not learned from other Knowledge Keepers, and they may not be the best choice for events as they are not in it for the right reasons.

Guidelines for attending a ceremony:

- Any person wishing to attend a traditional ceremony (including smudging) needs to be alcohol and mind-altering drugs free for at least 4 days prior.
- ALL public Indigenous ceremonies are free to be attended by anyone.
- At the ceremonies can be attended either as an observer or as a participant.
- Someone will be able to explain the ceremony or activities to anyone if needed.

Important Information:

- Not every Elder/Knowledge Keeper can do everything.
- Part of working with them is finding the right individual(s) who will be most suitable to your cultural ceremony that you are hosting.
- As in everything Elders/Knowledge Keepers can be specialists in different areas of Cultural traditions.
- Not all Indigenous people are the same and neither are the traditions and spiritual ways of doing a ceremony.
- Each Elder/ Knowledge keeper from Nations will do things differently depending on how they learned or where they learned their skills.
- Each Nation from the North to the South are unique in their way they hold ceremony.
- As individuals it is acceptable to work with more than one Elder/Knowledge Keeper at any time.

Meeting with Elders/Knowledge Keepers

First Initial Meeting:

When a person goes to meet a Knowledge Keeper/Elder for the first time, the expectation is to develop a relationship. The expectation is to not be in a rush; instead developing a relationship is much more important.

Bring the following:

- The main gift that should always be presented is tobacco: either loose or in a pack of cigarettes, or traditional tobacco.
- The print/prayer cloth (2m in size) that accompanies the tobacco can be any color that you feel confident with- for example give green for healing.
- The small gift can be anything that you feel is appropriate. Examples could be tea, coffee, wild game meat such as moose, deer, fish. Canned berries or a few items of everything. Whatever you feel at the time you need to give.

- The bundle should include one of the medicines that traditional people use, sweet grass, sage, cedar, willow fungus or even rat root.

Begin to build the relationship:

- Take your time visiting; chat, share some personal information about yourself. If they smoke, offer them a cigarette.
- The most important thing when meeting with Elders and Knowledge Keepers is NEVER rush and always listen when they are talking.
- Sometimes there is silence when the Elder/Knowledge Keeper is thinking and that is ok, you do not have to fill the silence, just sit, relax and wait.

After some time during the visit:

- Lay your bundle of tobacco, small gift and print (prayer cloth) in front of you.
- Explain why you are there and exactly what you are asking of that individual (offer as many details as you possibly can).
- Allow the person the choice to accept or decline.

If the Elder/Knowledge Keeper accepts the offer:

- Pick up the bundle and offer it to them using your left hand,
- and use your right hand to shake theirs.

If the Elder/Knowledge Keeper doesn't accept the offer:

- Do not take offense,
- Thank them for their time and for the visit.
- Confirm if you can invite them again for another ceremony/event in the future.

Provide the event details to the Elder/Knowledge Keeper:

- The date, time, location etc.
- Ask: Do they need a Helper? Most times Elders will bring an assistant to help them at the event or ceremony.
- If they do not have a Helper, then ask them if they have a particular person they would like you to ask.
- **IMPORTANT:** If you are asking for the help from an Elder Helper use the same protocol outlined above, as asking an Elder.

Before you leave the residence of the Elder/Knowledge Keeper:

- Get the information to request for an honorarium.
- Ask the Elder / Knowledge Keeper what special requests or cultural items that you may have to supply. This will vary depending on the type of event or ceremony. For example, for a pipe ceremony, a moose nose and berry soup. Other items may also be requested;
 - They may also request for other Elders/Knowledge Keepers and Elder Helpers.
 - They may request that certain cultural norms be observed at the event, for example how all attending the event needs to dress.

Other Details:

- As the host of the event you are responsible for food, refreshments and for the setup as per the directions from the Elder/Knowledge Keeper.
- It is also good practice to supply something for the Elders/Knowledge Keepers and guests something to sit on such as blankets, mats, cushions as most ceremonies are on the floor or ground
- Chairs can also be available as some cannot sit on the floor or ground.
- If you are attending a ceremony always try to take your own chair.
- After the first meeting connect with the Elder Knowledge Keeper a few times to make sure you have everything organized; and they have everything they need.

Day of the Traditional Event/Ceremony

It is important to show your gratitude to the Elder/Knowledge Keeper as they arrive and show them appreciation for attending.

- Introduce them to the leadership as well as to others in the area.
- Take time to visit with the Elder(s) and Elder Helper before and after the event. Show your appreciation for them coming to the event.

Dos and Don'ts During Event/Ceremony:

- No taking photos or videos during the prayer or the pipe ceremony.
- Don't rush the Elder/Knowledge Keeper. Even with a date and time set it is acceptable if the event does not start on time; the lead Elder/Knowledge Keeper will start when they are ready and when they feel like it is time.

