The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS network (CAAN) talks about doing research ‘in a good way’, but what does that mean?

Simply put, doing research ‘in a good way’ means that the research is conducted respectfully and benefits the community as a whole, as well as the individuals who live in the community, but let’s unpack this a little more …

How we conduct our research is just as important as what our research produces, so it is important to listen, ask questions, and be mindful of our actions. Doing research in a good way involves decolonizing our research process and incorporating the strengths of both Indigenous and western knowledge systems. Research done in a good way should start with relationship building and meaningful dialogue to learn about the worldviews, principles and protocols of the communities in partnership. The knowledge that we share should be respected and used to guide our process.

All research projects take time—some are done in a year, some are not wrapped up for five years. Some research projects continue even longer. It is a big commitment to join a research team; a commitment of time, a commitment to the community you are working with, and to the other research team members who have come together to contribute their skills, experience and knowledge to answering the questions set out by the community.

Relationship and relational accountability are at the very heart of the phrase “doing research in a good way”. Doing research in a good way is about being mindful that as researchers, we are choosing to embark on a journey with community and with other members of the research team. We follow on the heels of other researchers who did work with the community before us. Their past actions will influence how we are treated by the community, and we must be mindful of this. We need to remember that our actions through the course of our research project will impact and influence those who come after us, and so we must conduct ourselves accordingly.
Community-Based Research (CBR) allows us to do research in a good way as community collaboration, direction, participation and commitment are essential components of the approach. CBR must have active community involvement in all aspects of the research process; be relevant to the community and provide information that is directly useful to the community in which it takes place; practice equity in partnership where all partners have an equal voice in the research process; activities follow scientifically accepted research standards; and ethical guidelines are met to ensure that research participants are not harmed by any aspect of the research process.

CAAN and the AHA Centre not only see research as an academic process that helps us to answer important questions while bringing positive change to our communities; we also see research as a sacred undertaking that helps to show us connections between the spiritual and physical worlds. Elders have a special role to play in our understanding of knowledge transmission and Indigenous worldviews and so we are always sure to invite Elders to our research teams to share their wisdom, knowledge and ceremonial guidance. We also see ourselves as being in ceremony with one another for the duration of the research project. By treating research as a ceremonial practice, we can use Indigenous epistemological knowledge to guide us and decolonize the research process.

Ultimately, “research done in a good way” will:

- Follow principles of relationality and relational accountability
- Address a need identified by the community
- Bring about positive change to the community
- Be community controlled
- Create opportunities to learn, to grow, develop skills, and create meaningful work
- Privilege community voice and community decision making
- Ensure that tradition is inclusive, not exclusive
- Honour physical, spiritual, mental and emotional aspects of all people who engage with the research process
- Practice experiential learning
- Not do harm to the community, to the research participants, or to the research team members
- Acknowledge relationships which include kinship, non-interference
- Value the role of Elders – provide guidance, grounded in traditional teachings
- Value all ways of knowing

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