Navigating Mental Wellness:

Indigenous Learners' Experiences in Post-Secondary Spaces

Mental Health Commission of Canada

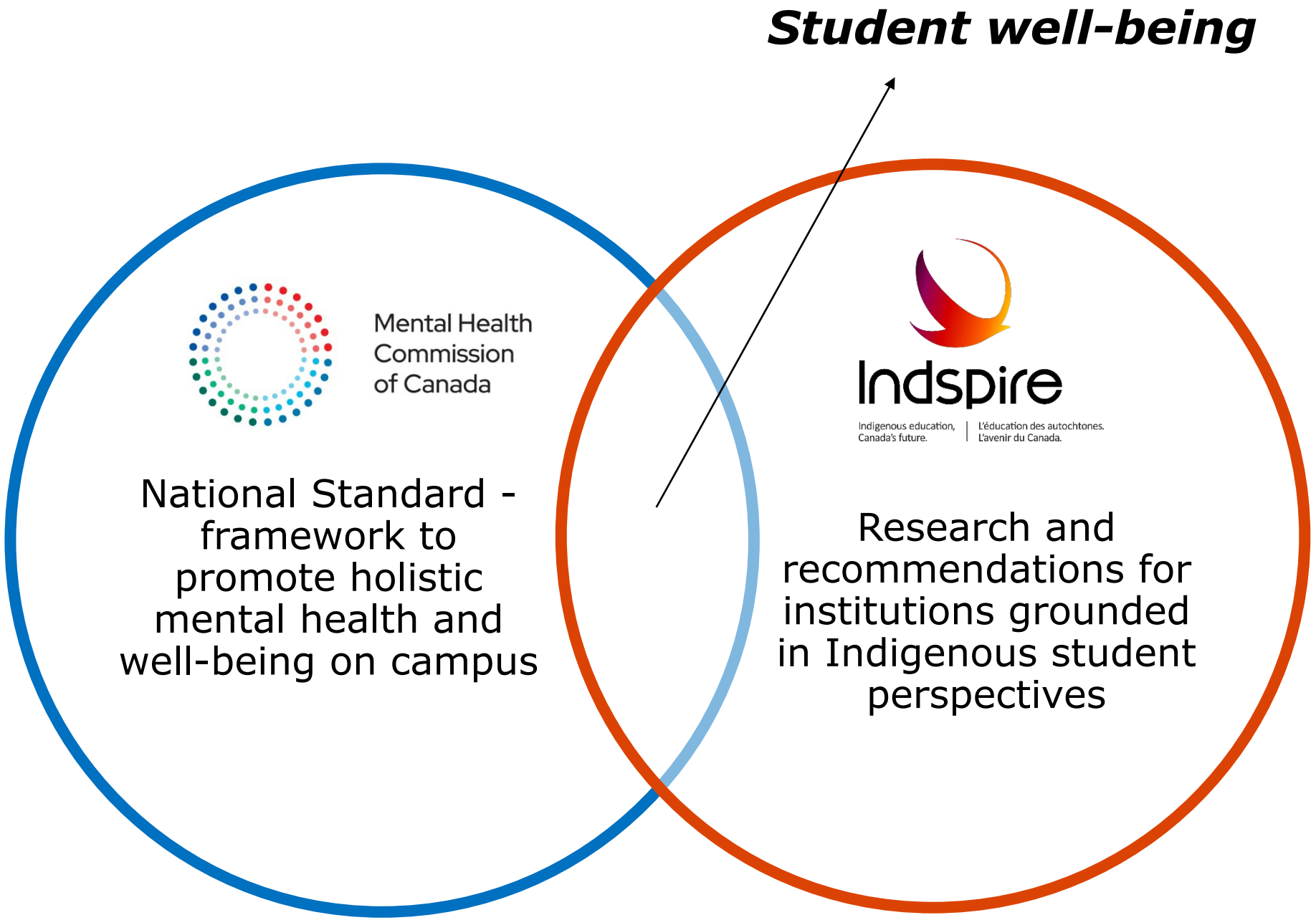
Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Indspire

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.



