

Krysta Williams - Full interview transcript

I think the first thing that people often need to hear and want to hear is that you're not alone. You have community and other family members who have experienced similar things, who have gone through this before and that we are trying to build networks of support; that there are supports out there. It might take some time to find the right ones for you but that you aren't alone and you will have people who will get your back and who are willing to support you.

I think a lot of times we are told that we shouldn't trust our guts, that we don't know what's right or that we don't have the expertise or experience or knowledge necessary to know if something's gone wrong. I think I want to say what I know from experience is to trust your gut if you feel that somebody that you love and care about, that something's wrong or that they're in trouble or that something isn't regular in their life. Maybe you haven't heard from them and that's not like them, so trust that above anything that police or anybody else might tell you. It can be really hard to trust your instincts when we are told constantly in many different ways that we are wrong or that there is something wrong with us and I think a lot of times we want to tell people it's ok to trust your gut instinct, it's ok to say maybe I don't have the information but I have a feeling or I have a sense that something's wrong and I want to do something about that and to trust that instinct and go with that. It won't always be easy and we get told a lot as Indigenous peoples that there's something wrong with us or that we're the problem, but often our instincts are accurate and they do tell us when something's wrong or something's off and we need to act.

I think the police are just one avenue. We're often told, and we see in the media so much, that they're the only answer but they're not. Your family, your friends your extended relatives, anybody you're connected to or that you are in community with, those are also options, those are also people that we can go to for support. People we can also say to 'I think something's wrong' and 'I want to do something about it'. So yes, the police are one option and sometimes in a lot of communities they're the only option, but don't forget that you also have so many people around you and so many other family members that have gone through this and who are here to say that that's not the only option and we are here to create more options.

If you are going to the police and they are saying that you need to wait longer or that they don't have enough information - that's when you need to start building your team of support yourself. If you feel like you are the only person who you feel has this information or knows something is wrong, start reaching out to people that you trust and to maybe mutual acquaintances and friends (that the person that you are concerned about also trusts) and try and get some information. Try and start setting up, taking as much information as you can about the current circumstances like where they were last seen, what was there last encounter like, who were they last seen with etc.

So when you first notice that's something's wrong this is where you really get to take control of the narrative. You're telling the story - so start compiling your own information about what you know to be true and what you would like other people to know about the circumstances. It's really important that you do this early on because people are going to be looking for details and information, whether it's the police, media, other family members, friends, people that you are trying to contact to get support etc. You want to make sure that you're telling them the same information and that everyone's on the same page about what they're doing and what's been going.

Messaging - carrying your story

Any information you can get establishing a time line or figuring out what's been going on in their lives in the last 24 hours and what made you think something was wrong. You don't always have to focus on that but if it's helpful for you to understand for yourself when did you first notice that something was off and why and how does that fit in to the larger story that you want people to know.

There may be details that you want to keep private or that you want to keep to yourself and details that you are comfortable sharing with other people so have a conversation with yourself or with somebody you trust about how you want your information to be disseminated or put out to other people and think critically about that. Remember, we don't always have control about how information gets spread so really think carefully about the kind of information that you want out there about the person you care about.

Dealing with the media

Media is a very tricky situation and can be a bit of a double edged sword meaning it can be both a good thing it help you connect with people it can help gather resources, get support, sometimes it's the only way people get information particularly social media but it also has the potential to be harmful. It has the potential to get details wrong to tell the wrong story or to be very harsh on the victim or on the person who is missing.

We know that mainstream media likes to blame people for the circumstances that they're in or the choices that they've made or the oppression that they face and so mainstream media can be really challenging to deal with. Many people deal with it in different ways from doing all of the interviews themselves, or designating an advocate or a spokesperson.

