

# Action Guide for Communities

Bringing Wise Practices to Life

# Introduction

Life promoting communities offer young people a strong sense of meaning, purpose, belonging, and hope based on a strong cultural foundation. They are communities with healthy, strong, and visionary leaders. They are self-determining communities. They are communities that recognize and honour the gifts of children, youth, adults, extended families, and Elders. They are communities that draw on Indigenous knowledge systems and good cultural ways. They are communities where Indigenous languages are being revitalized, and where ceremonies, spiritual practices, and land-based teachings are deeply valued. Respectful relationships that are grounded in a recognition of the interconnectedness of all living things is at the heart of this work. Children, young people, volunteers, families, professionals, knowledge keepers, local leaders and governments, and Elders all have a role to play in supporting the collective life of the community.

This Action Guide is meant to support the good work that is already going on in First Nations communities to support young people to live a good life. The Action Guide distills the learning from each of the community projects profiled on this website, and combines it with the knowledge generated by more formal research. It is designed to assist community organizers, youth leaders, planning groups, volunteers, and service providers think about how to engage in more life promoting practices in their own communities. The Action Guide is meant to support communities to build on their own local knowledge and wisdom to find their own solutions.

Life promotion practices work best when they are developed by the communities themselves. Support from the outside can sometimes be helpful, but only when this is decided on by the community. The community stories that are shared in relation to these Wise Practices strategies are examples and resources to nourish and inspire, not standardized models to be replicated. Action will look different in every community.

To read more about some of the ideas that inform this work, please see a [review of the published literature](#). If you are specifically looking for research articles that could be used in a funding application or proposal, see link to this [Annotated Bibliography](#). And if you are a leader, funder, or policy-maker who would like to support life promotion initiatives in First Nations communities, see the [System Change for Life Promotion](#) document.

# Drawing on Community Strengths

When young people get connected with the strengths and gifts of their culture and communities, they become connected to living. We all have a role to play when it comes to building community strengths and creating communities that support life. Oftentimes suicide prevention efforts focus on individuals and communities “at risk.” Such an approach tends to reinforce an understanding of people and communities as the problem, when in reality, the problem rests with racist and colonial policies that have interfered with living life in a good way for First Nations peoples. Focusing on community strengths does not mean overlooking the real injustices and threats to wellbeing faced by Indigenous peoples in this country or the need to take action on these fronts. Rather, it is an approach that begins on a different note – with a focus on collective life and wellness.

*We’ve listened to First Nations youth across the country who’ve said that the conversation on suicide prevention that’s focused on death and dying is not helpful to them. They want to focus on how to live life. We’ve taken a community-based approach because community is what facilitates wellness and supports life.*

*Carol Hopkins — Thunderbird Partnership Foundation*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides tools and practical approaches to help foster community strengths. It centres the voices, experiences, and expertise of First Nations people and communities, while also taking account of the systems in which we live and work:

*Achieving the envisioned continuum of mental wellness will require sustained commitment, collaboration, and partnerships as well as effective leadership across the system (p. 1).*

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and the research literature, the following ideas and prompts can help you draw on community strengths and promote life in your community:

## Highlight the ways we are all connected and mobilize existing wisdom.

Looking at the ways in which we are all interconnected, and drawing on our collective knowledge, can help to mobilize a collective response to the goal of supporting life promoting communities:

- Find out which cultural teachings and ceremonies have offered guidance for getting through difficult times in the past
- Connect with the knowledge keepers in your community who can help share those and other teachings.
- Learn about the history and effects of colonization in order to recognize the shared nature of current challenges.
- Learn from and highlight the stories of resistance and strength that have endured in your community
- See the ‘Changing the Narrative’ section of this Action Guide for strategies to ‘lead with the language of life.’

## Drawing on Community Strengths

### Find out what connects young people with life and living in your community.

Common approaches to suicide prevention tend to focus on what's not working, but it's hard to find answers and solutions there. Instead, look to what is already working and going well:

- What are the moments or places in which young people seem to thrive in your community? Are there certain times of year, ceremonies, people, or places in your community that seem to make young people 'light up'?
- What are the conditions that make those moments or places work for young people?
- What supports and resources could help deepen the connection young people have with life and living in those and other moments and places? How can you go about reaching other young people in your community?

### Develop strategic partnerships to promote self-determination for your community.

Guided by the people and teachings within your community, consider how you can also look beyond your community to get support for your local efforts in the short- and long-term:

- Strengthening relationships among families is one of many ways that community life can be supported.
- Developing networks with other First Nations can help build solidarity, reduce isolation, and broaden your experience of community.
- Advocating, and finding allies, at a policy level can help to remove some of the barriers and even access resources for your community.
- Consider whether there are ways to connect with non-Indigenous allies in your region. Could this foster longer term changes that might lead to reconciliation and decolonization?

# Healing through Culture

‘Culture as healing’ is an Indigenous approach to life promotion that addresses the whole unique person, in the context of his or her family, community, land, history, and spiritual world.

Culture as healing aims to deepen connections with self, others, and land as a path towards wholeness and wellbeing, in keeping with Indigenous values of holism and interdependency. It recognizes healing as simultaneously a deeply intimate and personal experience and a relational and collective process. When we support the healing of others we are also doing the work of healing the community now and into the future. “In therapeutic terms, Indigenous cultural reclamation fundamentally rejects the assimilationist mandate of the residential schools in service to a ‘cultural renaissance of the Red Man’” (Gone, 2013, p. 696).

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to chart the path for culture as healing. While there is certainly no blueprint, as it will look different in each community and for each person, there are some common principles that can clarify how to move forward.

Here is some of what the Continuum has to say:

*The culture as intervention model was developed through discussion with cultural practitioners and Elders from across the country and from many different cultures. Although concepts were described in different ways across the various cultures, there were also many common threads.*

*Of significance is the common belief that wellness must be understood from a “whole person” perspective wherein wellness is a balance of one’s spirit, heart/emotions, mind, and physical being. Spiritual wellness is facilitated through a connection to beliefs, values, and identity. At the heart level of one’s being, wellness is facilitated through relationships, having an attitude of living life to the fullest, and having connections to family and community. Mental wellness is facilitated through an appreciation for both intuitive and rational thought and the understanding that is generated when they are in balance. Finally, physical wellness is expressed through a unique native way of being and doing and taking care of one’s physical body as the “home” of one’s spirit.*

*By attending to these four aspects of our being, we have the opportunity to live life as a whole and healthy person. (p. 4)*

Based on the wise practice approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#), and related literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you foster culture as healing in your community:

## Build and nurture relationships with family.

Indigenous families, extended kin, and strong connections with Ancestors provide the resources for living well. Intergenerational familial relationships have often suffered as a result of colonization, and the response from many child welfare systems has all too often been to ‘protect’ children by removing them from their families. Research shows, however, that supporting strong family relationships, and providing culturally relevant support for Indigenous parents to look after their own children, serve as protective factors and help to promote individual, family, and collective wellbeing over time. Supporting this level of relationship will require critical reflection on the current practices of child protection systems in order to ensure families receive

culturally appropriate and meaningful support (see Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, and Elliot, 2017).

- How can families be strengthened and nurtured in your community?
- What opportunities exist for families to come together in community, and experience themselves in a good way?
- How can families who are struggling seek support in a way that builds them up?
- What current practices interfere with family relationships, and how can they be meaningfully altered?

## Healing through Culture

### Build and nurture relationships with community.

While much of mainstream/urban society has become more age-segregated, and the professionalization of services has often led to fragmentation and distance in our communities, research shows that relationships between young people and adults are one of the most significant factors in achieving community and family wellness. How can we find creative ways to step out of our silos and connect with one another more often?

