CULTURAL CONNECTIONS TO LIFE: INDIGENOUS SUICIDE PREVENTION

Dr. Brenda M Restoule, C.Psych
First Peoples Wellness Circle
CFHI - Northern and Remote Collaborative
May 13, 2016

Statistical Realities of Suicide

- Indigenous suicide rates are listed as 5-6% higher than the Canadian average
  - Inuit suicide rates have been quoted at 11% higher than the Canadian population
- Rates are highest for Indigenous male youth between the ages of 15 to 24 years
  - Rates vary in different regions and nations
Risk factors for First Nations People

- Early childhood separation from family and significant others
- Unstable primary relationships
- Conflict with authority
- Substance abuse
- Physical illness
- Depression and other mental illnesses
- Lower living conditions
- Higher poverty rates
- Lower levels of education
- High unemployment rates
- Culture stress

Possible reasons why First Nation youth suicide rates are so much higher

- Feelings of isolation from both their own culture and non-Native one. Leads to feelings of confusion about identity and formation of their own subculture against a (perceived) hostile world
- Racism
- Physical and mental abuse
- Family discord
- Loneliness and powerlessness
- Alcohol and drugs as a response to culture stress, colonialism, social conditions, etc
Indigenous Vulnerability

- Predisposition to a sense of hopelessness
- Creates a group vulnerability
- Historical and current experiences contribute and perpetuate the vulnerability to suicide
- Indigenous peoples’ experiences of contact and cultural domination may reasonably be viewed as a loss of predictability and control and increases vulnerability
- Colonialism and colonial acts create significant vulnerability for Indigenous population

Vulnerability experiences

- Loss of roles through cultural domination by forced definition of lifestyle and livelihood with reserve settlements
- Loss of autonomy and independence through implementation of treaties
- Loss of cultural practices
- Loss of language
- Loss of traditional territory
- Residential school
60s scoop
Institutionalization (child welfare and justice)
Structural and systemic racism
Racism and discrimination perpetuated through stereotypes
Lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous contributions to the Canadian society
Marginalization from Canadian society
Denial of cultural values and Indigenous knowledge in programming & services in education, health, social services
Traumas and intergenerational trauma
Significant loss = complex & complicated grief

Most profound impacts of colonialism and colonial acts has been significant culture stress and culture loss

Culture stress and culture loss have implications on physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual health. Create opportunities for trauma & intergenerational trauma

Culture stress is defined as loss of confidence in the ways of understanding life and living that have been taught within a particular culture

Culture loss is simply known as the loss of cultural traits that are no longer useful or popular and inevitably disappear. Culture loss can be accelerated during periods of acculturation
Effects of Intergenerational Trauma

- Early colonizing interactions led to physical/medical implications (i.e., small pox, starvation) and caused significant trauma to Indigenous people’s sense of predictability, belief and trust in cultural/traditional understanding of care.

- Ultimately created profound sense of loss and helplessness, spiritual crisis, psychological and moral breakdown and overall drastic changes in lifestyle.

Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2000) AHF

Suicide clusters & suicide epidemics

“When I was 14 years old, a student in my class committed suicide and it just, it affects everybody. It leaves you feeling, you know, just incredibly empty inside because you don’t, you can’t, it’s so hard to understand. The way a person would feel, to go so far as to actually kill themselves, you know. So it’s, people who are even you know, who feel great about their lives, you know. Someone near them kills themselves and you start questioning your own life too. It’s got such a domino effect and it’s just everyone around gets pushed back and feels the weight of the pressure of that person who killed themselves” (First Nation youth)
Indigenous youth are more susceptible to suicide clusters and contagions.

- Geographic proximity
- Family relationships or close community relationships (they know each other)
- Shared risk factors
- Shared life experiences
- Intimate knowledge of the original suicide

Community breakdowns from suicide

- Families
- Overwhelming existing resources
- Collective psychic numbing
- Inability to define trigger and/or root causes
- Reactionary responses to addressing the problem
- Single strategy or solution is not effective or has lasting benefits
Perpetuating hopelessness

- Insufficient community based resources (amount and capacity)
- Lack of partnerships with external programs and services
- Jurisdictional issues
- Complex and unresolved social determinant of health variables
  - Poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment
  - Poor housing and water problems
  - Violence, trauma and addictions
  - Chronic disease
  - Spiritual confusion
  - Cultural identity confusion

CHALLENGES TO SUICIDE PREVENTION
COMMON SUICIDE PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

- Suicide awareness
- Training on recognizing signs & symptoms of suicide
- Training on how to talk about suicide
- Improving self-esteem
- Building skills
- Focusing only on 1 segment of the community

IMPROVEMENT RATES

- Slight improvements in some communities
- Changes were not sustainable
- Impacts did not have large group results
- Those who benefitted from these prevention activities were often those who already had some resiliency
What’s Missing?

