



Wise Practices in Indigenous Suicide Prevention, and Requirements for Future Frameworks/Approaches

May 2018

The Wharerātā Group met in Norway in May 2018, and one of the themes of the meeting was to share updates on what's working in Indigenous life promotion and suicide prevention. The following is the result of an extensive conversation based on the combined experience of the leaders in the room covering decades, and based on the teachings and Indigenous knowledge systems of networks of teachers and Elders.

The construct or phenomena of suicide is new for Indigenous communities, and many Indigenous communities may not have stories of suicide prior to colonization, as there were little to no suicide as it is now defined. The phenomena of suicide as a response to unbearable pain was not widely known in Indigenous communities. Some Indigenous cultures may have experienced self-imposed death as a choice of responsibility to community, but the key difference is the sense of responsibility to community. Suicide as an act in response to unbearable pain was quite rare, as Indigenous community and cultures had many layers of relationship, prevention and shared responsibility to each other. While pain is part of every culture, Indigenous cultures based in relationship have significant ways to protect each other through complex extended family structures, ceremony, and connection to land as a sources of strength and belonging. Suicide, then, is a new challenge for Indigenous communities following colonization, loss of land and community structure, and impacts of external dominant cultures upon Indigenous communities.

This is a key difference for Indigenous suicide prevention which demands a client-centred response which respects and upholds culture, and significant understanding of the long-term impacts of colonization.

The Wharerātā Group has reviewed suicide prevention approaches and wise practices, and hereby documents key factors and principles in any approach or framework to reduce Indigenous suicide.

The following build on the principles from Indigenous youth at the International Forum on Indigenous Life Promotion and Suicide Prevention, and the Turamarama Declaration, and the experiences of the Wharerātā Group on what is working around the world.

Principles

- Youth designed and developed. When a framework/approach is targeted for Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth must be involved to drive the design of the approach. It is not appropriate to involve Indigenous youth (or Indigenous voice) at the end of a design process, nor in a consultative manner only. The most sustainable action and the most effective action is designed by those who most stand to benefit.

- Social media for positive impact. Indigenous youth use social media, and social media can both be a risk and a preventative factor for suicide prevention. Social media can be harnessed to build a sense of support.
- Culturally based. This is an essential foundation for any supports for Indigenous suicide prevention, and it is also a multi-faceted principle. The Wharerātā Group is not aware of any effective program or framework which is not culturally based.
 - Strength-based. Indigenous knowledge systems are strength-based, meaning that individuals, communities and cultures have strengths, and this balances the risks in any discourse. Following, the strength-based approach to suicide prevention is to rename the whole approach to life promotion. Life promotion activities is the strength-based approach to reducing suicide risk. Indigenous culture and knowledge is a strength. To access strengths, services and activities must be based in the community, a community-based program which can build on the unique strengths of the community. Helicopter services cause harm. To build on strengths, service organizations must be Indigenous, and service providers must have a significant proportion of Indigenous employees, based in cultural competence.
 - Culture and community belonging. Indigenous knowledge systems and cultures are centrally built around a sense of belonging for every individual, family and communities. Individuals require a sense of belonging in community with responsibilities to each other. Communities are responsibility to neighbouring communities, and to the land. Indigenous peoples need to belong. Frameworks/approaches must have land-based activities to strengthen connection and belonging, a primary preventative factor against suicide. Services must be in community, and the approach to evacuate individuals at risk must stop. Indigenous individuals benefit from culturally competent and local services, and removal from these protective factors likely causes additional harm.
 - Holistic. Indigenous cultures and knowledges are based in a holistic perspective of the world and wellbeing. Suicide prevention therefore must also cross sectors, and must include schools. Funding must also include supports to families and support networks in situations post-suicide to reduce the risk of additional suicide cluster events, and this may require long-term supports.
 - Hopeful. Indigenous peoples demand an approach to life promotion which celebrates life, Indigenous culture, and the potential of Indigenous individuals and communities.
- Trauma-informed and prevention-focussed. As Indigenous suicide and the loss of sense of belonging is new, related to colonization, suicide may be a response to trauma, both in early childhood and the trauma of past generations.
 - Trauma in early childhood may be approaching critically high levels in some Indigenous communities. The evidence is that an individual who has suffered child sexual abuse in early childhood may endure much much higher risk of suicide in later life. Suicide completion under the age of ___ is highly correlated to child sexual abuse. More work must be done to support parenting skills and culturally based relationships within families and communities, to reduce suicide. This may be the least expensive and most effective approach in some communities – real prevention of suicide. The youth voices at the International Forum for Indigenous Life Promotion and Suicide Prevention named this factor as one of the top four factors to address, to reduce suicide. Our children and youth have given instruction.