- Develop opportunities for Elders, community members, volunteers, extended family members, and youth leaders to come together to talk about their vision for a shared community life
- Find opportunities for communication and ideas to “travel” in more than one direction.
- Ensure there are accessible and free public spaces in your community, for informal opportunities to connect (ie. community garden, gazebo, fire pit, wharf, playground, soccer field, child care centre, community hall).
- Sharing food and hosting feasts are natural ways to nurture relationships within community – which First Nations peoples have practiced for centuries
- ‘How-to’ workshops can bring diverse community members into the room together. Ideas include: canning salmon, weaving cedar, washing and separating wool, or any other skill community members are willing to share.
- Develop creative partnerships around specific projects. Seek unlikely partners (corporate, government, individual, academic, or otherwise) to build bridges where they did not previously exist.
- Take advantage of existing opportunities to bring community members together. For example, early childhood development programs, such as [Aboriginal Head Start](#), can serve as the ‘hub’ or focal point for coordinating life promotion and community wellbeing efforts.

### Build and nurture relationships with land.

As Indigenous peoples have known and practiced for hundreds of years, the land is a living system and it has so much to teach us about how to live in a good way:

- What are the sacred sites in your territory?
- Who are the knowledge keepers who would be able to guide people through a meaningful experience in those places?
- Are there certain cultural practices (ie. sweat lodge), songs, teachings, or rituals associated with those places?
- Are there seasonal activities that could be done on an annual basis (i.e. berry picking, fishing, hunting, root gathering)?
- What is required to prepare for such experiences (i.e. transportation, compensation, tools, or gear)?
- How can information about these land-based teaching opportunities be shared to ensure people who would benefit from them are invited?
- What existing [opportunities and resources](#) exist to help you think about how to design high quality land-based programs in your community?

### Revitalize language and teachings.

Language is more than words. Language is culture. It connects people with themselves, their place, history, Ancestors, and ways of being in the world – all of which foster hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Consider the following when revitalizing language and teachings in your community:

- Who are your language speakers and knowledge keepers? What kinds of demands are on their time, and how can they be supported?
- Who are the young people in your community who show an aptitude for and interest in learning language and teachings? What kinds of demands are on their time, and how can they be supported?
- What opportunities for mentorship exist – including funding to compensate for the time contributed by those involved?
- What are the places in which people naturally gather, where learning might be integrated? i.e. day cares, community events, schools, festivals.
- Does anyone in your community keep recordings of songs and stories as they are shared?
- Are there singers in your community? Do they compose songs? Can they be supported to do so?
- Are there regular drumming circles, weaving or beading gatherings, language clubs, or communal food preparation/preservation events? Can new or more people be invited to join?
- Do you have access to a language app such as [First Voices](#)?
- Can you partner with a university or non-profit organization to find funding that can support [language revitalization work](#) in your community?

## Healing through Culture

### **Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.**

As is likely made clear by the various lists of questions in the sections above, 'culture as healing' will look different depending on who you are, where you are, and with whom you are working. Rather than thinking of 'best practices', we recommend cultivating your own 'wise practices', based on local wisdom and teachings

# Changing the Narrative

Changing the narrative of suicide prevention means opening up the conversation about youth suicide to recognize the place of distress, suffering, and suicide in the overall context of life itself – and making the deliberate choice to foreground life (i.e. to support the spirit through every stage of life). This is in contrast to other suicide prevention approaches that tend to focus narrowly on risks, or draw on notions of damage or deficit when thinking about persons and communities.

Changing the narrative means highlighting and promoting experiences, relational resources, and social conditions that re-engage young people with life and with living in a meaningful way. Changing the narrative helps young people see and appreciate the resilience, beauty, and vibrancy in their communities and themselves, even in times of crisis. This in itself can be life-affirming:

*Some people are embarrassed to say 'I'm from Attiwapiskat' because of the media coverage. But I want them to say 'Yeah, I'm from Attiwapiskat' and be proud of it.*

*Keisha PaulMartin*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to help change the narrative as well. The foundation of this Framework is built on promotion of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose:

*Helping youth access “a sense of meaning and an understanding of how their lives and those of their families and communities are part of creation and a rich history” can help them find “purpose in their daily lives whether it is through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing.” This contributes to “a sense of belonging and connectedness within their families, to community, and to culture.” Collectively, these experience help to create “hope for their future and those of their families that is grounded in a sense of identity, unique Indigenous values, and having a belief in spirit.”*

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and the research literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you change the narrative in your community so that you can lead with the language of life:

## Centre youth voices and diverse perspectives.

Centring youth voices requires considering not only the what (i.e. focus) of your project, but also the how (i.e. process):

- Mentor youth leaders, with a particular emphasis on ensuring cultural traditions and teachings are embodied in how they are being mentored. Do not expect young people to assume total responsibility, but support them to learn how to take increasing leadership roles in these ways over time.
- Keep young people at the centre of your initiative from the very start. Find ways for them to gain access to cultural teachings, protocols, and practices.
- Involve young people in decision-making and shaping the

project, with guidance from traditional knowledge-keepers – this will increase the likelihood of engaging more young people moving forward.

- Hold gatherings at times that are likely to attract young people, in places that are accessible, and in ways that are enticing (e.g. provide food, make the experience fun, energetic, relevant and creative).
- Do not expect every young person to want the same type of involvement – provide choice.
- Think beyond tokenistic youth representation. Consider ways to meaningfully engage a wide range of young people, to invite diverse youth voices.



## Changing the Narrative

### Engage supportive adults.

Who are the adults (both within and outside of your community) who:

- have a deep understanding of traditional cultural teachings, and can convey them well not only in what they say, but in how they live and interact with others?
- know and can share meaningful cultural practices, language, and teachings that young people may not otherwise have access to?
- will recognize, highlight, and support the gifts and strengths of young people in your community, regardless of the struggles they are facing?
- young people seem to trust and be drawn to?

- are strong listeners, reliable over time, and build meaningful relationships?
- work well with others, and empower young people by sharing their teachings?
- are effective leaders and advocates?
- have affiliations that can be helpful in pulling together the knowledge and resources you need to make your initiative succeed?

Not every member of your project's team needs to have all of these skills, but it is worth looking for a team that, together, is represented by the list above.

### Develop productive partnerships, within and beyond your community.

Rather than competing for limited resources, productive partnerships can help organizations and community groups get more done with less. When building partnerships, ensure lines of communication are open, and avoid 'mission creep.' Mission creep happens when goals shift because of the needs of the funder, or other interested parties. Make sure the project's mission and vision are clear. Written agreements (i.e. Terms of Reference and/ or a Memorandum of Understanding) can help clarify up front how the project is to be organized, who 'owns' it, how difficult decisions are made along the way, and what happens with information and resources upon project completion.

Partnerships can come from anywhere. Here are some possibilities you may wish to consider:

- First, as noted in the above sections, the most vital partners/ leaders in this work will be people in your community who have deep knowledge of your cultural teachings, protocols, and practices. Following guidance from traditional knowledge-keepers can ensure that not only do you integrate your teachings into the programs you provide, but also into how your team and other partners work with and relate to one another. This important guidance can enhance a sense of fulfillment, and reduce burn-out.
- Schools in your community have publically funded resources, teachers, and spaces. Partnering with schools can be an effective way to reach a broad range of young people. Schools can also often help offset some of your costs by providing space, supplies, tools and even volunteers. You may even explore ways of integrating your work into curriculum, if appropriate.
- It is becoming an increasing expectation that corporations and businesses will demonstrate social responsibility. You may wish to consider financial or other forms of support

from the business sector both within and outside of your community. As with any institutional support, ensure communication is clear and you remain the driver of your initiative. A memorandum of understanding or similar document will be important.