You can also screen who does your media. You can ask questions of the journalist or the person asking questions about why they want to do the story, what information are they looking for and for what purpose. You have a right to control the narrative about this person and you have a right to say no. I think a lot of times I've seen people feel very

coerced by the media because maybe they feel like it's the only option or the only way to get information out and they have to compromise maybe their privacy or safety or feelings of security in order to get that information out there and that doesn't have to be the case. You can absolutely advocate for yourself, get other people onboard and say this is the kind of message that I want to come across and can you repeat that. Let's be on the same page, let's say the same things you don't have to answer every single question.

Media will try to get people to say things on camera, off camera, in audio and in print or they might even misquote you - all of those things might happen but you can have a very specific core message that you are clear about which is hard to do. This can be very challenging when you are dealing with a very upsetting situation, when you are grieving or when you think you may have lost somebody and you're spiralling it can be very hard. Whatever tools you have at your disposal to stay grounded, to stay centred, to stay on topic, use it and use the supports that are around you if you feel comfortable. You have a right to say 'you know what, I don't want to do interviews' and hand it over to somebody else. Be sure to have conversations with them off camera or beforehand to practice what they're going to say and know that you don't have to answer questions, so if someone is asking you questions and you don't feel comfortable answering, you don't have to. You can just repeat your own message and take back control.

Reaching out for support

I think once you've established some of that information and figured out with other family member or friends that you want involved (knowing that there's all kinds of dynamics with families and with extended relatives especially in times of crisis) but we do the best we can with what we have. Once you've kind of figured out what it actually is that you want to say and really thinking about what are you using social media for. Are you reaching out for support around being in crisis or grieving or dealing with a loss? Or are you disseminating information? Are you trying to get people in your social network who you know to share a poster or to share information? Are you soliciting for information or are you asking people 'have you seen my friend? Have you seen this person?'. Try to really be clear about what you're doing which might be all of those things but knowing what it is that you are using it for because not everybody uses social media in the same way.

We all use it (social media) for different things. It has different purposes, maybe we have different groups of people on different parts of our friends list. Some people use it for work, some people use it to stay in touch with family when they're far away. Some people just use it for fun and so really thinking about not just using social media as a catch all but thinking about directly contacting people who you know and want to make sure see that information. The important thing to keep in mind also especially with things like facebook is it's not guaranteed that the people you want to see the information, actually will. So if that means directly calling, messaging, asking other people to directly

share and post it is really important so you're getting it to the people that you want it to go to.

Going to Court

So court processes are extremely awful. They can be very retraumatizing, they can induce feelings of grief and crisis and loss all over again. A lot of family members describe it as a repetition, a continuous cycle of having to live over again and again the worst moments, whether it was in the last year or the last 20 years. Preparing as much support as possible and deciding for yourself what components of a court process are important for you or for other family members to be engaged in. Some people want to go to every single date and be present and be in the courtroom so that court officials or the perpetrator (if they're going to be there) see the face of the people who this has impacted. Some people just want somebody to be there to report back to them because they can't be in the court room themselves, either because of things like physical location, a lot of times court is not in the same place that you live.

One of the things to also think about in terms of court support is which parts of it do you want to be there for. Some of them are very procedural. The important thing to think about is how are you getting information about which court dates are actually important to you for different reasons. Some of it may be logistical, or may be just formalities that the court has to go through about scheduling (which you may want to be there for or may be you don't need to be there for) so getting as much information as you can about what the purpose is for each date and making an informed decision for yourself about when you would like to be there or when you just want someone to be there, some form of support. Definitely ask community members or other people who may not have been connected to the person but who could maybe provide some people to be in the room.

One of the strategies that families have used is calls for court support. If there is a date that feels meaningful whether they are actually discussing the case or both the prosecution and the defence are going to be there, maybe the perpetrator is going to be there, if it's a public showing you can ask people to show up. You can ask people to be there in support either outside or inside the court room to make your presence known, especially the prosecution know, that community is watching and this isn't just another case that's going to get swept under the rug. That kind of public pressure and that kind of media attention can, and sometimes does, change the course of somebody's case. It can and does influence judges in their decisions and we've seen this in a few cases and a few family members have experienced this.

