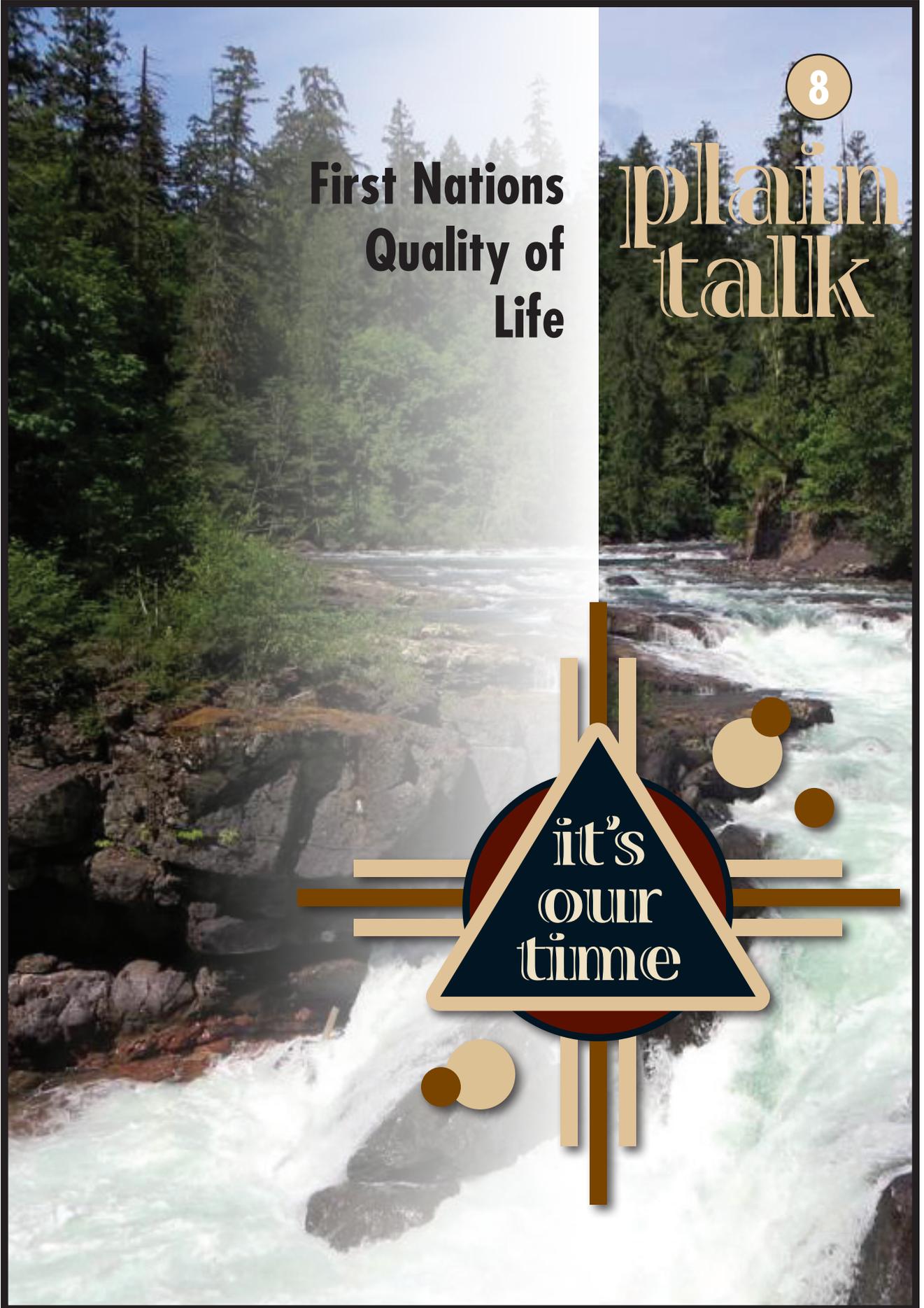


**First Nations
Quality of
Life**

**plain
talk**

**it's
our
time**



The phrase “Quality of Life” has become quite common, and is used in both formal and informal ways. The fact that there is no commonly accepted definition does not detract from its utility or usefulness.

Suppose we start by defining “Quality of Life” as the description of the experiences and activities that are part of the normal enjoyment of living. That is, quality of life is multidimensional. The next step would be to identify what those parts or categories are. We can then compare our own quality of life to the quality of life of others. This comparison can be made between individuals, families, societies, nations, or any other grouping you choose.