- Community radio stations, social media, and other non-profit organizations in your community can be great partners when aiming to change the narrative. Check out the vision statements of organizations in your area and see if there are areas of connection with your initiative. Partnerships may be mutually beneficial. Here are some guidelines that can be useful in partnering with media organizations: <https://www.gov.mb.ca/health/mh/docs/spg.pdf>
- Indigenous scholars and other university based researchers are often interested in collaborating with First Nations communities to develop relevant and useful knowledge that will benefit the community (e.g. Community-Based Research or Participatory Action Research). These approaches to research can support the implementation of local initiatives, be a source of mentorship, generate new knowledge, measure and evaluate initiatives, provide funding, and can be a way to communicate useful ideas to other communities and audiences. Most importantly, these approaches should be owned and led by the community in which it takes place and any products that are developed should be owned by the community as they are meant to be the primary beneficiaries. Researchers who are committed to de-colonizing, critical, Indigenous, and collaborative methodologies can often extend the good work that is already taking place in a community. Another way universities can be meaningful partners is through practicum programs. Students who are looking for work experience may wish to be involved in your initiative.

## Changing the Narrative

### Provide multiple avenues for expression.

Changing the narrative means that young people's unique and diverse experiences of hope and resilience will be allowed to shine brighter than the problem story of damage and risk. This new storyline can then be circulated in public. This cannot be pre-determined, so look for a range of ways that young people can express themselves. [Spoken word poetry](#), singing, photography, drumming, [filmography](#), [dance](#), theatre – there is no one right way to approach this. The most important thing is that the young people involved know that they can express themselves in an honest and authentic way.

### Provide structure, but don't be prescriptive.

If there are skills involved in learning about different modes of creative expression, find practical ways to teach, mentor, and practice those skills. Ensure young people are going to feel proud of what they ultimately produce or say, and do what it takes to set them up for success. Don't try to do too much, and don't try to do it too quickly. If you don't have the skills within your team to support the forms of expression being used, develop partnerships with people who do. This may mean partnering youth with each other, which can also lead to powerful experiences of connection that change the narrative from within.

### Start small, and build from there. Shine the spotlight on what is already working well.

While diversity of expression is important, you don't have to do everything all at once. In order to decide on a starting place, notice where there is already creativity and energy: Is there an example of someone changing the narrative in their own way already? Is this person an artist, a singer, a writer? Begin where there is already something that people will recognize as meaningful and effective. This will help draw others in, and the diverse forms of expression can emerge from there. Trying to force something that is borrowed from somewhere else – or is too big or ambitious – is not likely going to work. Let it grow in its own organic way, depending on who is involved.

### Circulate and live into the new narrative, in ways that are emotionally and culturally safe.

Part of what is so powerful about changing the narrative is the aspect of being witnessed by others in a new way. When young people see themselves reflected back in a way that is full of appreciation, dignity, and compassion it feels good, and this in turn significantly strengthens identity and belonging. It is important to be deliberate about what is being shared, how, and with whom. The advent of the internet means a wider audience can be reached, but it also means there is sometimes less control over who our audience is. Some things to consider when sharing the new narrative:

- Will identities and/or faces be included?
- Are others implicated in your story? Do they know you are sharing it?
- Can you use a metaphor, symbol, or image to convey an idea in a 'safe' way?
- If sharing online, will there be a space for comments? If so, how will they be moderated?
- How will ongoing conversations take place to continue to integrate and make meaning of the new narrative after it has been shared more widely?

# Strengthening Indigenous Identity

A life promotion approach begins with a commitment to life in all its forms. For First Nations young people, pride in identity has often been compromised by colonialism, racism, and other oppressive forces. Supporting a strong Indigenous identity among children and youth can be a very powerful and healing way to connect them with their life's purpose, their community, and a sense of hope and possibility for moving forward.

Indigenous identity is deeply connected to specific places, teachings, and cultures – there is not a singular approach to supporting young people this way. Often, it involves connecting youth with the knowledge keepers in their community, particularly in relation to Creation stories, in order to determine how identity and wellbeing can be meaningfully nurtured. It is also important to note that effective learning experiences within First Nations communities often rely heavily upon spiritual and cultural teachings, storytelling, modelling, and cultivating shared experiences.

*The Feather Carrier training brings the knowledge and experience of the whole community into practice. It builds on the values and belief that in this present time; life is worth living. ... It is the hope that the Feather Carriers Training will 'pull' individuals and communities towards life through promotion rather than 'push' them towards suicide prevention through criminalization, stigma and guilt/shame.*

*Ed Connors, John Rice, and Debbie Wilson Danard*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to support Indigenous identity. Among other things, it points to a deep understanding of oneself in relation to all of Creation. The Framework says:

*Creation is a term that conveys an understanding of an Indigenous world view that embraces land, animals, birds, physical elements, air, water, the universe and all that it is as "relatives". All of these "beings" are created by the Great Spirit just as human beings are created by the Great Spirit. They are relatives that are "other than human beings". They have a distinct purpose, they have a distinct identity, they have a distinct relationship with each other and humans, they have a place of belonging, and their existence has meaning unto themselves and in relation to each other and to humans. (p. 1)*

Based on the wise practice approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and the research literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you support young First Nations people to develop a strong identity:

## Strengthening Indigenous Identity

### Ground your approach in traditional teachings – particularly Creation stories.

Traditional teachings – and particularly Creation stories – often include important information about how to remain connected to, and strengthened by, identity. Find out who the traditional knowledge keepers are in your community, and consider the following questions:

What do your teachings (including Creation stories) say about:

- life's purpose?
- finding your unique gifts?
- sharing your gifts humbly and proudly with others?
- helping others to find and share their gifts?
- moving through life's transitions?
- facing difficult times?
- coping with loss?
- connecting with all of creation?
- What else do your teachings (including Creation stories) have to say that can help young people meaningfully connect with life through their Indigenous identity?

### Think about the words you use and how they 'do the work' of connecting young people with life and community.

The words we use convey certain assumptions, beliefs, values, and expectations. Connecting with identity as a source of pride and belonging can be facilitated by being deliberate about the words we speak. A life promotion approach 'leads with the language of life', while still acknowledging that death and loss are part of life. Indigenous languages hold important truths about how to live a good life; ideas that often can't be adequately expressed in English.

It may be useful to consider the following, in relation to language:

- Assuming that everyone is entitled to a long life, the phrase 'premature death' can be a useful substitution to the word 'suicide'. The concept 'premature death' refers to life that ends in advance of its fullest potential, and it helps us attend to the entire life span, not just a single moment in it.
- The phrase 'life promotion' can meaningfully speak to the commitment of connecting young people with an experience of life and liveliness – not just avoiding dying (as implied by the phrase 'suicide prevention').
- Young people may be used to hearing damage- or problem-centered stories about being Indigenous, based on racist stereotypes or misunderstandings about colonial oppression. Deliberately centering stories that draw from their own Indigenous languages and speak to Indigenous wisdom and strength can be very important.
- Important concepts in your teachings may be most accurately conveyed in your own language (not translated into English or French). Where possible, provide access directly to these concepts by using the words that are traditionally spoken in relation to them – in the language of your people.

### Develop partnerships to support your efforts.

See Develop productive partnerships, within and beyond your community under the 'Changing the Narrative' section of this Action Guide for tips.

### Provide opportunities for (new) experiences.

Experiential learning is the recommended way to support First Nations youth to connect personally with their own cultural teachings – and in turn their identity. There is no end to the ways experiential learning can be facilitated, but here are a few key things to consider:

- Provide opportunities to commune with the natural world.
- Provide a range of opportunities for modelling to occur, in multiple directions (e.g. across generations, between teachers and learners).
- Provide regular opportunities for deep reflection on meaningful questions that can help learners integrate their experiences in their own personal/unique ways.
- Use rituals that are significant for your community as a way of grounding the learning experiences that are taking place.

## Strengthening Indigenous Identity

### **Use ways of sharing, communicating, and evaluating that are grounded in your teachings.**

Depending on your particular teachings and practices, sharing circles and/or stories may be useful ways to obtain feedback about the processes you are engaged in.

For more detail about evaluation, see the 'how do we know if we're making a difference' section at the end of this Action Guide.