September 29, 2026


Student well-being
Mental Health Commission of Canada
National Standard - framework to promote holistic mental health and well-being on campus
Indspire
Indigenous education, Canada's future.
L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.
Research and recommendations for institutions grounded in Indigenous student perspectives

Agenda

01 —

MHCC’s work with the Post-Secondary Standard

02 —

Partnership with Indspire

03 —

Indspire’s Mental Wellness Research

A holistic approach to student mental health





Student's top 3 priorities for mental health and well-being in 2026

1. Access and low-barrier support
2. Diversity, equity, and inclusion
3. Early intervention, mental health literacy, and stigma reduction

What emerging trends will shape student mental health over the next 2-3 years?

> Raising student advocacy for holistic, student-centred approaches that integrate:
>
> - Mental health supports
> - Academic resources
> - Social and community connections rather than treating mental health as a separate issue
>
> *- Student Leader*

Guiding Principles as a Roadmap

- Student centered
- Health promotion & harm reduction
- Equity, diversity & inclusion
- Thriving community & culture of well-being
- Knowledge informed
- Continuous Improvement

A Shared Commitment to Student Mental Wellness

Mental Health Commission of Canada

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Mental Wellness Project Overview









Report launch

- Project kick-off
- Learning circles with Indigenous students underway

2024 → **2025** → **2026**

- Analysis of learning circles and survey data
- Report production



Phase 1: Mental Wellness Survey: Explored key factors influencing Indigenous learners' mental wellness and mental health service utilization - Administered March 2023 - Sent to 10,104 previous BBF recipients (2020–2022). 2,989 respondents (30% response rate).

Phase 2: Learning Circles: Explored lived experiences of mental wellness during post-secondary - 3 learning circles with 7 to 8 participants (22 total current and former Indigenous post-secondary learners)



What Shapes Indigenous Learners Mental Wellness?

Insights from Mental Wellness Research Reports

Indigenous Post-Secondary Learners in Canada

Findings from *State of Indigenous Education and Labour Market (2025)*

102,260

Indigenous learners enrolled in post-secondary education

57,975 First Nations	**41,985** Métis	**2,310** Inuit
56.7%	41.1%	2.3%

Indigenous vs. Non-Indigenous

7.9%
Indigenous Enrollment Rate

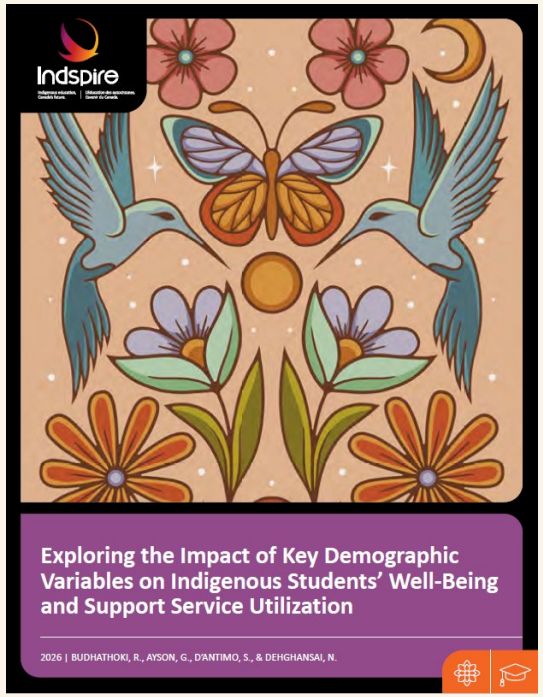
9.1%
Non-Indigenous Enrollment Rate

54.7%
of registered **Indigenous** learners are 25+

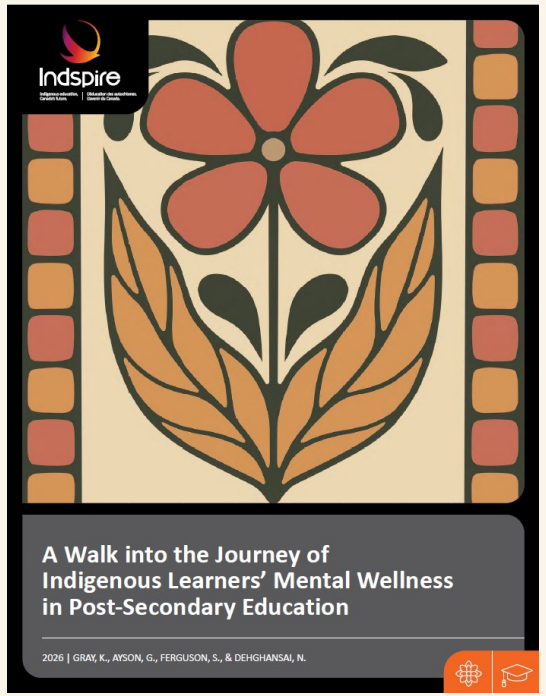
44.3%
of **Non-Indigenous** learners are 25+

