



## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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### EPISODE 12

#### **Adapting to COVID-19: Reflections on staying connected to traditions and ceremonies during a pandemic**

In this episode, Dr. James Makokis, proud Cree and member of the Saddle Lake First Nation, shares ideas about how Indigenous people can stay connected to their Elders and traditions while respecting public health guidelines on social distancing. He also offers thoughts about how ceremonial practices may need to adapt, moving forward, to ensure the continued health and safety of Indigenous people and communities during this pandemic.

#### BIO



[Dr. James Makokis](#) is a proud Cree from the Saddle Lake First Nation in Northern Alberta. A leader and well-known expert within the Indigenous, LGBTQ2 and medical community, Dr. Makokis holds a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Food Sciences, a Master of Health Science in Community Nutrition and a Doctorate in Medicine. He currently serves on several boards including the [Waakebiness-Bryce Institute for Indigenous Health](#) at the University of Toronto, and McEwan University's Indigenous Advisory Council. In 2007, Dr. Makokis was the recipient of the National Aboriginal Achievement Special Youth Award. Most recently, he and his partner, Anthony Johnson, were crowned the Season 7 winners the Amazing Race Canada.

#### TRANSCRIPT

**Rick Harp** - Dr. Makokis, while we all know there are specific guidelines around social distancing, can you talk about some ways that Indigenous people can stay in touch with Elders and traditions during COVID-19.

**Dr. Makokis** - Yes, of course. I think that we are fortunate to have many ways to be able to do this today with varying degrees of technology and things like that. I think young people were doing this with Elders even before COVID came over here to Turtle Island, as they work to maintain our languages, our traditions, our songs, and all of those things that we need to stay healthy in our communities and our nation. I'll just give an example for myself. Training to be a doctor, I had to be away from home for 13 years and it was difficult to maintain those connections. So what I did was, thankfully, was able to record Elders and their teachings and their songs, a lot of the songs that we need to have our ceremonies. I really recognize that without young people taking on that initiative, there is potential for losing those things. Thankfully, those Elders were very kind in allowing me to do that. So a long time ago, how knowledge was translated was with storytelling and a

lot of the time it was in the winter time with telling us our *âcimôwin*, our legend or our spirit teaching story in our *mikawap*, our tipi. We can still do that today even though we don't live in those anymore. I am also a long distance trail runner, or marathoner, and would have to be out running for 3-4 hours at a time and I would listen to these recordings, these songs, and it would bring me back to being in that person's living room and everything that they'd said and everything that they'd shared, much like how a long time ago people learned by hearing a song over and over and over again, in a tipi. I could just press repeat and listen to that same song, in that same way, over and over again so that I could learn it when I came back home and that needed to be sang or shared. I could do that and it felt really good and I think that is what young people, when we are looking at learning and maintaining our culture, being able to that and contribute back to our society. Even when we're away from our Elders, as with COVID right now, that we still have the independence to carry those on if we need to. I think that is a teaching as well, that we're learning from COVID-19, that even though we're away from our teachers and our knowledge holders, it's encouraging us to be independent, to continue what they've taught us and carry that forward. You can still connect with them, whether it's on Face Time or texting or all the different methods that we have to be able to connect with our Elders. They all have iPhones or grandkids with technology. It's a different medium for us to use which really signals our flexibility as a people, how we've always adapted.

You can still go outside with them and physically distance from your teacher. We have four moose hides in our freezer that we just have never had time to work on. Now we have that time that we're at home and we're planning to set up our stretchers for our moose hide. Anthony and I will be on one moose hide and then a certain distance away, some of our friends will be working on their moose hide... they're from the same family. If one of our Elder teachers wants to come and inspect, they can also come in and still teach us while being at a distance as well, so you can still continue to take those things on. We just have to take extra efforts to be cautious about how we do those things now.

**Rick Harp** - Dr. Makokis, can you comment on any harm reduction strategies that Indigenous people may want to consider during this pandemic regarding ceremonial practices?

**Dr. Makokis** - I think we need to be very cautious when it comes to gathering together during the next summer months and really we need to learn about what has happened in other places where we have other relatives. For example, the Navajo nation has as many cases of COVID as the province of Alberta. The province of Alberta has about 3 million people. The Navajo Nation, I believe, has about 100,000 people living on there. We see the devastation that is happening to our relatives there and part of that, which has been in the media, was because people were still, unfortunately, gathering and that helps spread COVID amongst the community. In terms of harm reduction strategies, our people have always been open to new ways, not new ways of doing things, but adapting as we've needed to, and if we just reflect on what's happened in the past, for our people, what is very real in the memories and minds of people who go to ceremonies, or traditional people, is the ban that there was on our ceremonies as imposed by the Indian Act and federal legislation which, if our people conducted and carried out those ceremonies, they'd be put in jail and imprisoned. So it is a very sensitive issue for our people right now. Certainly, there are some jurisdictions that have put bans on those, across the country.

