Module 5 - Mental Health and Cultural Safety

In this unit, you will learn:

- What is Mental Health? What are the common conditions of Mental Illness? How do we address the stigma? And, what are the impacts in the workplace.
- What is Cultural Safety? What culture-specific factors influence the mental health of Indigenous Communities? And, what can employers do to promote cultural safety in the workplace?
- The common factors that contribute to mental health challenges in the workplace and the role of the employer. How to understand what triggers feelings and emotions.
- The LARA Method for managing tense talks, a tool to discuss mental health with our employees.

Module Overview

1. Mental Health

📖 Mental Health

❓ Paul is the owner of a small marketing agency. One of his employees, Sarah, has been exhibiting signs of increased stress and low motivation. Sarah's performance has declined, and she frequently appears anxious at work. How can Paul best support Sarah's mental health needs?

❓ James runs a successful technology start-up with a team of dedicated employees. One of his team members, Alex, has recently suffered a personal loss and is struggling with grief. How can James best support Alex during this difficult time?

❓ Lisa is a business owner in the hospitality industry. She has noticed that some of her staff are experiencing burnout due to long hours and high-pressure situations. What should Lisa prioritize to address the burnout issue?

2. Cultural Safety

📖 Cultural Safety

❓ True or False?

❓ Match the description

3. Workplace Triggers

□ Workplace Triggers

② True or False?

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4. Practice Your Awareness

□ Practice Your Awareness

② Case Study: Applying the LARA Method

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② How do you anticipate applying this knowledge to promote culturally safe and inclusive conversations about mental health and employee well-being?

Mental Health

Mental Health

Mental Health and Mental Illness Are Not the Same Thing.

Mental health indicates a state of well-being. The presence or absence of a mental illness is not a predictor of mental health. Everyone has mental health, not everyone has mental illness, although all of us will experience challenges regarding our mental well-being at some point in life.

Mental Health

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and act, and it also determines how an individual handles stress, makes choices, and relates to others. Mental health is essential at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Mental health includes our emotions, feelings of connection to others, our thoughts and feelings, and being able to manage life's highs and lows.

Maintaining good mental health involves finding a balance in various aspects of life, such as social connections, work or school life, physical health, and self-care activities.

Mental Illness

Mental illnesses are conditions that affect a person's thinking, feeling, mood, and behavior, and they can vary in severity. Common mental illnesses include anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and eating disorders.

Mental illness affects people of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures; however, **systemic inequalities such as racism, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, colonial and gender-based violence, among others, can worsen mental health and symptoms of mental illness**. It is important to seek help and support when facing mental health challenges as they can significantly impact a person's overall well-being and quality of life.

Common Conditions

Below is an overview of some common mental health conditions (or illnesses) along with brief descriptions.

It is important to note that these are general descriptions, and individuals may experience these conditions differently. Diagnosis and treatment should be sought from a qualified mental health professional.

⌄ Anxiety

These disorders involve excessive worry, fear, or unease, which can interfere with daily life. Examples include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.

⌄ Depression

Depression is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, worthlessness, and a loss of interest in activities. It can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, often leading to difficulties in carrying out day-to-day tasks.

⌄ Bipolar Disorder

This condition involves extreme mood swings, ranging from depressive episodes (low mood, loss of interest) to manic episodes (elevated mood, increased energy, impulsive behaviour).

⌄ Eating Disorder

These disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder, involve unhealthy thoughts, emotions, and behaviours related to food and body image.

⌄ Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a chronic mental disorder that affects a person's perception of reality, thinking, and behaviour. It may cause delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and a lack of motivation.

⌄ PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. It can cause flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and emotional distress.

⌄ OCD

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) involves recurring obsessive thoughts and repetitive, compulsive behaviours. People with this disorder may feel compelled to carry out certain rituals or engage in excessive cleaning or checking behaviours.

ᐯ **ADHD**

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, which can significantly affect focus, organization, and self-control.

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Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

Addressing mental health stigma requires a collective effort at various levels, including society, communities, organizations, and individuals. It is an ongoing process that requires continuous effort, awareness, and collective action to transform society's attitudes and behaviours towards mental health issues. Here are some strategies that can help:

Education & Awareness

Promote accurate and evidence-based information about mental health to increase understanding through community education programs, workshops, campaigns, and media initiatives.