Indspire's Mental Wellness Research Program









Phase 1:
Mental Wellness Survey

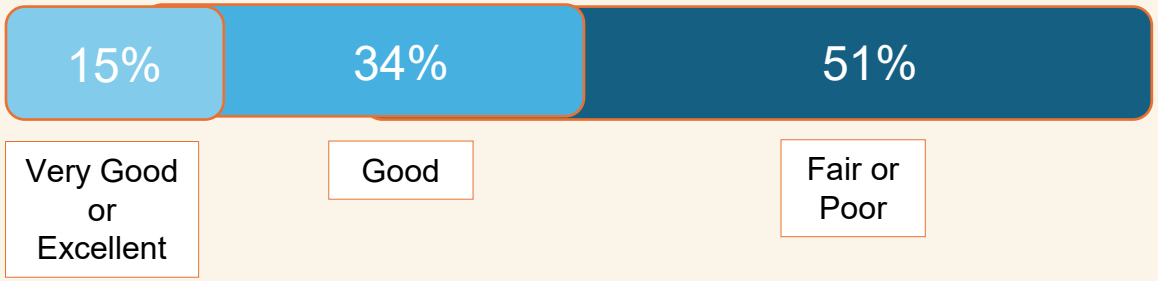
Phase 2:
Learning Circles

Understanding the Current Landscape

Mental Wellness Survey: Mental Health Landscape

Findings from *Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors: A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences (2026)*

→ **51%** of respondents reported their mental wellness to be "Fair" or "Poor".



3.41/5

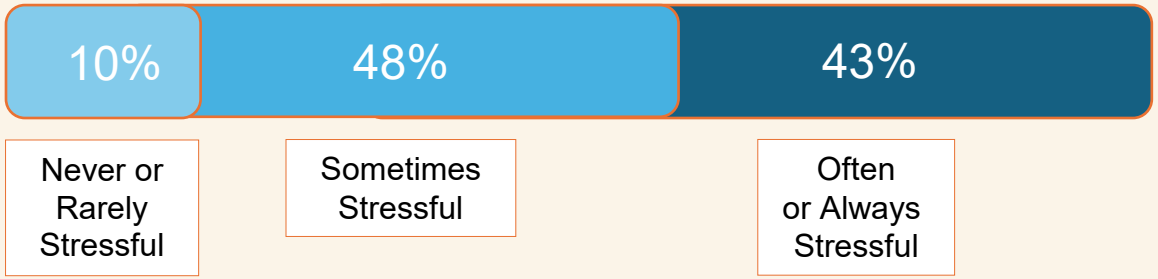
Mean Mental Wellness Score



Mental Wellness Survey: Mental Health Landscape

Findings from *Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors: A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences (2026)*