It can also be a process of or a way of processing the grief and the loss that's happened. A way to see things through or a way to simply get more information. Sometimes family members are even coming across information that they didn't know in the court room, so in that case it's really important to have support people there people who are here just for

you, just to actively listen to you and get you a coffee or a tissue when you need it. You really don't need to feel ashamed to ask for that kind of support because it is a very intense process a lot of people have mixed feelings about it.

It's ok to want to be there (or not) or to feel good about the court process (or not) even if you have other misgivings or other negative feelings about it. Often times your feelings or opinions about it may change over time since court processes take so long, maybe even years so knowing that this is something you are going to be in for the long haul. I think a lot of families are seeking closure from justice processes and so that's not always the case that closure might come from other things, it might not come at all it's a very personalized journey that depends on you and the family and the person that's involved about what it is that you need from this process.

Accessing or creating support

Depending on your region, you might hear from family members and advocates from coast to coast who have different experiences about the types of services that were available to them in their area. The types of services that they accessed and the types of supports that they had to build themselves, so really thinking about what's available to you and not excluding any options – try and see how it goes. You might have a good experience with a particular staff member, maybe you have a bad one. Ask for what you need, ask if they have experience supporting Indigenous families, ask what types of experience they have in the type of trial that you are facing. Definitely ask questions and advocate and ask them what their role is, what are they really there to do, can they be in touch with you once a week, every day, are they going to be able to show up to every single court case – is it going to be the same worker? Really those logistical questions about really what can they do and that can prevent a lot of the disappointment that families some times feel when they thought that victim services were going to be there for them and then may be they had expectations that weren't being met or the victim services people themselves were unclear about what they could do. Sometimes shifts are changed over time because of case load or other factors so don't put all your eggs in one basket, seek out support wherever you can get it and don't be afraid to ask questions and have very clear guidelines about what people can and can't do for you and be as clear as you can about that.

Oftentimes the one thing you can ask victim services to do is explain the court proceedings these are often in highly legal terms that are very inaccessible to the majority of the public. Ask them directly to explain what does this procedure mean, what is the judge saying or what is the prosecution or the defence doing, what is the purpose of this hearing etc. There can be a lot of confusion and a lot of very intense legal proceedings where you may not understand what is going on and what they're saying because they're not speaking in plain terms. Knowing if the perpetrator going to be there or is it going to be their lawyer(s)? Really thinking about when that's happening. The other important

thing to think about is making statements to the court. If you have to make an impact statement or you're doing a victim impact statement, thinking about how that's going to happen. Are you going to submit that in written terms? Do you want to read that in court? Knowing there are rules around what you can and can't say in court and you might actually have to revise your statement which doesn't always feel good and doesn't always feel consensual.

Roles, responsibilities and relationships

Think about what your role is depending on whether you are a direct family member, extended family, maybe you were very close and best friends with the victim but you're not blood family and so there might be complications with how people recognize you or how people see you. Part of that and is being able to assert your position and your relationship to this person through your actions and how you're able to support other people or how you're able to gather community support. It all counts, it's all important that as many people are involved as possible and give their input into these processes so that they can get what they need.

This kind of grief affects everybody who knew the person even remotely and even some times we get to know them in death. We get to know our extended community our extended relatives because they died or because they're missing or because something awful has happened and that's unfortunately a normal experience that we don't need to feel ashamed about that in the process a lot of times we feel survivor guilt or we feel like we could have done more or that we could have prevented something from happening.

Think carefully about who's shown up for them in their life, whose shown up for them when they were around, when they weren't gone or when they weren't missing, who was there supporting them day to day and making sure that those folks are also present in those proceedings. It may not always be biological family that takes precedent. While the courts or police or other service providers may place biological family members as the most important people to be there, we know that extended family, street family, chosen family all of those things, friends who become family, urban community all of these things are extremely important. Those are the people that are there day to day supporting somebody and also need to be front and centre and who also need to be included in these processes. They are often able to rally different kinds of support that maybe a biological family wasn't around for or wasn't able to do. Keeping in mind that we have complex histories of all kinds of trauma, grief, loss in our communities that affect how we connect to one another so keeping in mind that as you're going through those court proceedings that may not be acknowledged and that might be really hard but knowing that everybody who knows somebody whose gone through this is affected.