Empathy & Support

Foster a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Encourage empathy, compassion, and active listening when someone shares their struggles.

Promoting Inclusion

Ensure that people with mental health conditions are included and treated equitably. Implement policies and practices that prioritize mental health as an integral part of overall well-being.

Collaboration & Advocacy

Supporting and participating in mental health initiatives can amplify the message and drive change.

Role Modeling

Individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges can play a vital role in reducing stigma by sharing their stories and challenging stereotypes. Their voices help humanize mental health conditions and promote understanding and empathy.

Challenge Stereotypes

Encourage open conversations about mental health and challenge prejudices. Promote positive portrayals of individuals with mental health conditions in your communications to counter stigmatizing narratives.

Language Matters

Use respectful and person-first language when discussing mental health issues. Avoid derogatory language or terms that reinforce stereotypes or judgement.

Access to treatment

Improving access to mental health services is crucial for addressing stigma. Efforts should be made to ensure affordable, accessible, and quality mental healthcare services for all individuals.

The Impact in the Workplace

Mental health conditions can have a significant impact on the workplace, affecting both employees and employers.

It is important for employers to prioritize mental health in the workplace by implementing policies and programs that support employee well-being, offering mental health resources and supports, fostering an open and inclusive environment for conversations, and providing access to mental health services. Such actions can help reduce the negative impact of mental health conditions on both employees and employers, creating a healthier and more productive work environment.

Here are some common impacts of mental health conditions in the workplace:

Reduced Productivity

Mental health conditions can lead to decreased concentration, difficulty focusing, and decreased productivity. Employees may struggle to complete tasks efficiently, meet deadlines, or maintain consistent work output.

Increased Absenteeism and Presenteeism

Mental health issues can result in increased absences from work due to illness or the need for mental health care. However, even when present at work, employees may experience presenteeism, where they are physically present but unable to perform at their best due to their mental health condition.

High Turnover Rates

Untreated mental health conditions can contribute to increased turnover rates as employees may feel unable to cope with job demands or experience difficulties with maintaining employment stability.

Workplace Conflict and Strained Relationships

Mental health conditions can impact interpersonal relationships within the workplace. Employees may struggle with communication, collaboration, or be more susceptible to conflict due to their symptoms.

Increased Work-Related Stress

Certain jobs or work environments can trigger or exacerbate mental health conditions. High stress levels, long work hours, inadequate support systems, and a lack of work-life balance can all contribute to the development or worsening of mental health issues.

Increased Healthcare Costs

Employers may experience increased healthcare costs due to mental health-related medical treatment and therapy expenses. This includes both direct costs, such as insurance claims, and indirect costs associated with lost productivity and absenteeism.

Impact on Organizational Culture

Mental health conditions can influence the overall work environment and organizational culture. Stigma, discrimination, or a lack of support can create a hostile or unsupportive workplace atmosphere, contributing to employee dissatisfaction and decreased morale.

Paul is the owner of a small marketing agency. One of his employees, Sarah, has been exhibiting signs of increased stress and low motivation. Sarah's performance has declined, and she frequently appears anxious at work. How can Paul best support Sarah's mental health needs?

- [ ] Offer Sarah a pay raise to alleviate her stress.

- [ ] Ignore Sarah's behaviour and focus on her work performance only.

- [ ] Have an open and non-judgmental conversation with Sarah to express concern and offer support.

- [ ] Assign extra work to keep Sarah busy and distracted.

James runs a successful technology start-up with a team of dedicated employees. One of his team members, Alex, has recently suffered a personal loss and is struggling with grief. How can James best support Alex during this difficult time?

- [ ] Expect Alex to handle personal matters outside of work without interfering.

- [ ] Reassign Alex's workload to other team members to avoid any disruptions.

- [ ] Encourage Alex to take as much time off as needed without any communication.

- [ ] Have a compassionate conversation with Alex to acknowledge the loss, offer condolences, and discuss flexible work arrangements if needed.

Lisa is a business owner in the hospitality industry. She has noticed that some of her staff are experiencing burnout due to long hours and high-pressure situations. What should Lisa prioritize to address the burnout issue?

- [ ] Implement work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible scheduling and regular breaks.