→ **43%** report their days are “Always” or “Often" stressful



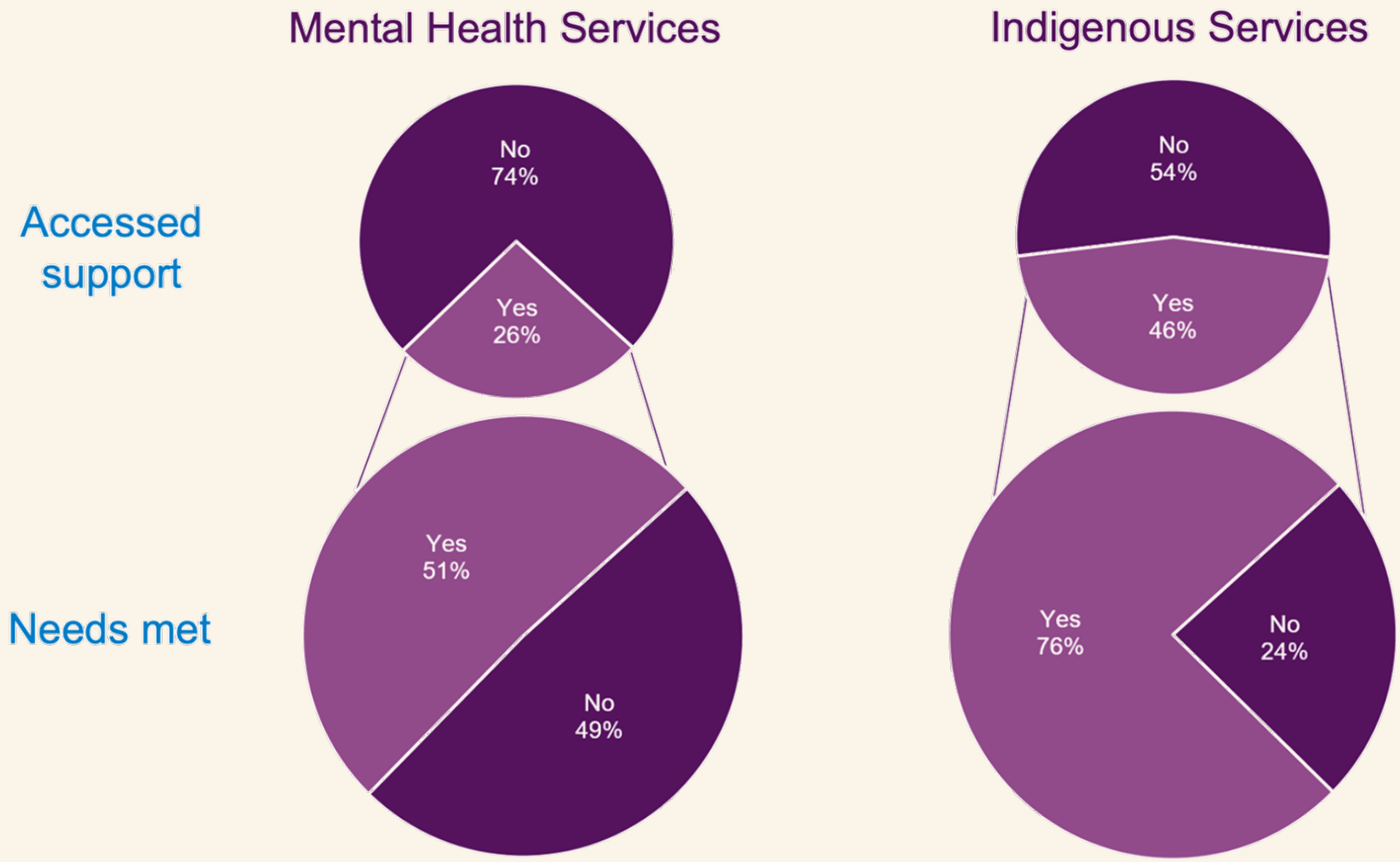
35%

report to have a mental health condition



Mental Wellness Survey: Service Utilization

Findings from *Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors: A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences (2026)*



Access ≠ Effective Support

Students who accessed mental health services reported:

→ Higher stress *(p < .01)*
→ Lower mental wellness *(p < .05)*

Accessing services was not positively associated with improved wellness.

Students who accessed Indigenous Services reported:

→ Significantly higher cultural connectedness *(p < .05)*
→ Higher sense of belonging (trend-level)
→ Comparable stress levels to non-users