There are many possible ways to identify the possible dimensions of a quality of life. In an international context, nations could be compared according to the following dimensions:

- Material wellbeing
- Health
- Political stability and security
- Family life
- Community life
- Climate and geography
- Job security
- Political freedom
- Gender equality

Another approach looks at quality of life in terms of dimensions framed from a different perspective:

- metaphysics (self-esteem, self-determination, cognition, purpose, optimism, life satisfaction)
- spirituality (prayer, worship, fellowship, meaning)
- biology (functional capacity, physical comfort, health promotion, health maintenance)
- interpersonal relationships (social support, interpersonal dynamics, cultural dynamics)
- environmental factors (transportation, assistive devices, safety and aesthetics)
- social factors (socioeconomic status, one’s personal social system, the global societal system)

An important point about quality of life is that one person’s definition may be very different about someone else’s definition. For example, for one person, being connected to her culture is key to her quality of life. For someone else, having a successful career and making a decent income is important to her quality of life. For someone else, again, spending a lot of time with his family is a basic element of his quality of life.



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Because there is no uniform and consistent approach to describing the components of the concept of quality of life, First Nations can create their own framework. Suppose we identify the following aspects or components that contribute to the overall quality of life of First Nations:

1. Housing
2. Education
3. Health
4. Cultural Connection
5. Family
6. Employment
7. Language
8. Sports
9. Arts
10. Wellness

It's important to note that each of these contributors can affect quality of life by influencing any of the other contributors in the list. For example, limited education levels can have profound detrimental effects on employment prospects.

Using these categories or components, we can assemble whatever information is available to make some conclusions about First Nations quality of life. Some of the information is based on the results of a survey—First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS) 2008/10.

This list of contributors to First Nations quality of life is not exhaustive—it can be added to at any time to form a more complete picture of First Nations' evolving quality of life. The order of this list is random.

1. Housing

- First Nations are experiencing a housing crisis with approximately 85,000 housing units required across Canada. In many cases multiple families live in one and two bedroom homes.
- Almost half of the existing housing stock needs major repairs and another fifteen percent require outright replacement.
- About twenty-five percent of First Nations adults live in over-crowded housing, compared to less than ten percent of adults in the general Canadian population.
- Almost forty percent of First Nations adults report that their home is in need of major repairs.
- Of the 88,485 houses on-reserve, 5,486 are without sewage services.
- Mould and mildew contaminate half of all First Nation households.
- Over ten percent of First Nation communities have to boil their drinking water,

impacting about 75,000 citizens.

- More than one-third of First Nations adults do not consider their main water supply in their home to be safe for drinking year round.
- First Nations youth reported living in households with an average of about 6 people, compared to an average of about 3 people in the general Canadian household.

2. Education

- In 2006, sixty-one percent of First Nations young adults aged 20 to 24 had not completed high school, compared with thirteen percent of non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- About forty percent of First Nations adults did not graduate from high school.
- The K-12 completion rate for First Nations students living on-reserve is forty-nine percent.
- First Nations students are more likely to end up in jail than graduate from high school.
- There are 40 First Nations communities without schools, and there are First Nations communities where children haven't been to school in more than two years.
- First Nations students attending on-reserve schools are funded at a rate of \$3,000 to \$7,000 less than students attending other schools in Canada.
- Only five percent of First Nations adults report completing a university undergraduate, graduate or professional degree, compared to about twenty-three percent of the general Canadian population.

3. Health

- Tuberculosis among First Nation citizens living on-reserve is 31 times the national average.
- One in five First Nations is diabetic—that's three to five times the national average.
- Approximately twenty-five percent of on-reserve water treatment systems pose a high health risk.
- The life expectancy of First Nation citizens is five to seven years less than non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- Infant mortality rates are 1.5 times higher among First Nations.
- Twenty percent of First Nations adults reported cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals because there wasn't enough money for food.
- More than half of First Nations youth who reported fair or poor mental health had never received counseling or mental health services, suggesting a potentially high level of unmet needs.
- First Nations adults who were high school graduates were more mentally balanced and experienced less psychological distress than those who did not graduate.