- [ ] Increase work hours further to meet business demands.

- [ ] Ignore staff concerns and focus only on business profitability.

- [ ] Discourage staff from expressing their feelings and concerns.

End of Section 1

Cultural Safety

Cultural Safety

The mental health of Indigenous communities in Canada is influenced by various cultural, historical and social factors. Cultural safety in the workplace for Indigenous Peoples refers to creating an environment that respects, values, and supports Indigenous cultural identities, practices, and protocols. It involves recognizing and addressing the historical and contemporary inequalities and injustices faced by Indigenous communities.

As seen in previous modules, acknowledging and addressing the intergenerational impact of colonization, residential schools, forced assimilation, and other traumatic experiences is crucial. By promoting healing and reconciliation, Indigenous communities can work towards improved mental health outcomes.

Cultural safety is achieved through fostering respectful interactions that acknowledge and address power imbalances within the workplace. It creates an environment that is free from discrimination and racism, instilling a sense of safety and inclusivity for all individuals involved.

Cultural Safety

Cultural Awareness
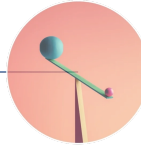
Power Imbalances
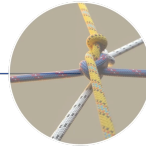
Anti-racism

Culture-Specific Factors Influencing Mental Health:

Cultural Identity and Connections to Land

Indigenous communities have a strong connection to their cultural heritage, language, and traditional practices. Maintaining and revitalizing cultural identity and connection to the land can serve as protective factors for mental health.

Traditional Healing Practices

These practices focus on holistic healing, emphasizing the balance between mind, body, spirit, and community. Ceremonies, rituals, and the use of traditional medicines, play an essential role in the mental health and well-being of Indigenous communities.

Community and Social Support

Indigenous cultures place importance on community and extended family networks. Strong social support networks provide individuals with a sense of belonging, solidarity, and connection that can protect against mental health challenges.

Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Elders and Knowledge Keepers hold significant cultural wisdom and play an important role in supporting the mental health of Indigenous communities. Their guidance, teachings, and cultural knowledge contribute to community resilience and well-being.

Land-based Healing and Traditional Practices

Many Indigenous communities find healing and solace in activities related to the land, such as hunting, fishing, gathering traditional foods, and participating in land-based ceremonies and teachings. These practices are associated with improved mental health outcomes.

Self-determination and Sovereignty

Empowering Indigenous communities to exercise self-determination, protect their rights, and have control over their resources and decision-making processes can positively impact mental health outcomes. Building systems that recognize and support Indigenous governance and self-governance is crucial.

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What Can Employers Do to Promote Cultural Safety in the Workplace?

˅   **Training**

Cultural Training

Employers should provide **education and training** to all employees about Indigenous history, culture, and issues. This helps to foster a better understanding of Indigenous experiences, which challenges and reduces misconceptions or stereotypes.

Here are some external resources:

  • **Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.(**ICT**)** offers a wide range of training programs focused on Indigenous cultural awareness, including workshops and online courses.
  • **Indigenous Works (**iworks**)** provides a variety of services and programs aimed at fostering Indigenous inclusion in the workplace. They offer training programs focused on cultural competency.

˅   **Representation**

Indigenous Representation

Actively incorporating Indigenous voices, perspectives, and leadership at all levels of the organization is crucial. This can include hiring Indigenous staff, creating Indigenous advisory committees, or engaging in consultation with Indigenous communities when making decisions that affect them.

Here are some external resources:

• The Aboriginal Job Board is exclusively dedicated to posting positions for Indigenous job seekers. It covers various sectors, including business, healthcare, trades, government, and more.
• Many regions in Canada have **Indigenous Chambers of Commerce** that provide advice, resources, and connections to Indigenous professionals who may be interested in joining an advisory committee.
• Building relationships with local **Indigenous organizations and communities** is crucial. They can provide valuable guidance and recommendations for your business to engage in consultation.

⌄ **Policies and Practices**

Policies and Practices

Develop and implement organization-wide policies that promote inclusivity and cultural safety. This can involve policies around language and terminology, dress codes, land acknowledgments, and Indigenous protocols and ceremonies. These policies should be regularly reviewed and updated in consultation with Indigenous stakeholders.