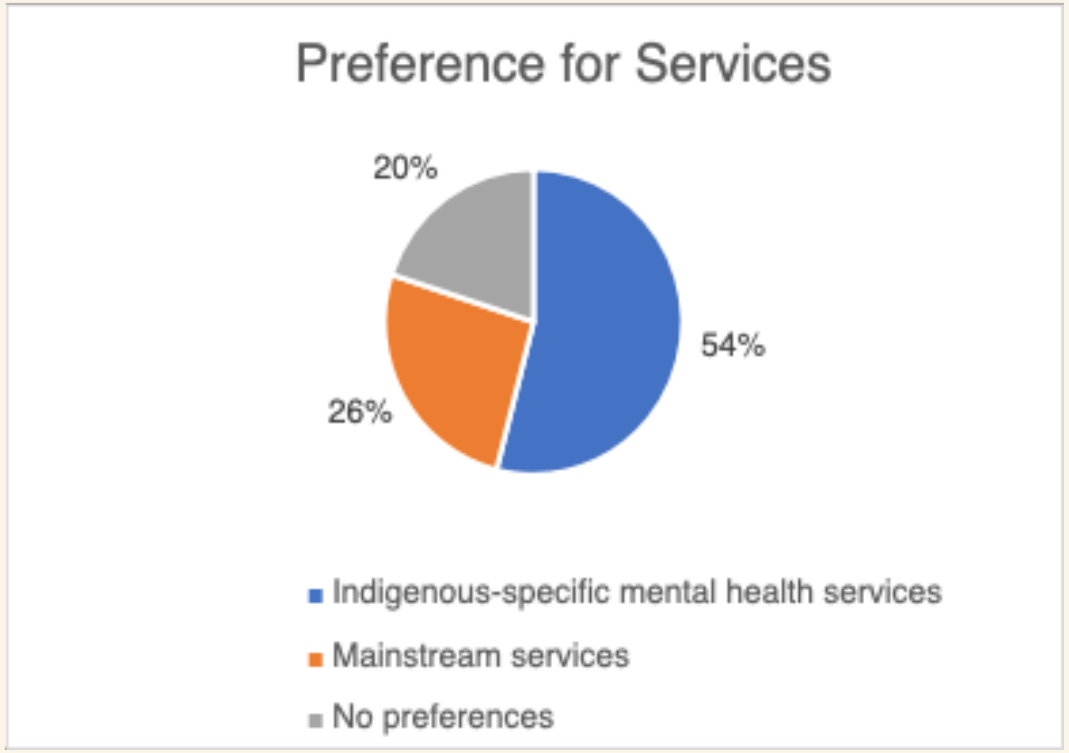
Indigenous services appear associated with relational and cultural outcomes.



Preference for Services

Qualitative drivers of preference:

- → Cultural safety
- → Representation
- → Confidentiality
- → Reduced stigma



Preferences are shaped heavily by cultural safety and stigma concerns.

What Makes Mental Wellness Services Effective?

Accessing Services: Trust as a Mediating Factor

Findings from *Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits (2026)*

“Non-Indigenous people don't understand our trauma from colonization.”

– Survey Respondent

“My Indigeneity is not a topic I feel safe and comfortable discussing to non-Indigenous therapists.”

– Survey Respondent



Accessing Services: Belonging Influences Willingness

Findings from *Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits (2026)*



"I stopped using student accessibility services because I felt as though I would be judged by professors and TAs."

– Survey Respondent

"The Indigenous CO-OP service thought I was a white person trying to get in on more opportunities and insulted me (I'm light-skinned and Métis)."

– Survey Respondent

Accessing Services: Students Trust External Supports

Findings from *Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits (2026)*

"I went to an outside Indigenous service that had doctors, nurses, counselling, massage therapy and Elders all in one location that was far more welcoming and nonjudgmental."

– Survey Respondent

"I regularly receive support from a Traditional Knowledge holder, and I pay her out of pocket since she is not registered with the First Nations Health Authority. I prefer to work with her."

