

# WISE PRACTICES

## FOR PROMOTING LIFE IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES DRAWING ON COMMUNITY STRENGTHS: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

### HOPE IN OUR CONNECTIONS

While suicide is often spoken of – and responded to – as an individual and/or psychological phenomenon, a lot of research supports more **RELATIONAL AND SOCIAL APPROACHES** to life promotion.

Many authors note that an individualized understanding of resilience misses the fact that the adversity Indigenous communities have faced is a result of long-term oppression through colonization, and recommend “depsychologising resilience” (de Finney, 2017, p. 14) in order to more accurately understand and foster it (Bird-Naytowhow et al, 2017; Fast & Collin-Vezina, 2010; and Isbister-Bear, Hatala, & Sjoblom, 2017). Thus, understanding **COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AS A PROCESS** – rather than an individual trait – is very important.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that **SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT** are very significant in relation to resilience, and recent research includes online social networks in this discussion (Kirmayer et al, 2009). The work of Philip, Ford, Henry, Rasmus, and Allen (2016) supports this. They state that “network studies of youth in schools nationwide showed evidence that social isolation ... and network intransitivity ... were associated with more suicide thoughts and behaviour [particularly] in female participants” (p. 46, emphasis in original). These authors suggest connections with immediate and extended **FAMILY, ELDERS, AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS SERVE AS PROTECTIVE FACTORS** – and they support work that enhances ‘protective’ factors (rather than working to mitigate ‘risk’ factors) when it comes to suicide prevention.

Recent studies point to the value of “two-eyed seeing” (referencing Mi’kmaw Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall) to not only integrate Indigenous and western ways of knowing, but to use them together to generate *new* ways of thinking and doing (Bird-Naytowhow et al, 2017, p. 5). Researchers highlight the importance of ensuring not just concepts but *processes* that are informed by **TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS AND PROTOCOLS**, and the wisdom of both Elders and the young (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; Saskamoose et al, 2017). The central importance of **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE** is highlighted by many authors (Battiste, 2009; Simpson, 2014). Indigenous knowledge must be understood not in terms of decontextualized content or teachings, but as a *system* that

... embodies a web of relationships within a specific ecological context; contains linguistic categories, rules, and relationships unique to each knowledge system; has localized content and meaning; has established customs with respect to acquiring and sharing of knowledge ... ; and implies responsibilities for possessing various kinds of knowledge. (Battiste, p. 8).

### RESISTING DAMAGE-CENTRED STORIES

As a deliberate act of resistance and commitment to resurgence, many authors urge that we not only focus on what’s *not* going well, but to pay close attention to what is already going well – particularly in and by Indigenous communities (Clarke, 2016; de Finney, 2017; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeta, 2017). As Clarke (2016) says, “‘knowledge of how to address violence and wellness in our communities has always existed’” (p. 5). Thus, responses cannot be universalized; they must be **RESPONSIVE TO DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**, and hope is vital (Leenaars, EchoHawk, Lester, & Leenaars, 2007). Tuck (2009) echoes this commitment to centering community

strength. Indeed, she observes that when practices and research only witness people's pain, it in fact "reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless" (p. 409). The implications of these damage-centred stories are the suppression of hope, and the obscuring of colonial power relations that disenfranchise communities.

Suicide must not only be understood as a psychological event; it must also be understood socio-historically (Barker, Goodman, & DeBeck, 2017). Many current discussions around resilience recognize not only the role of tradition, but of negotiating ongoing political realities and social activism, including the pursuit of SELF-DETERMINATION. There remains some debate over which routes are most beneficial to Indigenous communities (ie. collaborations with government/reconciliation or fostering Indigenous identities and practices/resurgence) (Kirmayer et al, 2009; Isbister-Bear, Hatala, & Sjoblom, 2017).

## OTHER COMMUNITIES RISING UP

Communities are increasingly refusing to bear the burden of suicide in silence and in isolation. As in the case of the young people from Attiwapiskat who participated in the Walk of Hope, there are groups and communities throughout Canada MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD, COLLABORATING, AND TAKING POLITICAL ACTION in relation to youth suicide.

