

Lateral violence assaults our mental health

“Lateral violence has impacted indigenous peoples throughout the world to the point of where we harm each other in our communities and workplaces on a daily basis,” Mohawk Rod Jeffries told a gathering in La Ronge last December. That violence includes gossip, shaming of others, blaming, backstabbing, family feuds and attempts at socially isolating others. According to Jeffries, “this form of violence occurs when out of anger and frustration, an oppressed group turns on itself and begins to violate each other.”

Those attending the workshop, organized by the Mamawetan Churchill River Regional Health Authority, shared numerous examples of how this form of violence has affected northern communities. Lack of trust, favouritism, and highly defensive people have resulted in poor services, rigid and arbitrary enforcement of rules and a lack of healthy communication. Community spirit has suffered and people have largely stopped volunteering to help their communities become healthy. Jeffries said the root of the problem is colonialism, and that we have learned to oppress each other.

By defining actions such as malicious gossip as violence, we can better appreciate that this kind of mental assault can be just as damaging as physical violence. We can appreciate the trauma these attacks can have on others, and we can better understand how these attacks undermine both our communities and our own well being. Just as we can refuse to take part in physically assaulting someone, we can also decide not to participate in mental violence. Before you say anything, consider whether you know for sure that it is true. Second, consider whether it is useful. In what ways will saying it help build a better community? Third, is it something you would be prepared to say if the person you are talking about was there beside you?

We can challenge gossip, attempts to shame others, backstabbing, and other forms of lateral violence by pointing out how such actions undermine the balance, vision, trust and empowerment that we want in all our communities. We can challenge those who participate in lateral violence to prove to us what they say is true, and that their saying it will lead to a better community. Just like we would be prepared to come forward and testify if we see someone physically assaulted, we should be prepared to come forward if we see examples of lateral violence. Lies can continue to do damage when protected by false applications of confidentiality.

A concern that I have with the model of lateral violence as presented by Jeffries is that its focus on colonialism and oppression may be used to justify this kind of violence against those that we judge to be not part of our communities. If we see people of European ancestry as oppressors, does this mean that mental violence against them is not lateral? If we believe that men are oppressors of women (and many feminists do), does that mean it is all right to talk about them? If we see workers as a class-based community of interest who are oppressed by capitalists, does this justify the use of lateral violence in union / management conflict?

We want to build our communities because that will mean that we are healthier ourselves. The temptation, in this kind of community development, is to re-direct our negative energies toward some out-group, and to unite the community in a kind of hatred of the other, the outsider. We must not use the fact of colonialism as an excuse to avoid the more difficult task of removing that negative energy from our selves. Nested in our vision of a better community is a greater vision of a better world.