# Being Culturally Responsive

There is no single approach to suicide prevention that has been shown to be effective for all people, across all contexts. What this means is that any approach to life promotion or suicide prevention needs to be culturally-tailored to the specific community where it is being implemented. In Indigenous communities, this generally means there needs to be careful attention paid to the local cultural wisdom, teachings, and practices that have been shown to be helpful for getting through difficult times.

*“My job [is] reminding Indigenous people of community resources and guiding them to recognize and develop their most valuable resource: themselves.”*

*Jenz Malloway*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to help develop culturally responsive approaches to cultivating wellbeing. Here is what this Framework has to say about what culture is:

There are many ways of understanding culture; in general terms, culture can be described as:

- grounded in the creation story of each Indigenous language family and maintained through their sacred knowledge structures;
- based on the truth that the pattern of creation continuously repeats itself across all aspects of life;
- maintained across generations and yet created through individuals' interactions with the changing world;
- identified through language, land, and nationhood and expressed spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically through unique values, relationships, and ways of being and doing; and
- dynamic, ever evolving and changing, created through individuals' interactions with the world, resulting in ways of naming and understanding reality;
- symbolic, often identified through symbols such as language, dress, music, and behaviours;
- learned and passed on through generations, changing in response to a generation or individual's experiences and environment; and
- integrated to span all aspects of an individual's life. (p. 34)

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and related literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you develop culturally informed responses in your community:

## Being Culturally Responsive

### Build and nurture a diverse crisis response and life promotion team.

People who give of themselves to support others during times of crisis, also gain something through it. Providing care and offering support to others is usually very life-affirming for the person offering the care. Ensure your team is nurtured and supported to serve your community well, and also to grow and heal through the process. Some of the ways this can occur are:

- Provide ongoing training and culturally grounded professional development.
- Find ways to express appreciation and gratitude regularly.
- Honour their expertise and gifts.
- Find out how they wish to be engaged in this work, and support them towards their goals.
- Allow for flexibility, as life events occur for members of your team.
- Advocate for them to gain credentials and/or recognition for their work where appropriate.
- If members of your team move on to other things, find ways to continue reaching out to them to acknowledge the role they've played.

### Draw on existing community resources and cultural traditions.

You (and your team) don't have to do this alone. See [Develop productive partnerships, within and beyond your community](#) for ideas about leveraging existing resources to support your work.

### Ground the work in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Culture is expressed through language, creation stories, relationships with land, people and animals, and by knowledge handed down from the Ancestors, which shifts over time. How can this wisdom support life promotion in your community? Here are some questions you may reflect on to guide your approach:

- What do we know about the journey of the Spirit through every phase of life?
- What are some of the stages of life, and transitions during which the Spirit could use some support?
- What are some practices and rituals we have to support the Spirit during these times?
- Who in our community conducts ceremonies, and can help us in these processes?
- What is the Spirit's journey after it moves into the next life? How can we support it?
- Are there significant times or dates that survivors will need support after a loved one has passed? How can they be supported?
- Are there concepts, words, or language that can help us better understand some of these teachings and practices?
- Are there significant places or sites that are significant to visit? Are there sacred medicines that we can harvest or use during these practices?
- Who are the knowledge keepers who can help us deepen our understandings of these and other teachings?

### Identify and mobilize people's gifts when responding to a loss.

Respectfully and meaningfully engaging after a suicide death is relational and emotional work. In order to do this work over the long term, you will require a team. Given the range of skills required, it makes sense to build this team on the basis of their unique gifts and talents. This will ensure sustainability over the long term. Here are some of the skills and gifts that may be useful to have on your team:

- Traditional knowledge, teachings, protocols, and language
- Cultural ceremonies (including practices surrounding death)
- Communication
- Social media
- Emotional support
- Organization and logistics
- Finances
- Driving
- Preparing food, etc.

## Being Culturally Responsive

### **Adapt Western knowledges, when it feels useful and appropriate.**

While Indigenous teachings central to this work, some communities have had great success 'marrying' Western frameworks and approaches to suicide prevention/life promotion with Indigenous ways of knowing. When making adaptations, it is important to ensure that these are thoughtfully done and community-specific. Tokenizing or generalizing Indigenous ways of knowing are neither effective nor appropriate. Draw on local language, teachings, and culture – as described above – to develop frameworks and approaches that are meaningful and practical in your community.

### **Recognize that culturally responsive postvention is also prevention.**

Culturally responsive postvention brings people into contact with teachings about life and death, connects people with each other and the Spirit world, and as a result helps to support cultural continuity throughout the cycle of life. When postvention is grounded in a community's worldview and integrates traditional approaches to healing, it also has the potential to serve as prevention over time since it builds the health and resilience of the community. Ritual follows a structure that allows the whole person; mind, body and spirit, to adjust to the experience. Culturally-grounded practice can also support a healthy grieving process and protect against re-traumatization.

As stated by Connors, Rice, and Leenaars (speaking of Ojibway postvention practices in particular):

*Simply put, we learn good things from bad experiences. Ritual follows a structure that allows the whole person; mind, body and spirit, to adjust to the experience.*



# Nurturing Youth in Community

A whole-community, life promotion approach nurtures young people in community, and nurtures the community as a whole. This means strengthening connections among people, families, the land, and the culture. A life promotion approach understands suicide risk in the context of a whole living system and it is an issue that is best addressed collectively, in a way that is more likely to be sustainable over time. This means that we need to provide compassionate care to those who are struggling, while also working to change the oppressive systems and colonial structures that create inequities for Indigenous peoples and communities.

Importantly, this does not mean that those who are living with suicidal despair do not deserve access to a full range of supports, including high quality mental health services. It just means that for those who are struggling, active participation in culture and ceremony – can provide important pathways back to life. By recognizing young peoples’ gifts and building on their existing wisdom and skills, young people can begin to recognize themselves as important resources in their communities. Through their active participation in community life, they in turn help others to connect with themselves, their community, their culture – and life.

*I wanted to be someone I needed when I was young. So that's what I became. ... I tell these kids:  
'You have a purpose. You just need to find it, and pass it on.'*

*Pierette Settee – Cumberland House Cree Nation*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to nurturing youth in community as well. Life promotion and wellness in general, cannot be addressed in isolation – a holistic approach is necessary to understand and respond to the interconnectedness among people and their place. The Continuum says:

*Necessary for healthy individual, community, and family life, mental wellness needs to be contextualized to a First Nations environment so that it is supported by culture, language, Elders, families, and creation. First Nations embrace the achievement of whole health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and economic well-being) through a comprehensive and coordinated approach that respects, values, and utilizes First Nations cultural knowledge, methodologies, languages, and ways of knowing. (p. 6)*

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and the research literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you nurture youth in your community:

## Nuturing Youth in Community

### Actively foster youth leadership, don't just look for it.

Recognize the gifts in all young people in your community, particularly those who might be struggling. Don't just look for 'naturally emerging' leaders, but foster leadership among young people who may not yet recognize themselves as such:

- Are there young people in your community who seem to be struggling? Who do they connect with and trust? How can you connect with them?
- What are they interested in? Are there ways of creating opportunities for them to come together around those interests?
- Can you involve these young people meaningfully in creating those opportunities? Are there ways of engaging

them in the creation and delivery of those opportunities so that they can gradually take some ownership of them?

- How can you connect them with traditional knowledge-keepers, to ensure traditional teachings are informing their experience?
- Focus less on 'service delivery' and more on co-creating culturally rich experiences together. The more young people are involved, the more meaningful the experiences will be for them.

For example, many communities have found that having a designated youth space (such as a resource centre) that is youth-led is a very important part of any life promotion initiative.