What is justice - getting what you need

I think asking people directly what doesn't make sense or what they are not understanding is important because there may be parts that are clear for them. It ranges and it's different from person to person, you almost have to get a full legal education sometimes to understand court proceedings and to understand whose in the room, how do you know who the defence lawyer is, who the prosecution is? A lot of the times they are not even in direct contact with the family member. They might only be dealing with the police, they might only be dealing with one person, one designated representative and once they get the information that they need, they may not be in touch again and may not be able to disclose or discuss aspects of the case as it's ongoing. That can be really frustrating knowing who are the players, what are their roles, what can and can't they do in terms of talking about the case as it's ongoing. How is a court room set up, what are some of the terminologies that they use, what does it all mean, what's the purpose of each hearing and why is it called the way it's called.

Understanding role of the crown

One thing that was interesting to think about particularly in colonial systems is that it's not just a family member or a person whose been harmed versus the person who harmed them – there is actually the role of the prosecution or the crown. Their job is actually just to defend the law right they are there to uphold the law, they're there to decide whether or not laws have been broken and to prove what those laws have been broken and which ones – they're not there for the family, they're not there for the victim, they're not there for the perpetrator. They are literally just there to uphold the law and colonial law not our own laws or governance systems. The colonial Canadian charter of rights and freedoms specifically. Similarly, the defence is there for the perpetrator, they're there to make sure that their rights are protected, that they have some sort of defence strategy to disprove as much as they can what the crown is saying. A lot of times family members will feel disconnected from the court proceedings - feeling like they don't matter or they're treated like it's just their stories and their testimony that are being used for and they are otherwise not connected to the proceedings and unfortunately that is actually the case.

Showing up to support

There's actually a lot of ways that community can come together to support somebody through a time of crisis, grief and loss. Maybe you've been to or you've seen on the news all of the rallies, vigils, ceremony, court support all of these very visible public things that we can do to show support for family members of people who have gone missing or who have been murdered. One of the things to think about in that case is your positionality. Who are you in relation to either missing or murdered Indigenous people generally or a particular family in your region or community so who are you? are you a community member? are you a friend? are you a family member? are you somebody that knew the

victim? Are you somebody that knew the person who was harmed? And what's your location? Where are you in the community? So really thinking about your self and where you're at in relation to the people.

Knowing what you need

When it comes to thinking about community support as a family member, think about who you want around, what it is that you need. What are the things going on in your life that you need help with right now, and maybe what are some dates or some things coming up in the near future that you could ask the wider public or the greater community to support you in. A lot of people want to support, they want to show you that you're not alone, that you are cared for and that the person that was harmed that you are thinking about or looking for or going to court for - they want to show some way that they care and they're involved. Think critically about how you want people to be involved in your life, how you want people to be involved in the life of this person that you're thinking about or that you're mobilizing around. One of the ways to think about it are start with your immediate needs, do you have food, housing, childcare? Are you getting your basic needs met? And thinking about who in the community would be good for that.

Other supports and creating your own

Are there traditional people that can offer cultural supports? Are there young people that could offer to hang out with your kids? Or extended family members? Are there really good cooks? People you could ask to bring over food or is that something that your community always does around loss. Think about what are the patterns and things that people are already used to doing that you can access. When you're thinking about your immediate needs, thinking also about planning. If you're in crisis right now and just looking for support right now making sure that you have your basic needs met, that should be the first thing on peoples' minds. However if you're in this for the long haul or if you've been doing this for many years really thinking about what do you need in terms of those basic needs supports. Do you need housing? Do you need longer term care? How's your health being affected? All of these areas might seem really overwhelming but if you can get a support team and different people handling different things with you and with your consent and making good agreements with them it can help you to delegate and offload some of those really big responsibilities and make things feel less overwhelming.

