



# White Polar Bear Circles

FOR HEALING & RECOVERY

*connecting women • creating safety • sharing stories • finding hope*

## BACKGROUND

It is well established that women with intellectual or developmental disabilities, including FASD, have often experienced traumatic events as children, adolescents, or young adults. This particular group of women are more likely to experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, child welfare involvement, and exposure to community-based violence. Trauma-related impacts including anxiety, depression, and heightened arousal/reactivity can lead to substance use as a coping mechanism. Problematic substance use in turn can lead to involvement with the legal system.

Despite the need for gender-, disability-, and culturally- responsive trauma treatment, there are few services available to meet women's needs. Existing services may not have the resources to address women's trauma needs, or they may consider working with this group as outside of their scope of practice. This has meant that many women have been excluded from mainstream services, leaving their trauma and trauma impacts, such as substance use, unaddressed. In the absence of effective support, women can be vulnerable to further experiences of exploitation and/or violence, which may exacerbate their use of substances to cope. These experiences can consequently lead to involvement in the justice system. In effect, the experience of trauma can be considered as both a cause and a consequence of substance use and legal involvement.



## White Polar Bear Circles

To address this gap, a partnership was created between several Winnipeg community-based organizations including Life's Journey, Inclusion Winnipeg, New Directions for Children and Youth, and Opportunities for Independence. Funded by the Substance Use and Addiction Program of the Public Health Agency of Canada, this collaboration resulted in the development of the White Polar Bear Circles, a trauma-informed treatment program for women who struggle with addiction and who may be challenged by mental health or intellectual/developmental disabilities, and who have involvement with the criminal justice and/or child welfare system.

The White Polar Bear Circles project takes a harm reduction rather than an abstinence approach to substance use for this population of women.

The goal of the project is to facilitate women's understanding of their trauma experiences and their relationship to substance use and legal involvement.

The White Polar Bear Circles project has three phases. Phase One involves researching the prevalence of trauma and substance use within the population of women with intellectual disabilities and FASD and legal involvement. Phase Two involves the development, implementation, and evaluation of gender- and disability-responsive trauma training for service providers in Manitoba. Phase Three involves the implementation and evaluation of an evidence-based trauma-specific intervention for this particular group of women.



## Service Provider Training

As part of Phase Two of the project we are inviting interested service providers to participate in a series of training modules to improve responses to women with intellectual disabilities who have, or who are at risk of involvement with the law. Training will be delivered using the online platform Microsoft Teams. The training will begin in September and sessions will be scheduled every two weeks for a total of 10 sessions. Sessions will be done live on Wednesday afternoons from 1:00 pm to 2:30 pm. They will include information, interactive activities, and answering questions from attendees. This training will offer service providers the opportunity to:

- increase their knowledge of gender- and disability-responsive trauma counselling,
- develop inter-professional group facilitation skills
- expand their case management skills

Once the training is complete, we will select interested service providers and work with them to implement the pilot program within three communities: Winnipeg, Brandon, and Thompson and with two age groups of women: 15-18 and 19+.



## Program Content

DATE (all dates are Wednesdays)	SESSION TOPIC
September 8, 2021	Introduction to White Polar Bear Circles Trauma Recovery Model
September 22, 2021	Cultural Considerations
October 6, 2021	Ability/Accessibility
October 20, 2021	Assessing trauma histories/responses
November 3, 2021	Facilitating healthy coping responses (Seeking Safety program)
November 17, 2021	Mourning and Remembering Stages (using narratives to facilitate grief work )
December 1, 2021	Re-integration stage (facilitating help-seeking behaviours)
December 15, 2021	Case Management
January, 2022	Group exercises
January, 2022	Inter-sectoral systems /Maintaining the work

### Contact

If you are interested in participating in the training or would like further information, please contact **Marielle Weeh Tiki at 204-390-6757** or **Matthew Thompson at 204-390-7362** or by email at [info@whitepolarbearcircles.org](mailto:info@whitepolarbearcircles.org)