Here is an external resource:

• The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) published this Information Booklet about Territory Acknowledgments. The booklet answers all questions and provides advice through key do's and don'ts.

⌄ Mindfulness

- Respect and honour Indigenous **protocols and practices** when engaging with Indigenous employees, clients, or partners. This can include practices such as offering tobacco, participating in cultural ceremonies or gatherings, or recognizing traditional territories. Seek guidance from Indigenous partners or Elders to ensure culturally appropriate protocols are followed.
- Create **support networks** within the workplace that provide space for Indigenous employees to connect, share experiences, and access culturally relevant resources. Establishing employee resource groups or affinity groups can help foster a sense of belonging and support.
- Use a **trauma-informed approach**. Be mindful of the potential impact of historical trauma and systemic discrimination on Indigenous employees' mental health. Implement trauma-informed practices that prioritize safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment in all aspects of the workplace.

⌄ Evaluation

Regularly seek feedback from Indigenous employees and stakeholders to ensure that cultural safety initiatives are effective and meeting their needs. This can involve anonymous surveys, focus groups, or individual conversations to address concerns and make necessary improvements.

Partnerships

Genuine Partnerships with Indigenous Communities

Engage in authentic and meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities outside of the workplace. This can involve collaborative initiatives, sponsorships, or volunteering efforts that support Indigenous self-determination, economic development, or cultural preservation.

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True or False?

True	False	
☐	☐	Smudging and the use of traditional medicines play an essential role in the mental health of Indigenous communities.
☐	☐	Indigenous Peoples exclusively use spiritual rituals and ceremonies to heal trauma.

Match the description

Match the answers with data below:

a) offer benefits such as cultural und erstanding, sustainable resource ma nagement, social and economic dev elopment, reconciliation, and enhanc ed decision-making.

b) focus on recognizing the rights an d land title of First Nations, emphasi zing the importance of reconciliation and establishing a respectful connec tion to the land and water.

c) helps foster a better understandin g of Indigenous experiences and per spectives, reducing stereotypes.

d) requires using job boards and est ablishing professional relationships o utside of mainstream channels.
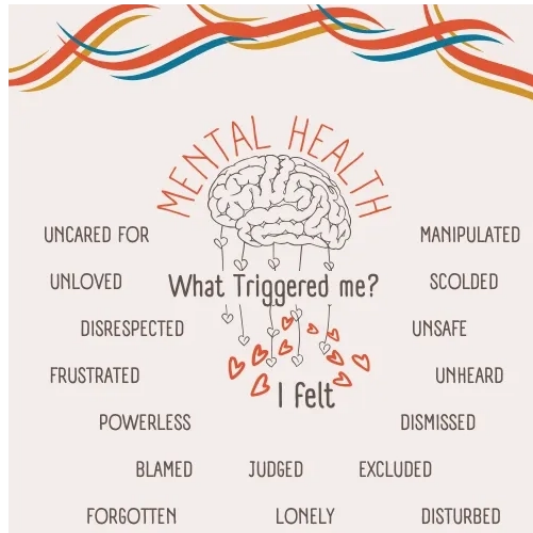
Cultural Training and Awareness	
Recruiting Indigenous Staff	
Land Acknowledgments	
Partnerships with Indigenous Communities	

End of Section 2

Workplace Triggers

Workplace Triggers

While each individual is unique and may have different triggers, some common factors can contribute to mental health challenges in the workplace.

Work-Related Stress

Excessive workloads, tight deadlines, lack of job control, high-pressure environments, and conflicts with colleagues or supervisors can cause significant stress, leading to mental health issues.

Employers play a crucial role in supporting employees to manage stress effectively. Here are some recommended actions to take:

• Promote open communication. Encourage employees to share their concerns, stressors, and challenges.
• Offer educational resources, training, and workshops on stress management, resilience, and mental health.
• Support employees in achieving a healthy work-life balance by encouraging breaks, time off, and reasonable work hours. Promote the importance of self-care, including exercise, relaxation, and hobbies.
• Provide regular feedback and performance evaluations to avoid ambiguity and reduce stress related to uncertainty.
• Provide flexible work arrangements, when feasible, such as remote work options or flexible scheduling. Providing autonomy and control over work processes can help reduce stress levels.
• Provide managers with training on identifying signs of stress, creating supportive work environments, and effectively supporting employees' mental health needs.
• Regularly assess workloads to ensure they are manageable and realistic. If employees consistently face overwhelming work demands, consider redistributing tasks, hiring additional staff, or providing temporary assistance to alleviate stress.