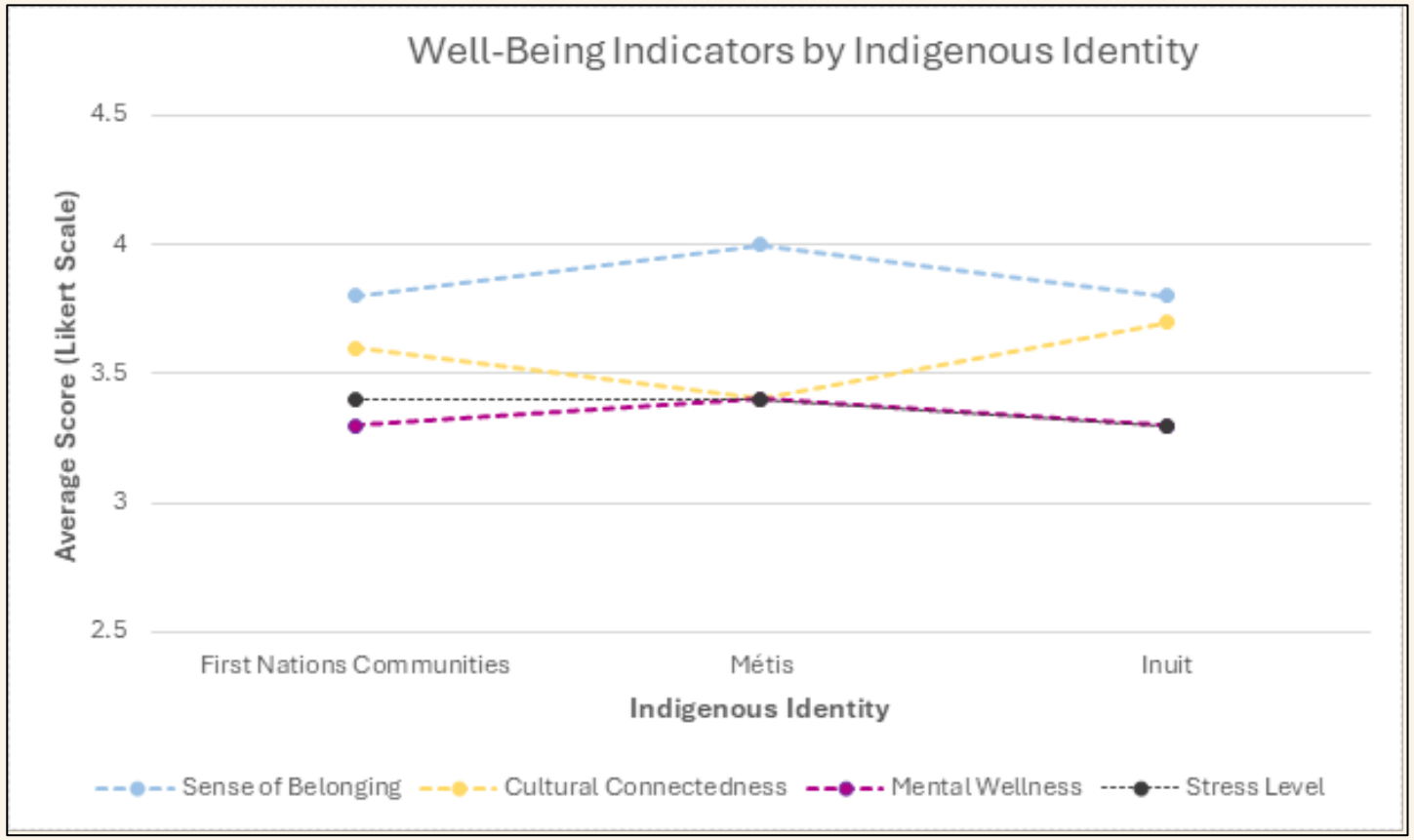
– Survey Respondent



Demographics and Demographic Differences

Group Differences By Indigenous Identity

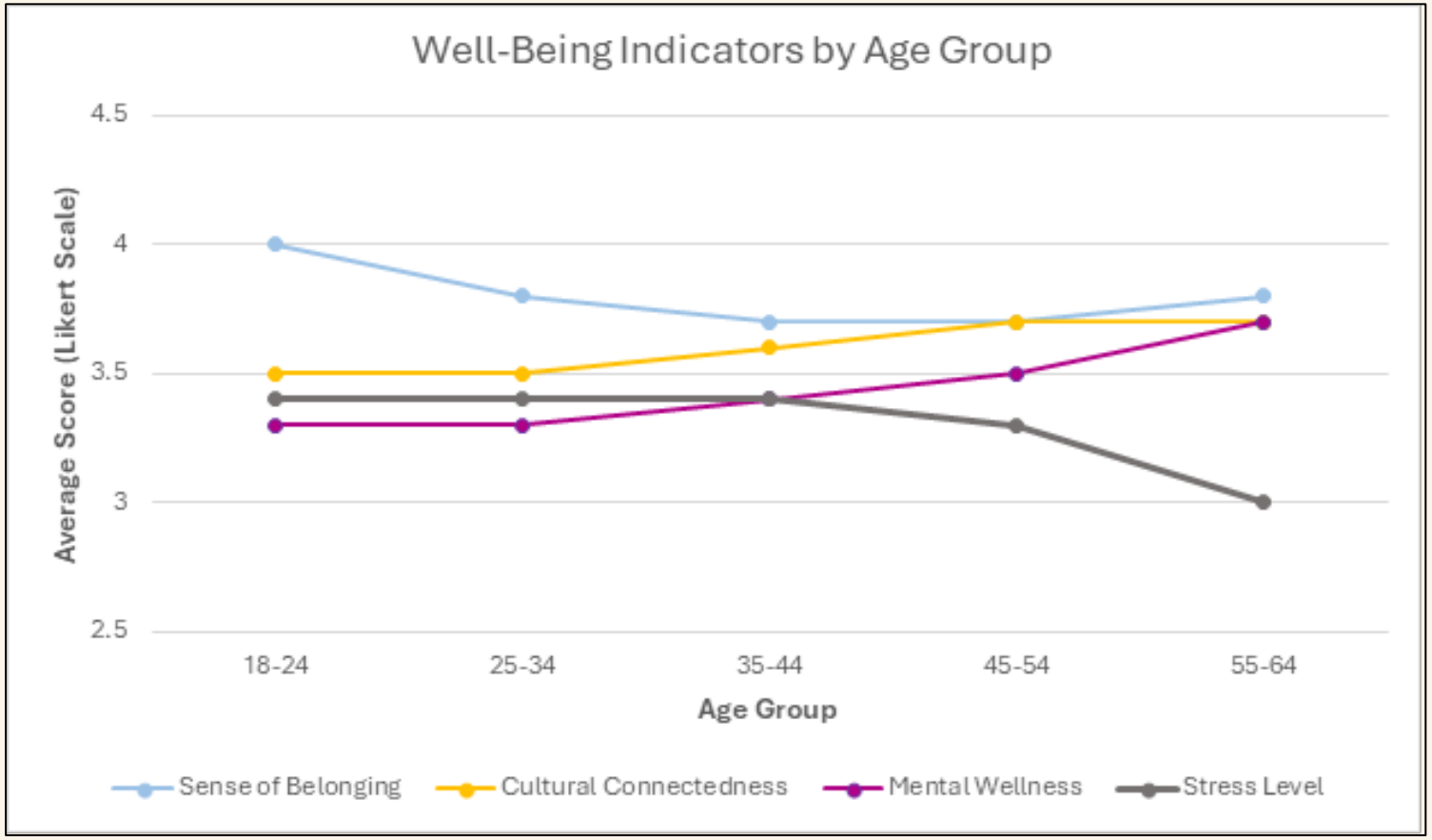
Findings from *Exploring the Impact of Key Demographic Variables on Indigenous Students' Well-Being and Support Service Utilization (2026)*



On the 5-point Likert scale, Métis respondents reported the highest average sense of belonging (4.0), compared with First Nations and Inuit respondents (3.8).

Group Differences By Age Group

Findings from *Exploring the Impact of Key Demographic Variables on Indigenous Students' Well-Being and Support Service Utilization (2026)*



Across age groups, cultural connectedness and mental wellness generally increased with age, while reported stress declined among the oldest respondents (55–64).

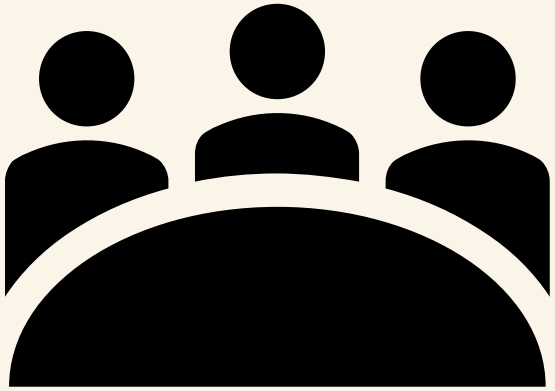
Supporting Indigenous Student Mental Wellness

Phase 2 – Learning Circles

Deepening Understanding Through Dialogue

→ Series of learning circles with current and former Indigenous students
→ Explored:
    → Lived experiences of mental wellness during post-secondary
    → Barriers to accessing supports
    → Institutional strengths and limitations

→ Development of the **Tree Analogy** as a guiding framework for institutional transformation



Learning circles

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

6 Pathways to Support



Fostering relationships and community

Healing





Cultural connection

Life skills





Professional development opportunities

Emergency resources



Fostering Relationships and Community

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Connecting with other Indigenous students **fosters a sense of belonging** and **builds a community** of individuals who understand their background, culture, current journey, and obstacles.