I think we need to reflect about the creativity of our people. So some of the stories that I reflect on, and teachings that have been shared in the past during the time of ceremonial bans, is the creativity that our people had. My grandfather lived in the mountains, away from all of that, all of the Indian agents, and would run into the bush and hide when they were coming. He'd be told. What they did, at that time, to maintain their ways, was having a sweat, a *matôisân*; they would build that inside of their tipi. They did that so if an Indian agent came, he couldn't see inside their home but they'd be having a sweat inside of there to continue our ways and praying and connecting, maintaining that important part of our life and livelihood. That was really under the threat of a military imposition of external law on our people that caused those changes to

happen but they adapted so they would carry them forward into the future. The same thing with some of the sun dances on the prairie, they are actually shortened in some places and they still continue to do that and they were shortened because they couldn't have the full ceremony. It would be too long to be able to do that if the Indian agent came and so they shortened that. You kind of wonder why, as a younger person, some of these things are done and when you understand the history behind how our people have been affected, they were always creative and always adapted to those situations. Those are some of the teachings that I reflect on and in terms of today, we also need to be adapting and flexible in the things that we do. If we were to have a sweat at my house, for example, I would encourage it to be just the people that live in our house.

The thing about this virus is people can carry it asymptotically for up to 14 days, which is a long time if you think back to what you were doing 12 days ago. I'm sure most of us couldn't remember that, let alone 3 days ago. So during that time, you can pick it up and not show symptoms and we bring it to a place where there's many of our loved ones and our Elders and ceremonial leaders that we could give it to them unknowingly. That is something that we have to take very serious because our Elders and our traditional medicine people are so important to us, as is everybody in our communities, especially our children and we want to protect those people that are the most vulnerable because we need them. We need that knowledge to continue on, to be transmitted to young people. I see, in the past, how other communities have adapted their ceremonies. I think of some of the piercing sun dances in the prairies, they've adopted harm reduction strategies and the people who are doing the piercing use a new scalpel and they use new gloves with each person that they're going to be piercing. I think that is good. I think that it shows a real understanding for the present situation that we're living with in terms of preventing the transmission of blood borne illness, in that case, like Hepatitis B or HIV. We have this knowledge now that we know about some of these things and they didn't exist in the past. We didn't need to make those changes in the past but the reality of our situation is that Indigenous people, for various reasons due to colonization, social sicknesses due to colonization and social disparities, are over represented in many of these illnesses, the particular instances of HIV and Hepatitis B, for example. So if those changes aren't made, then there is the potential for people who go there for help to go away from that gathering with an illness that they otherwise might not have had.

In terms of COVID, I think there are some solutions that are possible in a harm reduction way to prevent the spread within our communities and to other communities. We know that when we come together in ceremony, we all come together in a good way but we come from many different places across the land. So a ceremony can be in Treaty 6 but people come from Treaty 7, Treaty 8, Treaty 4, Treaty 3 to support, which is so beautiful, then they go back to their communities. We've been really fortunate in our First Nations reserve to have very few cases so far and part of the reason [for] that is our leaders have been very proactive in securing our borders to band members only, community members only, essential health workers and social service providers because we know what has happened in the past with previous pandemics. We have to continue with that same vigilance as we continue understanding about COVID-19 and the potential devastating effects that it can have on our people into the second wave, as that comes, and into the third wave. We can still have some of these but we have to do things differently or we have to consider how to do things differently. It can mean extra work. Some of the things I've been thinking about around this is, as I said, many of the communities have been closed. One solution might be that if people are going to come from outside the community, and where the community has been closed to outsiders, is asking them maybe to come in 14 days before and stay with their family in their area only and not interacting with other people then after the gathering and going home, self-isolating again for 14 days. Within the actual gathering, making consideration for not sharing certain items or instruments like that. You can quickly see how much extra work and planning that would take to go into that. There are options for people if they wanted to continue doing these because of their commitment, and that there are ways of going around that. Many Indigenous physicians and Indigenous health workers are grounded in our own teachings as well. We do follow that way of life and it's important for us to all work together to ensure the safety and well-being of all of our people

and our nation. So what this is teaching us is that no nation is immune to this and we all have to be cautious to protect all members within our nation because any loss due to COVID-19 is too great.

**Rick Harp** - Dr. Makokis, thank you.

**Dr. Makokis** - Yes. Thank you so much for having me on today. Have a good day.

**Rick Harp** - To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the *Voices from the Field* on the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, [nccih.ca](http://nccih.ca). Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. Learn more at [www.sessions.blue](http://www.sessions.blue)

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National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health  
(NCCIH)  
3333 University Way  
Prince George, British Columbia  
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tel: (250) 960-5250  
Email: [nccih@unbc.ca](mailto:nccih@unbc.ca)  
Web: [nccih.ca](http://nccih.ca)

Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé autochtone  
(CCNSA)  
3333 University Way  
Prince George, Colombie-Britannique  
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tél : 250 960-5250  
Courriel : [ccnsa@unbc.ca](mailto:ccnsa@unbc.ca)  
Site web : [ccnsa.ca](http://ccnsa.ca)

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