Specific event protocols can be found under the event/ceremony title within this document.

After the Traditional Event/Ceremony

- When the event is over gift the Elder/Knowledge keeper with a gift that shows your appreciation such as a blanket, scarf, jacket, something of value or something home made just for them.
- Also present them with an honorarium as most travel to the event.
- As well, present a gift and honorarium to the Elder Helper.

Specific Traditional Ceremony/Event Protocols

Pipe Ceremony:

- If you are hosting a ceremony such as a pipe ceremony it is important to know that you must have four male Pipe Carriers for every Women Pipe Carrier.
- 1 woman's prayer = 4 men's prayer
- Don't take photos or videos of the items the Knowledge Keepers or Elder Helper use for ceremony.
- Don't take photos or videos of the pipe ceremony. If you are doing a live stream of the event that includes the pipe ceremony, you will begin your live stream after the pipe ceremony.

Smudging:

- This is a ceremony where individuals cleanse themselves spiritually with smoke from the four sacred medicines: sweet grass, sage, cedar, and willow fungus. You can use one of the medicines, or you can mix them.
- Although we can smudge with any of the medicines it is good practice in a large group gathering when many are smudging together men and women to use Sage.
 - The reason being: Sage is the “women’s medicine”, and a woman can use it to smudge even on her moon time. Just make sure the other medicines are available for individuals who wish to use them.
- Smudging usually starts off most meetings, but it always starts off all cultural events and all ceremonial gatherings to clean out any negativity and to bring calmness and peace to all involved.
- Smudging has been passed down from generation to generation. There are many ways and variations on how a smudge is done.
 - There is no right way or wrong way, as long as the individuals who are smudging are clean of alcohol and mind-altering drugs for a minimum of 4 days and are smudging for good reasons; not just to perform the actions.
- Smudging is done for a variety of reasons:
 - We smudge to clean the air around us.
 - We smudge to clean our minds so that we will have positive good thoughts of others.
 - We smudge our eyes so that we can see the beauty around us and so we see only the good in others.
 - We smudge our ears so that we hear the goodness of nature around us and so we will only listen to positive things about others.
 - We smudge our mouths so we only speak well of others and so creation hears the sweetness of our words.
 - We smudge our feet so we walk in harmony with creation and so we also walk in good places with good purpose.
 - We smudge our whole being, so we portray only the good part of our self through our actions.
- Remember to pray when you are smudging for yourself, family, friends, and for everyone.
- Smudging allows people to stop, slow down, become mindful and centered. This allows people to remember, connect and be grounded in the event, task, or purpose at hand. Smudging also allows people to let go of something negative. Letting go of things that inhibit a person from being balanced and focused comes from the feeling of being calm and safe while smudging.
- Smudging is always voluntary; people should never be forced or feel pressured to smudge.
 - It is completely acceptable for a person to indicate that he/she does not want to smudge, and that person may choose to stay in the room and refrain or leave the room during the smudge.
 - The guiding principle in any Indigenous tradition is respect, so be respectful of people’s choices.
- If any individual has questions, it is okay to ask before or after the smudging.

The wearing of the skirt:

Ruby Sweetman, Coordinator and Instructor of the Native Arts and Culture Program teaches us about wearing skirts to ceremony and some of the protocols.

The belief is that women are closest to Mother Earth. Women wear skirts because it makes them more grounded and closer to Mother Earth. This is why women wear moccasins and skirts.

In every ceremony, out of respect, you should wear a skirt. If you don't have a skirt, you should cover yourself up with a blanket. For example, in sweats, women aren't supposed to show the skin on their legs. Women will have a long gown, or towel, to cover their feet so they're not exposed.

The ribbon skirt is associated with the first skirt – the skirt that covers the tipi. Ribbon skirts are a contemporary form of the traditional skirt. First Nations People never had ribbon, they had hide. Canvas from ships sails were used from settlers. Then other fabrics and ribbons were incorporated over the years as they were brought over to eventually give us ribbon skirts.

The colours worn on the skirts are what the wearer prefers. Every person is born with a colour. If you don't have colours, you go ask an elder, present them with cloth and tobacco, and usually they will give you a name and colours.

When women are on their moon time (menstruation), they can smudge with the "women's medicine", sage. Depending on the Elder conducting the ceremony, when a woman is on her moon time, she should stay out of the ceremony circle, or ceremony grounds. A woman's moon time is a powerful time because they are cleansing themselves, like Mother Earth cleanses herself with the rain and snowmelt. Women are the most powerful at this time and those powers can interfere and take the power and prayer away from healing ceremonies.

If women have questions on what to do, or not do, during ceremony, they can ask a female Elder for guidance.