"… over time I've focused on connections, building relationships, people that I can trust and confide in, and people who are supportive as well, and that's **helped me cope with the stresses of school**".

- **Peer support (buddy and mentorship programs)**

Cultural Connection

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Participants spoke about the crucial role culture plays in their lives, **fostering a sense of identity and belonging**. They need spaces where their identities are **acknowledged and respected**.

> "… sometimes I go through phases where I realize I'm doing really not good. And then I'm like, wait, what's missing? Oh, **I haven't gone to a sweat in a while**. I haven't like smudged. **I need a smudge**. I haven't smudged in a while".

- **Ceremony**
- **Access to Elders**
- **Land-based learning activities**
- **Traditional creative workshops**
- **Physical representation of culture**

Professional Development Opportunities

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Supporting professional development would **foster feelings of success** and accomplishment **outside of coursework**.

"Honestly a resume writing workshop would be helpful. I have never prepared one, and when I'm done university, **I'm expected to go out and do all these things that no one has taught me** like go on job interviews."

- **Resume-writing**
- **Interview coaching**
- **Industry mentorship**
- **Networking events**

Life Skills

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Many students navigate multiple responsibilities (e.g., caregiving and financial obligations) while adjusting to academic stresses. **Helping to equip students with practical skills** can **alleviate stress** and **build confidence** in their ability to manage daily challenges.

"I'd like to see some **traditional parenting teachings** or classes. A lot of us are like intergenerational trauma, you know, residential school survivors. **We don't know** how to parent".

- **Cooking classes**
- **Self-care workshops**
- **Financial literacy programs**
- **Parenting support circles**

Healing

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Participants reported suffering from intergenerational trauma resulting in addiction and maladaptive coping mechanisms. They require **trauma-informed support** rooted in **reclaiming identity, culture, and self-determination**.

"… we need to have **culturally appropriate counselors**. They need to be culturally safe. They need to be **trauma informed**. They need to know enough. That so that we're not bridging the gaps when we're sitting and talking to them. They know the background and they **know the historical challenges**".

- **Indigenous-centered counselling and addiction services**
- **Integrating Indigenous knowledge and practices into academia**
- **Programs that help students reconnect to cultural traditions**

Emergency Resources

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Students spoke about having to overcome additional and unbudgeted expenses. PSIs could offer **shame-free support** to **provide stability** in times of crisis. This can **reinforce sense of belonging** and **institutional commitment** to student success and mental wellness.

"I'm worrying about how I get food."

- **Grocery cards / Food pantry**
- **Short-term housing assistance**
- **Bus tickets**
- **Tech-lending programs**

Reimagining Institutional Support

The Tree Analogy

Findings from *A Walk into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education (2026)*

Mental wellness is shaped by the conditions around students, not <u>just</u> individual factors.

The tree shows how institutional environments enable (or limit) that growth.

The tree illustrates:

→ What grounds students
→ What stabilizes them
→ What allows them to grow
→ What institutions should sustain



National Day for Truth and Reconciliation



Anushik
Lunaappew

Hiy Hiy
Cree

Kia ora
Maori

Nia:wen
Mohawk

Nya'weh
Cayuga

Masi
Tłı̨chǫ and Dene

Huy ch q'u
Mul'q'umi'num

Wliwni
Abenaki

Mental Health Commission of Canada

Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Thank you

Q&A

Mīkwēc
Saulteaux

Miigwetch
Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe

Nanāskamon
Plains Cree

Masicho
Tłı̨chǫ and Dene

Matna
Inuktitut

Nakkumek
Inuktitut

Naqumik
Inuktitut