

# PROFILE

## Fighting For Better Mental Health Among Indigenous Youth

Linnea Dick opens up about dealing with mental health issues as a young Indigenous person, the factors that can lead to poor mental health, how she got better, and what she is doing to help a new generation achieve a happier and more meaningful life.

"I think if I could funnel it into one big thing that really impacted me as a youth, it's that we're not given very many opportunities to find ourselves, whether in a rural or urban setting, whether that be the medical system, the education system, in the diversity of recreational activities, it's just not there [for many Indigenous youth]," said Linnea Dick.

Dick works for We Matter, a national, Indigenous-led campaign targeting young people with suicide awareness and prevention. According to the Canadian Institute for Health, Indigenous youth are five to six times more likely to commit suicide than their non-Indigenous peers. Part of the We Matter campaign involves over 200 videos submitted by youth across the country, sharing their own struggles and inspiring messages to other youth.

"I fell into depression. I felt so unworthy ... I felt unworthy of the people who were there to support me. I felt unworthy of success. And, I kind of just accepted that as my fate because of those lack of resources. Because I wasn't able to be the unique and cultural person that I was raised to be."

Dick, who's now 30, struggled with eating disorders, depression, and addiction. She said the worst point of her alcoholism was at 14-years-old and describes herself as a "black out drunk," trying to escape her pain. Dick says her mental health issues stem from being sexually abused as a child by someone she trusted.

Dick describes what she was going through as "quite challenging."

"It presented this question of, is my life worth it? Am I worthy enough to be here?"

### **Place and its impact on mental health**

"It was hard not to feel lost because no matter where I was, I was missing a huge part of myself," says Dick.

At the time, Dick lived in British Columbia, growing up mainly in Alert Bay, Victoria and Vancouver.

"I think on one side of things, it was really difficult living in the city because I had this sense of who I was, my identity, my culture, my traditions, and it not really having a place in my life in an urban setting.

"But, on the other hand, living in a small town like Alert Bay, which is quite isolated...I felt like I wasn't living up to my full potential because there was such a lack of resources there," says Dick.

"It was hard not to feel lost because no matter where I was, I was missing a huge part of myself."



Photo credit to Joshua Waits

### **Linnea Dick**

Social Media & Outreach Coordinator at We Matter.

Dick says she wasn't offered any sort of help for her addiction or depression by professionals, not even after drinking and blacking out at a High School dance and having the ambulance called.

In one incident, during a routine check up, Dick says she broke down and cried in the doctor's office. The doctor suggested she go on antidepressants.

"I was raised very traditionally with my father, with the Kwakwaka'wakw traditions...The health care professional didn't understand any of that.

"I think there is a place where some people might benefit from the antidepressants, but having a choice is so important. Had I sat there and he said, what do you feel you need? What is going to make you feel better? My whole experience would have been different, but instead I felt ashamed."

### **Factoring in gender and intergenerational trauma**

In talking about place as identity, Dick also says that "apart from experiencing those challenges of being Indigenous and not understanding the society that's built around us and doesn't speak to who we are as people," she also felt belittled as a young woman, exacerbated by having been sexually abused.

"I was very fearful. I walked around everyday with my head low. I was afraid that someone would say something racist to me, that someone would

judge me, that I might be sexually harassed, and I didn't have the voice to speak up against it because I didn't know I was allowed to."

To overcome generations and generations of genocide, of abuse, of violence, of oppression, it doesn't happen easily. I was born with a weight on my shoulders and no one to teach me how to navigate through it. - Linnea Dick

Dick also talks about the role of inter-generational trauma as one of the many layers connected to her experience with mental health struggles.

"A lot of society has this attitude of get over it. We can't just get over it and its been scientifically proven that we hold

that trauma in our DNA.

"To overcome generations and generations of genocide, of abuse, of violence, of oppression, it doesn't happen easily. I was born with a weight on my shoulders and no one to teach me how to navigate through it. Our parents and our grandparents were so strong but we're still learning how to be empowered."

Dick's been sober for six years now and credits finding her voice in activism and in meeting a friend and mentor who was sober for 15 years.

"I think that in a lot of ways, that's why a lot of Indigenous people are taking back their sobriety because, as we begin

to heal every generation, we're able to let go of those mechanisms that were put in place through colonisation that told us this is how we deal with things.

"We're taking back who we are as people, and just looking around and seeing all those amazing people, is what really set me on the right path..."

*Linnea Dick is the Social Media & Outreach Coordinator for WE MATTER and can be reached at: linnea@wemattercampaign.org This story appeared originally in the CBC Radio Out in the Open episode "Youth Mental Health" in May, 2018 and has been edited slightly for this publication*

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