4. Cultural Connection

- First Nations adults saw family values as the core of community life, followed by Elders and traditional ceremonial activities such as powwows.
- First Nations adults who participated in traditional activities such as hunting and trapping, fishing, hiking, canoeing or kayaking, snowshoeing, or berry picking or other food gathering were more likely to report physical or spiritual balance than were those who did not.
- Almost ninety percent of First Nations youth felt that traditional cultural events were “very important” or “somewhat important” in their life.
- First Nations youth who participated in cultural or extracurricular activities on a regular basis demonstrated increased levels of personal resource variables, such as self-esteem, social support, and mastery, and reported feeling balanced more often than First Nations youth who did not participate in such activities.
- Nearly half of all First Nations youth identified traditional ceremonial activities as a community strength.
- A third of youth identify schoolteachers as significant players in cultural transmission.
- In each of the four facets of well being—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual—about three-quarters of First Nations adults reported feeling balanced “most” or “all of the time.”
- Two-thirds of First Nations adults reported that they participated in community cultural events at least “sometimes.”
- More than half of First Nations youth reported learning culture from their grandparents.

5. Family

- First Nations children, on average, receive twenty-two percent less funding for child welfare services than other Canadian children.
- Over half of all First Nations youth identified family values as a community strength.
- Almost half of First Nations youth live with both of their biological parents; almost half live with their biological mother but not their biological father.
- In 2006, the average household income for First Nations living on-reserve was \$15,958, compared to \$36,000 (before taxes) for non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- One in four children in First Nations communities live in poverty. That’s almost double the national average.
- Almost half of First Nations children live in a household with an annual household income of less than \$20,000.
- Sixteen percent of First Nations adults struggle financially on a monthly or more basis to pay for food and transportation.
- Suicide rates among First Nation youth are five to seven times higher than young non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- There are almost 600 unresolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.

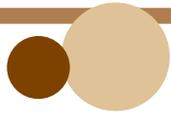
- First Nations adults with greater ability in their First Nations language had contemplated and attempted suicide less often than those with less ability in their First Nations language.
- Self-esteem, self-mastery, and social support were generally high among First Nations youth and were associated with a range of positive outcomes in various aspects of wellness.

6. Employment

- First Nations people living on-reserve have the lowest labour force participation rate (52%) of any Aboriginal group, compared to 67% for non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- In 2006, the unemployment rate for First Nation people living on-reserve was twenty-five percent—approximately three times the rate for non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- Canada will face a labour shortage by 2017 as baby-boomers retire and there are fewer workers to replace them.
- With more than half of the First Nation population under the age of 23, First Nations youth can fill this gap.

7. Language

- Severe funding shortages create barriers for community members to teach, learn, use, and maintain their languages.
- The proportion of First Nations adults who reported that First Nations language is the language they use most in daily life increased from 2002 to 2010.
- More than two-thirds of First Nations adults reported being able to understand or speak a First Nations language.
- More than one-third of First Nations adults used a First Nations language daily.
- The proportion of adults who understand and speak a First Nations language increases with age.
- More than one-fifth of First Nations youth used a First Nations language in their daily life, and the majority understood or spoke a First Nations language.
- More than three-quarters of First Nations youth felt that it was either “very important” or “somewhat important” to learn a First Nations language.
- A majority of youth aged 12 to 17 years old indicated that it was very important or somewhat important to learn a First Nations language and that grandparents and parents helped them the most to understand their culture.
- Almost half of all First Nations children were reported to be able to speak or understand a First Nations language.
- Having First Nations children learn a First Nations language and participate in cultural activities are highly valued by primary caregivers.
- Family members were the primary transmitter of culture for First Nations children, supported by community members like Elders, friends, and teachers.



8. Sports

A number of First Nations individuals have demonstrated their athletic prowess and serve as role models for First Nations youth and contribute to their motivation and quality of life. For example, the Iroquois Nationals have captured the world's attention by demonstrating their skill, power and success in Lacrosse. First Nations sports role models include:

- **Fred Sasakamoose**, the first Aboriginal and Treaty Cree person to play for the National Hockey League as a Chicago Blackhawk in 1953-1954.
- **Reggie Leach**, the first First Nations (Ojibway) player to reach super-star status, playing 14 seasons in the NHL.
- More information about prominent First Nations athletes is available in Plain Talk 17: Role Models.