Poor Work-Life Balance

When employees struggle to juggle their work responsibilities with personal commitments and lack adequate time for rest, relaxation, and self-care, it can intensify stress levels and impact mental health.

Employers can take several steps to help employees achieve and maintain a better work-life balance:

• Provide options for flexible work schedules, such as compressed workweeks, flexitime, or remote work opportunities. This allows employees to better manage personal commitments and achieve a healthier balance between work and life responsibilities.
• Set clear guidelines and expectations regarding work hours, availability, and response times. Encourage employees to disconnect after work hours and establish boundaries to prevent work from encroaching on personal time.
• Emphasize the importance of taking vacation time and create a culture that supports and values time off for employees to recharge and rejuvenate.
• Provide resources or incentives for wellness activities such as gym memberships, healthy food options, mindfulness programs, or stress reduction workshops.
• Encourage managers and colleagues to respect personal time and commitments, and discourage excessive overtime or constant demands. When leaders demonstrate work-life balance, employees are more likely to feel empowered to achieve it themselves.

Unclear Job Expectations

Employees may experience anxiety and stress if they are unsure about what is expected of them, or are lacking clear job descriptions, roles, or responsibilities. An absence of feedback or recognition can also contribute to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

To improve the uncertainty produced by unclear job expectations, employers can take several steps:

• Ensure that job expectations and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated to employees. Provide written job descriptions, project guidelines, and performance goals to avoid ambiguity and give employees a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
• Conduct regular check-ins with employees to discuss their progress, address any uncertainties, and provide feedback. These conversations provide opportunities for employers to clarify expectations and offer guidance, ensuring employees feel supported and informed.
• Work with employees to establish realistic and achievable goals that align with their job expectations. Ensure that goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART goals). This helps employees have a clear focus and reduces uncertainty regarding performance expectations.

Lack of Support and Communication

Inadequate support from managers and colleagues, insufficient communication channels, or a lack of teamwork can lead to a sense of isolation and negatively impact mental well-being. Isolated individuals may actively avoid social situations or places where they may encounter others. They may go to great lengths to distance themselves from potential interactions or group activities. Isolation often contributes to a decline in self-esteem and self-worth. People may feel inadequate, unimportant, or like they don't belong, leading to increased self-doubt and negative self-perception. Isolated individuals often struggle to ask for support or reach out for help. They may believe that their situation is unlikely to change or that others wouldn't understand or empathize with their feelings of isolation. Isolation can impact an individual's performance at work. They may struggle to concentrate, have reduced productivity, or show a decline in overall performance.

Bullying, Harassment, or Discrimination

Hostile work environments where bullying, harassment (verbal, physical, or sexual), or discrimination (based on race, gender, disability, etc.) exist can cause psychological harm and potentially trigger or exacerbate mental health issues. Experiencing bullying, harassment, or discrimination could lead to:

• A hostile and stressful work environment. Constantly feeling targeted or unsafe can lead to chronic **stress and anxiety**.
• Feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and low self-esteem. Over time, these factors can contribute to the development or worsening of **depression.**
• Flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and reminders of traumatic experiences are common symptoms of **PTSD,** which can significantly impact a person's well-being and ability to function in the workplace.
• Constant devaluation, belittlement, or exclusion can lead to feelings of worthlessness, impacting one's confidence and ability to perform daily tasks or excel in their work.
• **Burnout**, a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion due to excessive and prolonged stress. Constant mistreatment can drain an individual's energy and motivation, impairing their ability to cope with work demands and causing a decline in overall well-being.

Organizational Culture and Leadership

A toxic work environment, poor leadership practices, lack of employee engagement, ineffective conflict resolution, or a culture that doesn't prioritize mental health can all contribute to poor mental health outcomes.

Job Insecurity

Concerns related to job stability, fear of lay-offs, or a company's financial instability can create significant stress and anxiety for employees, leading to mental health challenges.