For instance, the communities of CLEARWATER COUNTY came together after the death by suicide of an 11-year-old girl – the ninth suicide in 6 months in the area. A series of community meetings and workshops were organized, sometimes including all three of the First Nations in the county: Bighorn, O'Chiese, and Sunchild, as part of a coordinated Suicide Prevention Initiative. The strategy aims to honour cultural diversity while at the same time recognizing their shared experiences.

As a result, these communities have seen an increased willingness to talk about suicide, and have had support from both the police and the media. At the time of writing, they were also seeing evidence that the work is helping communities to rebuild, with only one suicide from April to October 2006, whereas the same period the previous year saw six. The number of attempts has also decreased during that period from 58 to 39. This story highlights, more than anything, the significance of the process of COMING TOGETHER around this issue in enhancing relations in their communities – among aboriginal and non-aboriginal community members, among different First Nations, and between young and old.

Leven (2010) shares the story of youth from the OKANAGAN NATION ALLIANCE as paving the way for a new reality, by "heightening awareness about Aboriginal youth suicide by participating in the Second Annual Spirit of the Sylix Youth Unity Run" (p. 15). The idea for this 230 km relay came from young people themselves as a fun and

## PARTICIPANT VOICES

JEREMIAH BURKHART,  
MESSAGES OF HOPE  
(VIRGINIA, US):

I do think that trying to take that positive spin on it is a vital way to approach this issue, and really focusing in on this idea of hope.

We just hope that [youth in Attiwapiskat] understand that there were people thousands and thousands of miles away thinking about them and caring about them enough to do this.

DR. ED CONNORS, WISE  
PRACTICES ADVISORY  
TEAM MEMBER (ONTARIO):

This is a story that demonstrates how the spirit moves in synergistic ways.

On many levels these stories come together to demonstrate how the voices and actions of our youth can combine to affect real change.

engaging way to involve youth, parents, and other community members in the issues of suicide, substance abuse, and family violence. Levin (2010) highlights some of the benefits of participating in the run, including: **LIFTING SPIRITS**, building relationships and connections, being more open to talk about painful things, and gaining strength by **(RE)CONNECTING WITH CULTURE**. The run itself was a cultural event, with support from Chiefs and Elders. The article then explicitly links this initiative with the research by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) that identifies cultural continuity as a protective factor.

Suthers (2007) writes about the Yukon's most remote community, **OLD CROW**, which (at the time of writing) hadn't seen a suicide since the mid-1990s. "Vuntut Gwitchin Chief Joe Linklater believes the close ties the community members have to their culture and traditional way of life plays a large part in keeping the problem at bay" (p. 14). People in the community hunt and speak the language, they have close family ties, there are counselling services available locally, and there is a ban on alcohol which has been in place for 16 years – all of which the Chief sees as contributing factors to the **HEALTH OF THE COMMUNITY**. This is contrasted with the story of Sandy Bay, a Saskatchewan community working to find its way after a series of suicides. The focus for this community is on the youth – listening to them, empowering them, and connecting them to elders – and on providing supports for those whose lives have been touched by suicides as well. Learning from the successes of other communities is helping to **BUILD HOPE**.

## REMAINING VIGILANT

Wexler (2009) points out that 1) youth suicide rates in Indigenous communities are (overall) disproportionately high, and 2) some research connects this with historical community disruption and change, but 3) very few researchers explore the link to **ONGOING COLONIZING DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES** explicitly. Based on her research specifically looking at Inupiat youth suicide, she says "one could understand the alarmingly high Inupiat youth suicide rate as the result of healthy pathways thwarted by cultural discontinuities and active oppression" (p. 16). Colonization is not a thing of the past, and Tuck (2009) reminds us that it is a mistake to "think of colonization as merely the unfortunate sins of our fathers" (p. 411).

Thus, the important life promotion work to be done involves strengthening cultural continuity and eliminating the oppressive practices and systems that persist.

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