### Build capacity among young people. Enable learning through doing.

Being 'youth led' does not mean youth should be left on their own to make things happen. Ensure they are given the tools they need to experience success, and the mentorship to hone the skills needed to build their capacities:

- Start small, no matter what the initiative is. With stakes low, risks are safer to take and young people can slowly step outside of their comfort zones. As they experience small successes, they may take on more responsibility and leadership in their community.
- Try to avoid a distinction between those providing and those participating in programs where possible. Ensure there is a role for everyone at various steps.
- Recognize that mentorship can travel in every direction: What are the gifts, skills and passions of young people in

your community? How can you help to create platforms for them to share those gifts, skills and passions with others?

- Guide from behind. This doesn't mean leaving young people without any guidance at all, but ensuring they are determining the direction, and know you are there to support them through the process.
- Be a role model. Having role models, especially Elders, can provide hope and direction for young people.
- Allow for mistakes to be made and learned from.
- When possible, see if certifications and trainings can fit into the initiatives being pursued.
- Wherever possible provide financial or other compensation for young peoples' time.

### Ensure there is a community of support around youth-led initiatives.

When young people are given opportunities to lead, they can sometimes feel a heavy burden to make things happen on their own. How can the broader community lighten the load and support youth-led initiatives? What partnerships in the community can support the initiatives youth are seeking?

- What cultural teachings – including languages, stories, protocols, and practices – can help foster leadership among youth in the community? Who in the community has access to this knowledge and how can they be meaningfully connected with young people who wish to learn?
- Can leadership/government provide: space to access, training opportunities, or supplies to access?
- Are there neighbouring businesses that can sponsor fundraising efforts?
- Can schools be engaged to reach more young people and/or

integrate cultural or other programming and curriculum?

- Are there service providers who can partner with youth-led initiatives to provide access to guidance, support, and potentially even funding or resources?
- What cultural events and practices are already occurring in your community? Can they actively reach out to young people to build bridges among generations in the community?
- When training or cultural opportunities arise, is it possible to send multiple people from your community, including both youth and adults?
- Are young people and Elders in your community provided the opportunity to build meaningful and ongoing connections with one another?
- In what other ways can an ongoing community of support be built around youth-led initiatives in your community?

## Nuturing Youth in Community

### Cultivate networks of support across diverse communities, not just within them.

While every community is unique, many also face similar challenges. Particularly for rural and isolated communities, it can be beneficial to find ways to network with other First Nations communities. Learning from the experiences of other communities (such as the examples provided on this website), sharing ideas and experience with other communities, and pooling resources are all ways that your community can increase its capacity to nurture youth. Particularly when facing obstacles, networks among communities can help to maintain hope and momentum.

- What other First Nations communities are in your region? What do you have in common? What do you offer that is unique?
- Do you have any personal or professional connections with other communities in your region? How might you reach out to or connect with them?
- Is there an overarching body (organizational or governmental) that connects you with other communities in your region? Might they support you to come together (monthly, for instance) to support your youth in community?
- How else might you bring together adults and youth from each community in your region? Can you connect virtually? How can you learn from each other's experiences, and support each other moving forward?

### Find opportunities in challenges that arise.

In the 'Setting up for success' section of this Action Guide, there are important steps that can be taken to develop a deep understanding of the historical and political contexts of the issues you wish to address – including the legacy and ongoing effects of colonization. There are real challenges facing all communities, and these will sometimes lead to setbacks when it comes to nurturing youth in community as part of life promotion work.

All of the above strategies (fostering leadership, building capacity, ensuring there is a community of support, and creating networks among communities) will strengthen our ability to stay the course in the face of very real challenges.

- When obstacles arise, how can we find the opportunity within them?
- What can setbacks teach us about what our community is calling for? Are there teachings that can help us learn from and grow stronger through these experiences?
- How can we collectively create a vision that helps guide us through challenges?
- How can we track progress – including setbacks – in order to continue moving towards our goal?
- How can we access important teachings and knowledge keepers to provide direction in difficult times?
- How do we share with others the learning that has come from our challenges, to be transparent about our process and strengthen our collective capacity to move forward through challenging circumstances?

# Reducing Problematic Substance Use

A life promotion approach recognizes problematic substance use and suicide as responses to problematic environments and historical contexts of oppression, violence, and injustice. In other words, increasing rates of suicidality and substance misuse in First Nations youth cannot be understood outside of an historical context where settler-colonial relations have severed the connection between people and the land, their cultures, their teachings, and each other.

Research is now demonstrating that approaches that centre culture, identity, and community resilience and that are holistic in nature, show much promise. Thus, reducing problematic substance use is not separate from life promotion/suicide prevention – the two can and often do go hand-in-hand.

This approach to life promotion understands behaviours (such as drinking or self-harm) as responses to certain experiences. Approaches that enable hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose in the lives of young people promote culturally-meaningful growth and healing. This approach recognizes the whole person in a broad historical and sociopolitical context. It recognizes individuals as embedded within a whole community, and it is important that this community be supported as well:

*Through this whole process I think the biggest thing for me is that it's not only the learner, but it's also the person delivering the [Buffalo Rider] training that's feeling that support, helping build that community capacity in a way that it empowers the people within the community. To deliver the programs in a way that's culturally appropriate first and foremost, and that meets the needs of the youth in the community. Who knows that better than people that live and work in the community?*

Nora Bressette

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches for reducing problematic substance use as a way of promoting life. It says:

*The Continuum focuses on the broader concept of mental wellness rather than mental illness. Mental wellness is supported by factors such as culture, language, Elders, families, and creation. It is necessary for healthy individual, family, and community life. First Nations seek to achieve whole health—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and economic well-being—through a coordinated, comprehensive approach that respects, values, and utilizes First Nations cultural knowledge, approaches, languages, and ways of knowing.*

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, and the research literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you work towards reducing problematic substance use in your community as a way of promoting life:

## Reducing Problematic Substance Use

### Understand the relationships among substance misuse, suicide, and colonization.

Problematic substance use and suicide are two of a number of challenges faced by some First Nations communities. Taken together, these challenges can be understood as precipitated by the distress, poverty, and discrimination that have resulted from settler-colonialism and its legacy. When Indigenous people have been severed or [separated from land, teachings, cultural practices](#),

and communities, problematic substance use and suicide rates have often increased.

Consider how your prevention initiative might focus on some of these root causes. What knowledge, teachings, and resources will you need to access in order to intervene at this level in your community?

### Ground your initiative culturally.

You have a foundation of knowledge and teachings that can ground your initiative in a way that is meaningful and relevant for your community. See [Ground the work in Indigenous ways of knowing](#) for ideas about ensuring your initiative is culturally grounded from the very start.

### Focus on processes that promote wellbeing, not just particular outcomes, risk factors, or issues.

Many funding models and programs are organized around distinct issues (such as 'suicide prevention' or 'substance use'), which can make it difficult to develop an initiative that focuses on the whole person and community resilience. However, there are resources that can help you find the language and processes to advocate for a more holistic approach to healing. See [Healing through Culture](#) for some concrete ways to foster wellness in First Nations communities.

If you are writing a proposal, developing a program, or need to make a case for culturally grounded, holistic approaches, visit the [Annotated Bibliography](#) on this website to see some of the published research that can help you advocate for your approach.

Consider if and how the ways you implement your program match the stated values. For instance:

- How are cultural teachings and practices supporting you and your team not only in the content of what you are developing, but in your ways of working together?
- How are you creating a supportive and safe environment for your staff and/or volunteers?
- Are the ways you are tracking success and evaluating your initiative congruent with the values that inform it?
- How else can and do you embody wellbeing as you work towards supporting young people in your community?

### Nurture role models, mentors, and relationships within community.

It can be very important for young people to have a trusting relationship with – or at least access to – someone who lives a life they deem to be 'healthy'. For instance, if a young person is seeking a life of sobriety, it can be nice to know a trusted sober adult. With this in mind, support local people in your community to be the champions of your project – this can help to build lasting relationships and community capacity that will extend long after a time-limited program ends. See [Engage supportive adults](#) for more ideas about how to identify and engage potential role models and mentors.