- Missing:
  - Culture
  - Indigenous knowledge
  - Community defined
  - Community ownership
  - Focus on family & community
  - Need for building competency in managing life challenges

What’s working...
Cultural Continuity Factors Impacting Suicide Risk

As described in research by Chandler & Lalonde (1998):
1. Land claims
2. Self-government
3. Community owned education services
4. Community owned police and fire services
5. Health services
6. Cultural facilities

First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Model
Key Themes & Supporting Elements

**Key Themes:**

1. Culture as foundation
2. Community Development and Ownership
3. Quality Health System and Competent Service Delivery
4. Collaboration with Partners
5. Enhanced flexible funding investments

**Supporting Elements:**

- Performance Measurement
- Research
- Workforce Development
- Change Management
- Governance
- Self-Determination
Defining Indigenous Knowledge

“A complete knowledge system with its own epistemology, philosophy and scientific and logical validity….which can only be understood by means of pedagogy traditionally employed by the people themselves” (Battiste and Henderson, 2000)

The collective understanding of how the social, political and economic ways of understanding the universe and their place within it as a community or nation interacts. The foundation of these ways of knowing are based on and guided by traditional interpretations of these ways of understanding in everyday contexts (NAHO)

Indigenous Knowledge

- Strength and resiliency based
- Community action
- Spirituality based
- Importance of knowing history
- Nurturing a strong sense of identity (personal, family, community)
Reframing the Issue of Suicide

- Importance of moving beyond general education on suicide prevention or its impacts
- Avoid the perspective that this issue ‘belongs’ to a certain group of people or service agency
- Community based responses carries the greatest potential for success
- Support people and the community ‘where they are at’ by helping them define their strengths to support growth and development in other areas

- Nurture and enhance strengths
  - Build on skills and knowledge
- Create a sense of ownership
  - Foster leadership
- Promote resiliency
  - Dialogue about promoting life
- Enhance connections
  - Revitalize language, customs and traditions
Interconnectedness & the Medicine Wheel

- Reminds us that what affects one affects all and the world cannot continue with missing parts
- Belief that the entire community is responsible for achieving and maintaining health and wellness
- It is up to the community to help each other return to wellness and balance when any one person is in a state of imbalance

Considerations for an Indigenous Community response

- Multiple community impacts
  - Family structures and connections
  - Service provision
- Community grief responses
  - Multiple support responses
  - Natural helping system
- Community implications
  - Preparing a response
  - Changing community protocols
  - Education and knowledge transmission
  - Addressing determinants of health
  - Creating synergy for change
Cultural Connections

- Research with the Quebec Cree have found that people who report good relationships in the community and spend more time in the bush are associated with less distress (Tanner, 1993)
  - This is most true for men
- Spending time in the bush, an ongoing traditional practice of the Cree, is a recognized way of life that provides significant physical (source of food), social and spiritual meaning that contributes to well-being

There are suggestions that Indigenous ethnopsychology (concepts of mental health and illness and attitudes toward associated behaviours) promote better adaptation and outcome of psychotic disorders

- This may be because our people tend to label states rather than people allowing for the possibility that someone whose behaviour is bizarre today may be ordinary tomorrow
Nurturing Strengths

- Activities and programs that highlight the skills and strengths of people
  - Outdoor leadership program for youth
  - Women’s sewing circles
  - Senior’s craft time
  - Elders story telling
  - Men’s Warrior Training

- Build on knowledge
  - Education and training
  - Strengthening families program
  - Teachings (i.e., roles, death, birth, stages of life, etc)

Creating Community Synergy

- Support people in defining their role in supporting the community
  - Circle of Courage Peer Support Programs
  - Natural Helpers Gatekeeper Program

- Create community ownership
  - Taking Back our Community
  - Community dialogue on community story or action plan
  - Community circles

- Community defines needs and identifies internal resources
  - Community Response Plans
  - Raising the Spirit (response team)
  - Critical Incident Response Teams (Niwiidooktaadmin)
INCREASING CAPACITY

- Work completed through National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention (NAYSP) note training community workers in supporting people to address grief and prevent suicide is critical
  - Risk of community workers turnover due to stress of work
- Due to limited capacity (human and financial) critically important to develop strong partnerships and linkages (horizontal and cross-jurisdictional) with other agencies that can support the community and workers.
  - Requires breaking down cross-jurisdictional boundaries

Create Hope and Optimism

- Support healthy identity
- Assist in developing family plans to wellness
- Enhance a community response to addressing needs from a holistic perspective
- Celebrate successes
- Celebrate life (i.e., feast of the dead, welcoming babies, walking out ceremony, coming out ceremony, vision quest, berry fast)
- Ensure everyone has a voice
- Address systems issues
Promoting Life Through Belonging

- Recognizing internal and community resiliency requires knowledge
  - Relearning community story through storytelling
  - In sharing the community story examples of resiliency of the people during difficult and challenging times (i.e., assimilationist policy, genocide, poverty, racism/discrimination, addictions, critical events, natural disasters)

- Revitalizing resiliency factors
  - Language
  - Customs
  - Traditions
  - Roles

CREATING MEANING IN LIFE

- Culture camps
- Traditional protocols
- Language
- Acknowledging Indigenous knowledge
DEFINING PURPOSE

- People having a role in the community to create a community wellness plan
- Learning teachings
- Community and family stories
  - identify ancestral purpose that continues in current life
- Land based activities
  - Skills
  - OALE

Wellness Framework
CLIPS ON CHOOSING LIFE

THE ART OF LIVING

Literature to Explore

- Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada’s First Nations (1998). In *Transcultural Psychiatry*.
- Acting on What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations
- Suicide Among Aboriginal People in Canada (2007)
QUESTIONS?

Miigwech! Thank You! Merci!