9. Arts

A number of First Nations individuals have demonstrated their creative abilities as musicians, actors, writers, painters and playwrights. Their energy and talent serve as role models for First Nations youth and contribute to their motivation and quality of life. First Nations role models in the arts include:

- **Adam Beach, Lake Manitoba First Nation**, actor, producer and political activist.
- **Norval Morrisseau, Ojibway**, a grand shaman and a great artist known as Copper Thunderbird and the Picasso of the North.
- **Daphne Odjig, Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve**, honoured and renowned artist.
- More information about these and other prominent First Nations artists is available in **Plain Talk 17: Role Models**.

10. Wellness

The concept of wellness refers to the condition or state of the four traditional indigenous dimensions of personal development: mental (mind), physical (body), emotional (emotion), and spiritual (spirit).

Wellness can be affected by all the components that contribute to quality of life. For example, poor housing can have a negative effect on one's physical and mental wellness. On the other hand, strong cultural connection can have a very positive influence on one's emotional and spiritual wellness.

Wellness can also be affected by the presence or absence of the different types of skills, knowledge, and attitudes in the following competencies:

- Literacy: the ability to read, write, understand written and verbal communication, and use information to function effectively in the contemporary world;
- Numeracy: the ability to use numbers;
- Problem solving: the capacity to understand, deal with and resolve new situations;
- Physicality: the capacity to move effectively in a wide variety of physical activities;
- Media literacy: the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and understand the ways television, radio, commercials, advertising, and news programs can manipulate and influence the way we behave. A person who is media literate is informed;
- Financial literacy: the capacity to manage money and make confident and responsible financial decisions;
- Health literacy: the capacity to find and use health information to maintain and improve basic health;
- Nutritional literacy: the capacity to understand the importance of good nutrition in maintaining and improving basic health;
- Meditation:
 - Meditation is a mental exercise that involves focusing on the inside rather than the outside. That is, focusing on thinking rather than on what's around you.
 - Meditation has been practiced by people all over the world for thousands of years.
 - There are religious and spiritual foundations of meditation in all religions. For example, prayer in Christianity is a form of meditation. Meditation appears to be a beneficial practice with or without a religious or spiritual context.
 - Research has looked at the potential benefits of meditation. The data are not always clear, but there is evidence that meditation produces reduction in stress and blood pressure, improvement in type 2 diabetes, improved blood glucose and insulin levels, and reduced absenteeism and improved academic performance in students.
 - A number of studies have pointed to the benefits of meditation for First Nations adults and youth.
 - Many First Nations people have found that meditation plays an important role in their quality of life.
 - Lots of information about meditation is available in print and on the internet: information about meditation techniques and methods, the role of meditation in different world religions, and guidelines for building meditation into one's lifestyle.
 - Try to meditate for about 15 minutes once or twice a day, at a time that is best for you, with relative quiet and few distractions.
 - A generic guideline for meditating:
Sit in a comfortable position with the back straight and without back support, in a quiet environment.

Close your eyes and try to relax.

Pick a phrase or a word as your "anchor," repeat the anchor to yourself, silently— if you find yourself thinking about something other than the anchor, go back to



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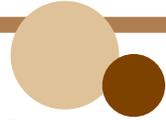
repeating the anchor silently. Or, instead, think about relaxing all of your muscles starting at your neck, through your shoulders, and working your way down to your feet. Or be aware of your breathing or the beating of your heart.

Whenever you find your mind wandering (and it will happen), go back to your method (anchor, muscle relaxing, focus on breathing, or any other device you pick).

The data about First Nations' quality of life indicate that a number of conditions adversely affect the quality of life of individuals, families and communities. First Nations citizens face much higher rates of chronic and communicable diseases and are exposed to greater health risks because of poor housing, higher unemployment, and contaminated water. At the current rate, it will take two decades to close the education gap between First Nations and other Canadians. We can and must do better!

At the same time, the data indicate that connection with their culture and their language promotes and strengthens quality of life, especially among the youth.

The future of Canada depends on strong First Nations. If we close the education, housing and employment gap and support cultural connection and First Nations language use among First Nations, First Nations workers would add \$400 billion to Canada's GDP by 2026 and Canada would save \$115 billion in government expenditures.



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*Grown men can learn from very little children
for the hearts of little children are pure.
Therefore, the Great Spirit may show to them
many things which older people miss.
Black Elk*