However, these people will also need support. What are some ways that you can:

- provide enough structure that they can trust they will succeed, and enough flexibility that they can bring their own gifts to their role?
- build relationships among them to foster a community of support?
- ensure lines of communication are open in all directions?
- provide opportunities for debriefing, follow up, and ongoing development of skills and knowledge?

### Implement approaches that foster community resilience.

When problematic substance use and suicide are understood in context, it makes sense to prioritize community wellness and resilience as a powerful response. Community-level responses can benefit from partnerships, and support that is sustainable. For ideas about cultivating meaningful and strategic

partnerships, see [Develop productive partnerships, within and beyond your community](#).

That said, it is important to recognize that communities are comprised of people, and all of the strategies listed above can contribute to community resilience over time.

# Regenerating Indigenous Food Systems

For Indigenous peoples, food practices have been “a lifeline to cultural, emotional, and physical survival through multiple generations” (Mihesuah, 2017, p. 20). Thus, food production is a way of life – not just a way to make a living. It is also connected with a broader concept of health and wellness that includes spiritual and mental wellbeing that involves a deeper connection with ancestors that is fostered through food and related land-based practices. Furthermore, traditional food practices can be a vital tool for coping with the challenges of poverty and other forms of marginalization that lead to food insecurity.

Resurgence of food practices is a gateway to teachings, spirituality, language, and meaningful relationships with the land and other beings. Food is not solely about nutrition. For many Indigenous peoples it is about sacred ecological relationships with other human and non-human beings. In all of these ways, regeneration of Indigenous food systems connects young people with purpose, hope, meaning, and belonging – and in turn with life and living.

*Food is the center of every ceremony and celebration. Building community off of good food.*

*Erica Ward — Natoaganeg Community Food Center, Eel Ground First Nation*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to chart the path for regenerating Indigenous food systems as a pathway to community well-being. While there is certainly no blueprint, as it will look different in each community and for each person, there are some common principles that can clarify how to move forward.

Here is some of what the Continuum has to say:

*Traditional foods are an important medicine for health promotion and community development because:*

- They are nurturing from our mother the earth and relatives in creation.
- When shared in community feasts, they facilitate relationships for individual, family and community wellness.
- Ceremonial feasts facilitate relationships with Creation and with ancestors, which are necessary for community wellness.
- Community and ceremonial feasts promote cultural values of sharing and caring.
- Community and ceremonial feasts promote an understanding of Indigenous world view. (p. 15)

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#), and related literature, these reflective questions and prompts can help you regenerate Indigenous food systems as a pathway to wellness in your community:

## Regenerating Indigenous Food Systems

### Actively connect Elders and knowledge keepers with children and youth.

Because of colonial imposition, many young people may not have access to skills related to food harvesting, processing, and preserving or other cultural food practices, including related rituals. Connecting children and youth with Elders and others who carry that knowledge is a way to revitalize food practices in your community:

- Is there formal programming that already exists through which these connections can take place, particularly if there is compensation for Elders and knowledge keepers?

- Could a workshop series specific to traditional food practices be a way for people in the community to gain valuable professional or personal development?
- Are there informal ways Elders and knowledge keepers already come together in your community? Can learning about traditional food practices be woven into these moments? Can more people be actively invited into these spaces?

### Bring traditional food practices into existing programming and events.

Rather than thinking of the regeneration of food practices as its own separate initiative, there are many ways it can be integrated into existing programming or events. This can eventually be 'scaled up' as resources, time, and capacity allow:

- Is there capacity to serve traditional foods one day a week at the childcare center? Can local people be supported to source and provide the food?
- Do you have seasonal curriculum at the school and/or childcare center? This can be achieved by inviting traditional harvesters to teach about what they do, bringing children onto the land with them, learning songs and dances related to these practices, inviting Elders in as storytellers.
- Are there certain community members already taking on some of the particular duties related to food practices

(such as smoking fish, harvesting clams, drying meat, or picking berries)? If so, can children and youth be mentored during these times? Can they get school credit for their participation?

- Are there already 'cultural nights' or regular gatherings in your community, in which you can include engaging in traditional food practices in what you do together?
- Is there the possibility of a regular column about revitalizing traditional food practices in your community paper, perhaps including recipes?
- Can Traditional Wellness and other health services can integrate traditional foods into their program delivery?
- Are there community events for which volunteers are needed, and coordination of this incorporate traditional food practices?

### Consider creative partnerships.

It can be useful to build creative partnerships with organizations or groups in order to enhance capacity around food practices. On the one hand, a caution here might be to ensure the focus of the partnering organization does not interfere with your own community's interests around revitalizing your own traditional food practices. On the other hand, starting with a focus on accessing healthy food in general can be a great first step to

a phased approach towards revitalization of Indigenous food practices in your community. Your community can decide which starting place is the best fit.

See 'develop productive partnerships, within and beyond your community' under the 'changing the narrative' section of this Action Guide for tips.

### Build and nurture relationships with land.

Access to land and rights to land-based practices are vital for regenerating Indigenous food practices.

See 'build and nurture relationships with land' under the 'healing through culture' section of this Action Guide for tips.

# Centering Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous concepts of health and wellness have always been holistic. This includes a deep recognition that the strongest determinants of health and wellness are related to the quality of relationships people have, the overall health of the land/environment, and having access to resources for living life well.

Indigenous knowledge is tied to place; it is community-specific and land-based. In recent years, there have been concerted efforts to reform health and human services in ways that centre Indigenous knowledge- this is sometimes referred to as Indigenizing programs. In order for practices and services to be meaningfully informed by Indigenous knowledge, community members of all ages – including traditional knowledge-keepers - must drive the process of creating and/or reforming programs and services from the very beginning.

*Our project is trying to get away from the deficit-based model by empowering traditional knowledge for ensuring the safety and welfare of children. Focusing on connection to the land, getting youth back in touch with the land and Elders. It was grassroots to a certain extent – it was the community that had the vision.*

*Travis Holyk — Carrier Sekani Family Services*

The [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) provides conceptual tools and practical approaches to chart the path for reforming programs and services with Indigenous knowledge at the centre. The process and resulting programming must centre knowledge, teachings, and practices that are specific to the culture, land, and language of the community developing them. That said, there are some common themes that can guide communities in moving forward with this work.

Here is some of what the framework has to say:

*It is vital to the development and on-going delivery of culturally appropriate community services to utilize Indigenous knowledge and skills and support the community to engage in cultural and traditional practices and activities. Initiatives that promote and encourage collaborative intergenerational education, knowledge exchange, and community participation also facilitate well-being. When culture and Indigenous knowledge is supported across the continuum, every generation is said to be a teacher and a practitioner. For example, when songs are transferred to individuals, families, or communities, these people are then sanctioned for their knowledge and rights to practice some aspect of culture. In these instances, age is not a condition but rather a guide for Indigenous education methods to transfer knowledge. (p. 37)*

Based on the approaches to life promotion highlighted on this website, the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#), and related literature, these ideas, reflective questions, and prompts can help you reform child- and family-serving programs and services in your community with Indigenous knowledge at the centre:



## Centering Indigenous Knowledge

### Pull together a team of trusted advisors.

This work requires vision, and input from community members at many stages along the way. Creating a trusted advisory group as a first step can ensure community voices are part of the process from the very beginning. Some things you may wish to consider:

- Who will the advisory group be comprised of? Elders? Youth? Knowledge Keepers? Others?
- What will the name of the group be? Is there a word or phrase in your language that captures the spirit of this work?
- How will members be compensated for their contributions? Is there a budget for honoraria?
- You may wish to begin by developing a set of guiding values and vision statement for this working group, to ensure clear focus.
- How often will the advisors meet? How will you ensure their work is integrated into decision-making processes at every level?