True or False?

True **False**

☐ ☐ A work-related trigger for stress is excessive job demands.

☐ ☐ Job insecurity, restructuring or organizational changes are not mental health triggers.

☐ ☐ A work-related trigger for trauma is stigma or lack of understanding.

☐ ☐ Discrimination or microaggressions could trigger unresolved past traumatic experiences.

☐ ☐ A work-related trigger is clear communications and expectations from management.

End of Section 3

Practice Your Awareness

Practice Your Awareness

Discussing Mental Health Can Be Challenging

Engaging in discussions concerning identities can evoke intense and involuntary emotional responses, including anger, frustration, fear, and isolation.

How can we effectively support someone experiencing emotional flood? How can we ensure emotional safety following a triggering event?

The LARA Method for Managing Tense Talks

In the next Module, we will examine comunication techniques. However, there are guidelines to help you navigate the above mentioned questions.

Opening up mental health conversations can bring up all sort of emotions and responses. To engage in difficult conversations, the LARA Method was created by Bonnie Tinker in the 90s to help someone who has been triggered. LARA stands for Listen, Affirm, Respond, and Ask Questions. Over the years, the concept has been expanded to include an extra letter before listening. Some alterations include CLARA (center yourself) or BLARA (Breathe).

Listen

First, practice active listen to fully understand what the person is saying. Learn what the speaker thinks and feels, communicated with words and body language. Pay special attention to transmitted feelings and try to empathically understand. Listen to validate those feelings.

Affirm

Confirm or affirm something in the message received. Examples of affirmations are: "I hear you", "What I sense is", "It seems like you feel...", "I appreciate your honesty", "I agree with what you said", etc.

Respond

Address the concern that was voiced. Take the questions and concerns that were debated and address them directly. Frame your responses with "I feel", "I believe", "I think", etc.

Ask Questions

Retrieve all pertinent information before providing a new perspective or information from your own personal experience. For example, "how did that make you feel", "Why do you think that happened".

Are you ready to talk?

This SPARQtools Toolkit from **Stanford University** could help you improve your communication skills by learning the LARA Method and addressing your biases. It takes 1 hour to complete and you will have a chance to assess your strengths, map your identities, identify what triggers you, learn tools for managing tense talks and lead discussions about difference.

SPARQ

areyoureadytotalk | SPARQtools

↗ **Visit page**

Case Study: Applying the LARA Method

Address Harassment in the Workplace

Jade is an Indigenous woman working as an insulator at a construction company. She has recently experienced repeated instances of harassment from her co-workers, including offensive comments and jokes aimed at her cultural background. As the employer, you need to address this issue using the LARA method to have an effective conversation with the involved parties.

LARA Method:

L - Listen and understand the concerns of the victim.

A - Affirm the victim's feelings and experiences.

R - Respond appropriately and take action.

A - Add information by asking questions.

How would you apply the LARA method to address the harassment experienced by Jade? Arrange the inputs below in the order that corresponds to the method studied in this Module.

Rank answers in input below:

a) Be attentive to Jade's concerns, acknowledge her experience, document the incidents, and provide her with resources and support. Provide a safe and quiet space for a confidential chat, be attentive and non-judgmental, allow pauses and silence, reflect compassion and understanding.

b) Respectfully inquire about more details and explain the process toward resolution. "Are you comfortable sharing more details about the specific incidents to ensure we have a comprehensive understanding of what occurred?", "Is there anything you would like to see happen as a resolution to this situation, Jade?", "Are there any measures you feel would be helpful in creating a more respectful and inclusive work environment for you and other Indigenous employees?"

c) Clearly state the company's stance on harassment, share the steps being taken and reiterate support and confidentiality. "We have a zero-tolerance policy...", "We are committed to addressing this matter seriously...", "You have our full support throughout this process".

d) Express empathy and validate her emotions. "Thank you for coming forward and sharing your concerns, Jade. It takes courage to speak up, and your feelings and experiences are valid." "I understand that being exposed to offensive comments can be hurtful and create a hostile work environment."

1 ____

2 ____

3 ____

4 ____

End of Section 4

How do you anticipate applying this knowledge to promote culturally safe and inclusive conversations about mental health and employee well-being?

You have reached the end of the Module