Think broader once you've got those basic needs and your care team in place. What are some other things you can delegate? What are some dates coming up? Do you want to participate in some of the larger vigils or movement building activities? Community mobilizations that you see happen across the country? How do you want to participate? Do you want to be in the background helping? Or are you ready to talk about your experience and what you've gone through? Do you have other people that can advocate

for you or who know you better? Who would know what you are comfortable with and who would actually honour your self determination (as in would they honour agreements)? Would they do things without your permission or would they check in with you first? Really making sure that you have people around you that are in it for the same reasons you are and are there to support you.

You have to be the primary objective so in thinking about participating in community rallies in vigils things like that, try and get a sense of the organizers, try and think about their past events: what is the tone been? Why are they gathering? Are they gathering around ceremony? Is that something that you are comfortable with? Have you engaged in ceremony or cultural activities before? Would you like to? These are all questions that are going to come up as you're thinking about how you want to participate and what other people could do to support you.

Keep in mind lots of people want to show support and want to be involved because they have their own feelings or their own experiences of grief and loss that they're looking to deal with. So keeping in mind the difference between somebody supporting you interpersonally, maybe somebody you can call every once in a while and have a chat and just process your grief together, versus a community member maybe you know will be at events or who has a really good media analysis or you know has a particular skill that you could utilize. You can ask different things of different people and that's ok. Really try and get to know and use your relationships as much as possible and build new ones too. You're going to meet lots of different people, maybe people you have never met before but they may have been involved in this issue or they may have been organizing around this issue for a long time. Use their knowledge and expertise, ask questions, ask them how other family members that they know or they've supported have dealt with something. Knowing that your strategies might be different or your needs might be different and that's ok but getting as much information from your community and from people who have been doing this a long time is a really great place to start.

Movement building - you're not alone

In terms of ways that you can get involved or you can plug into the larger movement there are so many things going on, there are so many things to choose from when it comes to how you want to connect with other family members. One of those examples is a really amazing commemorative art installation that's been travelling around the US and Canada called Walking With Our Sisters. This is a really great opportunity and ceremony for families to participate in that goes to different regions and is really a massive gathering place for family members, community and many other people to not only learn about this issue but gain healing, to be able to process grief and trauma and engage in culturally specific ways of honouring people who are missing and murdered.

Some of the other things that family members in different regions have done is traditional feasts and gatherings. Think about who else in your area could you work with who has maybe experienced the same thing since often times these are not isolated cases. This type of violence unfortunately is very normal for our communities so how can we gather together to honour the fact that this violence shouldn't be normal but also build our own support together so that can happen in lots of different ways and thinking about in your community, in your region what is it that people do when they want to honour, when they want to uplift and when they want to heal what is it that they do? And start asking. It's ok if you haven't done this before. It's ok if you have never gone to a ceremonial gathering before, you can still participate and is also an opportunity for that healing to happen.

It Starts With Us

One of the collaborations that's been really important in this movement is It Starts With Us and it's called that for a very specific reason – one of the really amazing parts of ISWU is an opportunity for families to build living tributes. What this can mean is gathering together information, stories, photos of your loved one compiling them in a way to show the public not only just who they were in death or who they were in their disappearance or at the time of their disappearance but who they were in life. How did you know them? How was your relationship? What were they like? And this is really a way to honour the living, to honour people in their fullness of themselves and not just in their death or disappearance because that's what the media is going to focus on so telling a different story.

Doing these ceremonies, gatherings or participating in tributes may seem superficial or may seem unimportant to the actual solving of the case. It's important to keep in mind that stories and information can sometime surface years after some things happened. It's in the telling and retelling of these stories that we gain a better understanding of how this violence happens and not only how to prevent it but maybe clues as to what happened or to gain closure about what's happened in your situation.