### Draw on a holistic model of wellness that is specific to your community or local cultural knowledge.

Policies, job descriptions, agreements, and even laws related to programs and services are often grounded in a western or colonial model. If you are striving to reform your programs and services with Indigenous knowledge at the centre, it is useful to begin there: with your own traditional language, teachings, and governance systems. Here are a few tips:

- Some communities develop strategic relationships with universities (such as with linguistics and law departments) in order to rally the human and other resources necessary for this time-consuming work.
- Identify the range of sources of knowledge for local teachings, language, and laws. This may include: archives of recordings of language speakers, storytellers, and songs; publications; research; legal and other policy documents; and more.
- Unearth the guiding principles, values, and practices that should inform services and practices today.
- Begin to map out a wellness model for your community that is grounded in these teachings.
- It can be useful to specifically define what “best interests of the child” means in your community, as this is a concept that can be vague when applied in a range of contexts.
- Be sure to share the learning from this process with all who deliver or receive services to children or families within your community.

### Develop practice models that are consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Having a firm foundation in your own wellness model will directly inform the kinds of practices you offer. A few considerations:

- Many communities find a shift towards more inter-generational and land-based practices.
- Many communities also find a shift away from ‘siloed’ approaches to support (addressing various challenges people might face separately) towards a more holistic form of support.
- Some communities develop partnerships with universities or other organizations for Community-based or Participatory Action Research Projects as a way of ‘trying out’ new practice models and exploring their effectiveness at the same time. This can also be a useful strategy for incremental capacity building.

## Centering Indigenous Knowledge

### Decide if you need to create formal agreements with government partners.

Community-driven programs and services centred in Indigenous knowledge can contribute to much more autonomy for communities to operate in a way that works for them. However, this does not mean provincial and federal governments do not have any responsibility. They do. It is very important to know the rights and responsibilities of all parties when it comes to delivery of services, and to create agreements to uphold them. In particular:

- It can take a lot of time to finalize the particulars of a formal agreement – taking into consideration new provincial and federal legislation, or other changes that impact programs and services. It can be useful to create and sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the provincial and federal government, which outlines Indigenous rights as they pertain to services for children and families as well as commitments to working together in a way that moves towards better upholding these rights. There are many examples from which to draw.
- Connect personally with other communities that have created formal agreements related to child and families services to learn about possibilities for your own community.
- Ensure funding is included in formal agreements once they are developed. Funding should not only be for service delivery, but also for the time taken to create agreements, and for capacity building.
- Ensure conflict resolution processes – with oversight by an independent third party – are also part of formal agreements.
- Ensure reference to your Advisory Committee is included in formal agreements.

# Setting up for Success

Every life promotion effort is going to be different. This section provides a general overview of how you might start things off in a good way. It is not a complete list of what needs to be done – this will have to be determined with your community partners in response to your own local strengths and needs – but this section will help you get there. Some of this information may already be familiar to you and your community partners, and it can hopefully reinforce what you already know, think, and do. In other cases, you may find this information helpful to educate others (e.g. funders, external partners) about what it takes to promote life promotion/suicide prevention in First Nations communities.

The information below is largely informed by the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) (specifically the section 5, entitled Context and Key Considerations, and section 6, entitled Key Themes) and [related published literature](#).

## Ensure the initiative is owned, led, and driven by the community.

To be community-owned, a life promotion initiative needs to be grounded in the community's own values, knowledge, language, and history from the very beginning. Ceremonies, cultural teachings, and local protocols should provide the cultural foundation for any life promotion effort. Anything that can be done to strengthen and restore family connections and heal the wounds of intergenerational trauma (as a result of residential schools and ongoing colonization), and support the community to be self-determining will be life promoting.

Attention to [cultural safety](#) is paramount in this work. The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework states that cultural safety “includes reflecting upon cultural, historical, and structural differences and power relationships within the care that is provided. It involves a process of ongoing self-reflection and organizational growth for service providers and the system as a whole to respond effectively to First Nations people” ([p. 36](#)).

And finally, build on existing community strengths to enhance the sustainability of your project. The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework has identified five priorities for action in this area. These should be top of mind for any new life promotion initiative:

- First Nations Control of Services
- Building on Community Priorities
- Developing Community Wellness Plans
- Working Together in Partnership
- Investing in Community Development and Capacity Building ([see more detail, beginning on p. 38](#))

## Setting up for Success

### Develop clear communications and expectations among all parties/partners.

This work cannot be done in isolation. It requires creative and strategic partnerships with people and organizations within your own community and beyond. Local, provincial, federal and First Nations governments, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, private corporations and businesses, knowledge-keepers, volunteers, passionate and committed practitioners and community members may all play a role in life promotion efforts in your community. Be sure to recognize the value of diverse partnerships in life promotion efforts.

It's also really important to develop clear communications and expectations among those involved, at the beginning and along the way. Develop clear protocols and ways of working that ensure people feel heard and valued. Here are the priorities

for action identified by the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#) that relate to the development of effective collaborations:

- Defining Clear Roles and Responsibilities
- Establishing Leadership
- Creating Partnerships and Networking
- Developing System Navigators and Case Managers
- Providing Advocacy
- Raising Awareness—Reduction of Stigma and Protection of Privacy ([see more detail, beginning on p. 50](#))

### Seek out partners and allies who can provide flexible, long-term funding.

Investing in the well-being of the whole community is the best way to reduce risks for suicide and other threats to health. But life promotion initiatives don't just need money: funding and other resources need to be provided in ways that are appropriate to the work being done. Wellbeing in communities is enhanced when funding is flexible, sustainable, sufficient and accountable.

Funding that is narrowly guided by the needs of the funder (rather than the community), bound by limited funding cycles, and burdensome to communities in terms of reporting requirements, can take good energy and time away from important life promotion efforts. It is important for funders to recognize the cross-sectoral, long-term nature of life promotion work.

Goodkind et al. (2010) list several recommendations that have been adapted and elaborated [elsewhere on this website](#). The adapted recommendations include:

- Expand mechanisms for reimbursement for traditional healers,
- Shift emphasis from evidence-based practices to practice-based evidence
- Require health systems to take into account the current realities of First Nations youth
- Provide funding for programs that connect prevention and treatment
- Recognizing and supporting traditional healers, cultural practitioners and Elders as service providers
- Recognize the role of structural inequalities and colonial policies in the lives of First Nations children and families involved with the child welfare system
- Follow-up on federal government apology with concrete actions

## Setting up for Success

### Understand the historical and political contexts of suicidal behaviours.

Suicide is typically understood as an individual, private trouble. Current ways of thinking about suicide often emphasize the links between suicide and mental illness. This can lead to efforts that focus on individuals but overlook many of historical, contextual and political factors that contribute to suicidal despair and hopelessness. To set yourself up for success, make sure you have a good understanding of the historical and political contexts in which you are living and working.

Understand the role of colonial violence and its negative effects on First Nations children, youth, families and communities today. Be aware of the relatively recent emergence of suicide within Indigenous communities, and the relationship between suicide and colonization. Consider how your work might help to change this cycle of harm by addressing social, economic, political and structural factors that contribute to hopelessness and despair in First Nations communities.

Look for opportunities to make links between life promotion efforts and other projects that are dedicated to standing up against the effects of colonial violence in the lives of First Nations peoples, including [violence towards women and children](#), [two-spirit people](#), [sexualized violence towards girls and women](#), and

[homelessness](#). Joining up with others who share the common goals of community healing, decolonization, and advancing the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples can make your collective efforts even more powerful.

Learn about the various [social determinants of health](#) (e.g. employment, safe and secure housing, income, quality childcare, education) and the interplay among them – this helps to resist the tendency to individualize problems or make individuals responsible for the solutions. That is, it can help us to see that the responsibility rests with all Canadians, and it involves collective and systemic changes. According to the [First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#), “At every stage of life, health is determined by complex interactions between social and economic factors, the physical environment, and individual behaviour” (p. 29). Setting up for success requires that we consider all of these factors in relation to one another.