- Trauma from past generations can be a risk factor for Indigenous individuals today. Many Indigenous Elders speak of the weight that some Indigenous carry, the pain of the racism and violence experienced by parents and ancestors. The children of survivors of residential schools in some countries may carry significant risk factors due to the trauma passed down, the pain passed down. An effective response to Indigenous suicide must be trauma-informed in the history of the country and community – what happened to the community which may have caused trauma? Indigenous youth at WeBelong called on adults and survivors to share about their experiences, so that youth can better understand what may have happened to their families. Indigenous communities may find their own resilience by sharing their history. Non-Indigenous peoples must also learn more about the colonization history and the impacts on Indigenous peoples. In terms of funding, healing from inter generational trauma is not a short-term pilot, it is a longer term community development approach. Therefore, funding must be long-term, over five years, which provides time and capacity for long-term planning.
- Trauma may also be continuing through racism. Wider racism against Indigenous peoples must be challenged and address. Racism can have many faces: refusal of service in stores and restaurants, lack of respect for Indigenous culture and knowledge in mental health training and service delivery,, minimization of the differences between cultures, demanding Indigenous to adhere to mainstream protocols, and lack of Indigenous in organizations from front-line through to board levels. All health and mental health providers must challenge the violence of racism against Indigenous peoples.
- Knowledge translation.
 - Wise practices exist in Indigenous suicide prevention and life promotion around the world, and communities and practitioners need a platform to share wise practices (knowledge transfer). International networks also provide an additional area of social support for those work in the area.
 - Indigenous youth development. Indigenous youth are leaders today, and more supports are required to build capacity and leadership skills.

Current National/Regional Frameworks/Programs and Wise Practices

New Zealand

- Indigenous suicide rates are currently increasing, and bullying is becoming a significant factor
- Maori Suicide Prevention Framework. Te Ray Matani at <http://teraumatatini.com>
- Additional resources available at the New Zealand Ministry of Health <https://www.health.govt.nz/>

Australia

- Indigenous suicide rates are currently increasing
- Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/mental-fifth-national-mental-health-plan>

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention strategy <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/mental-pub-atsi-suicide-prevention-strategy>
- Evaluation report Solutions that Work <http://www.atsispep.sis.uwa.edu.au>
- Wise Practices
 - Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration. A companion declaration to the Wharerātā Declaration http://natsilmh.org.au/sites/default/files/gayaa_dhuwi_declaration_A4.pdf
 - Headspace national youth mental health foundation and centres <https://www.headspace.org.au>

Canada

- Inuit suicide rates are among the highest in the world, and Indigenous suicide rates are increasing
- Resiliency within: Nunavut Suicide Prevention Action Plan for Inuit https://www.gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/resiliency_within_eng.pdf
- National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy by ITK <https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ITK-National-Inuit-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy-2016.pdf>
- No longer operating in the way it was intended, but a great model. National Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Framework, <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/452522/publication.html>
- First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum <http://thunderbirdpf.org/first-nations-mental-wellness-continuum-framework/>
- First Nations Mental Wellness Teams http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/sc-hc/H34-276-2014-eng.pdf
- Wise Practices
 - SafeTalk half-day suicide risk alertness training. <https://www.livingworks.net/programs/safetalk/>
 - Land-based culture-based services: [http://www.kwanlindun.com/images/uploads/HealingTogether%20-%20Design%20and%20Implementation%20of%20Land-based%20Healing%20Programs%20\(Gaye%20Hanson\).pdf](http://www.kwanlindun.com/images/uploads/HealingTogether%20-%20Design%20and%20Implementation%20of%20Land-based%20Healing%20Programs%20(Gaye%20Hanson).pdf), <http://www.uccmm.ca/seven-grandfather-services.html>
 - We Matter is a place Indigenous youth can turn to for an uplift, for positive support, or for a reminder that you matter. <https://wemattercampaign.org>
 - Facebook supports the Nunavut Framework <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/facebook-to-play-key-role-in-nunavuts-suicide-prevention-strategy/article35461229/>

United States

- Resources on the Indian Health Service at <https://www.ihs.gov/suicideprevention/>
- Wise Practices
 - Inuit Circumpolar Council - Reducing the Incidence of Suicide in Indigenous Groups – Strengths United through Networks (RISING SUN) <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/organization/gmh/risingsun/index.shtml>