All First Nations have unique cultures, languages, relationships with the land, and histories. There are already many gifts, strengths, and resources that you can mobilize within your community. Ensure your initiative is informed by and builds on the unique strengths of the community with(in) which you are engaging.

*Please note: If you are part of a) an academic institution, b) government, c) a corporation, d) a non-profit organization, or any other group that wishes to fund or support wise practices for life promotion, [please click here](#).*

# Evaluating Life Promotion Efforts

## How do we know if we're making a difference?

The approach to life promotion and suicide prevention is community-specific and culturally attuned and cannot always be specified in advance. In other words, the particular context always matters when deciding what will be the most useful, ethical, and culturally appropriate approach to take.

This emphasis on responsiveness and flexibility is by design and justifiable on a number of grounds.

We advocate a diversity of wise practices for promoting life. This is because the multiple and complex challenges faced by First Nations communities, which are associated with a colonial state like Canada, cannot be addressed through single, short-term or simplistic approaches. Life promotion work needs to be collective, sustained over time, and grounded in a social, historical and cultural context. This means we need a new strategy for evaluating the effects and usefulness of our initiatives. This is why we have featured practices that 'show evidence or promise' of promoting life and preventing suicide in First Nations communities, based on Indigenous ways of knowing and/or according to those who live in these communities. Measuring the effects of life promotion/suicide prevention is always going to be challenging, and should not be approached as if it were a simple task.

Because of the complexity of this work, it is particularly important that we pay attention to whether or not our work is making a difference in the communities where it is taking place. Here are a few tips for doing so:

### Ground the evaluation effort in core values and beliefs.

In [Reframing evaluation: Defining an Indigenous evaluation framework](#), LaFrance and Nicols (2010) ask this important question: "Is there a set of core beliefs or common values that can serve as a foundation for framing a tribal approach to evaluation?" (p. 22). In their research, they identified four core beliefs or values that can help to guide Indigenous evaluation processes: that land is a living presence, that every person and entity has a purpose or gift, that family and community are central, and that the sovereignty of Nations must be respected.

How might you identify the core beliefs and values that guide life promotion initiatives in your community? Centering these values and beliefs can help guide evaluation efforts in a way that attends not only to outcomes, but importantly, to the process as well.

Given that research and evaluation has sometimes been conducted in harmful ways in First Nations communities, it is important to center ethical practice when evaluating initiatives as well. Here are some guidelines on [ethical engagement in community work](#) that can be useful for grounding evaluation in the core values of doing no harm and centering dignity for all.

### Walk the talk.

Before evaluating outcomes, start by looking inward at your own organizational structure and processes. Do they reflect the core values and beliefs you identified above as central to this work? Does your team operate in a way that reflects those commitments?

It is important for those doing the evaluating to fully embody and put into practice the criteria by which the evaluation is being done. Otherwise, there will be blind spots, unreasonable expectations, and inconsistencies. Most importantly, however, it will not create conditions for success.

When we walk the talk ourselves, we are much more capable of ethically and effectively promoting good action for and with others.

## Evaluating Life Promotion Efforts

### Recognize and mobilize the gifts of every person and entity.

Focusing on gifts does not mean ignoring challenges or problems, but it does represent a commitment to resist being problem-driven. Instead, a strengths-based approach embraces the belief that all people and entities have a purpose, and focuses on identifying and mobilizing those gifts. From this approach we can look at what is already working well, and put resources and energy into promoting and enhancing those existing strengths in order to promote life and wellness (see for example, the work of [Well Living House](#).) Continuing to identify and access gifts and strengths throughout your journey will help maintain momentum as you move forward. Importantly, tracking them can also help you begin to see when and how your work is making a difference.

All of the communities featured on this website began in this way – actively resisting the problem-centered narrative that sometimes surrounds the topic of suicide prevention.

### Draw on multiple perspectives in identifying markers of success.

Most of the initiatives featured throughout this website have emphasized the importance of diverse participation at all stages. Ensuring youth engagement; seeking guidance from Elders, developing creative partnerships with knowledge-keepers, academic institutions, businesses, and leadership; and even building networks among different communities in a region have all been ways of bringing many voices into an initiative.

When it comes to finding out whether – and how – your work is making a difference, this diversity is vital. Having so many perspectives involved at every step is important in uncovering blind spots, being transparent, and creating a culture of accountability. Be sure to invite feedback from those multiple perspectives at various stages throughout your project – not just at the end. Focusing on process (rather than results) when it comes to evaluation means shifts can be made along the way. This can increase your chances of making a meaningful contribution over time.

### Track different outcomes over time.

Paying attention to short-term, medium-term and long-term outcomes (including but not limited to suicides and suicidal behaviours) is an important aspect of life promotion/suicide prevention work. For complex issues such as life promotion and suicide prevention that are embedded in political and historical contexts, it also makes sense to focus on tracking progress.

Tracking progress requires that we have a good picture of where our community is when we begin our initiative. This requires an understanding of statistics and demographics, but also stories, anecdotes, and experiences from a wide range of perspectives and forms of knowledge. Marlene Brant Castellano (1997, cited in LaFrance and Nichols, 2010) identifies three categories of Indigenous knowledge that can be included: Traditional knowledge (which is handed down), empirical knowledge (which can be observed), and revealed knowledge (which is acquired through dreams, visions, and spiritual protocols).

When diverse forms of information is gathered and synthesized on a regular basis, progress can be tracked over time, to help us see if and how we are making a difference. For instance, some initiatives featured on this site have seen dramatic decreases in break and enters, and in suicides in their communities. Some have seen deeper connections being built among generations, and increased participation in community and cultural events. Some have led to meaningful shifts in identity or new insights for community members. Track different responses over time – and make them known in your community.

## Evaluating Life Promotion Efforts

### Seek diverse forms of feedback and evidence, including stories, art, and other creative outputs.

Be creative in how you seek feedback and evidence. What is important, however, is that you do seek feedback and evidence. We are often working with limited time and resources, and in response to very real community crises. Because of this, we can find ourselves working in a reactive way that doesn't integrate feedback, wisdom, and reflection into the process, basing decisions on what we 'think' is working in our community.

Generating this information can help us to make informed decisions about next steps; it can also help us build a shared language to help us articulate and advocate for this important work. Building up our understanding of how community-led life promotion initiatives can be effectively implemented in First Nations communities can be an important contribution to our collective life promotion efforts. This can help other communities develop their own wise practices as well.

Depending on the core values that underlie your work, there are a number of ways you can gain feedback and evidence to help find out if it is helping your community. Here are a few tools that may be useful:

[BC First Nations Health Authority Resources for Community Members Interested in Conducting Research](#)

[Well Living House Indigenous Evaluation](#)

### Reflect with others on what you are learning and shift gears if necessary.

While it is important to seek feedback in an ongoing way, gathering information is not where evaluation starts and stops. Make it a practice to synthesize, reflect on, and discuss this information with other members of your team and community on an ongoing basis. Importantly, be sure to include in your reflection teams people who are well positioned to provide culturally appropriate guidance to your efforts. For instance, the [Counsel of Grandparents](#) is an example of this from the Well Living House. See also "[Mental Health and Addictions Elders Advisory in Alberta](#)" (described on page 103 of the embedded link).

This will enable you to address shortcomings or challenges before they overwhelm your initiative, in response to local teachings, feedback, and needs. Shifting gears is not a sign of failure; it is an indication that you are committed to making a difference in your community, and listening to what feedback and evaluations are telling you.

### Adapt regularly on the basis of what you learn.

Your community is not static. It may be changing on the basis of your initiative, but also due to things outside of your control – such as elections, funding streams, losses, or developments.

While your initiative may have begun in response to community needs and contributed to positive changes at that time, this could change. Thus, your ability to make a difference may also change over time – even if your initiative has not. Ensure you have the information and guidance you need to adapt your initiative on the basis of what you learn. Be transparent with your community about and changes that are being made, and on what basis you are making them.