



Strengthening Aboriginal Communities to Strengthen Youth Wellness

Like most youth, Canada's indigenous youth develop their identity through family and community, and a relationship with the land. So it makes sense that the strength of communities has a direct bearing on youth health and wellness.

The culture of Canadian Aboriginals is based on relationships with the family, community members, and the land. Understanding this fact is critical to understanding youth health and wellness and has been a lesson learned only after many national mistakes over the decades. Today it is understood that cultural identity is a major factor in the development of pride, and physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Across Canada there have been many youth focused wellness and training programs put into place, and they all have a common focus – restoration of wellness through mental health development. When the mind is despairing and thoughts are not grounded in culture and relationships, Aboriginal youth do not prosper. One of the important facts learned after many mistakes is that everything from mental health to successful workforce skills training depends on youth connecting to indigenous beliefs and values.

A Gift from the Land and the Sea

Sometimes it is difficult for Westerners to understand the relationship Aboriginals have with the land, yet it is the metaphor for all relationships. As one Aboriginal explains whaling, for example, "...we do not catch the whale...the whale is a gift from God that is sent to us." Once delivered to a team of community members working together, Aboriginals share their good fortune with others.

This is not a typical article on health and wellness because it is not about doctors and medical centers. It is about relationships. Unless the importance of relationships is understood, the direction of well-intentioned assistance could easily be misguided. Certainly, the trajectory of Aboriginal youth as a group needs to be changed. According to Health Canada, the suicide rates are 5-to-7 times higher for First Nations youth than it is for youth who are non-aboriginal. The suicide rates among Inuit youth are 11 times the national average and among the highest in the world. Aboriginal communities are close knit, and each suicide reverberates through the community.

Community Crisis with Social Cause.

Darien Thira, PhD, Reg. Psych, is a community development/mental health consultant for a number of Aboriginal communities. He is also an adjunct faculty member at the Adler School of Professional Psychology and wrote a doctoral dissertation on Aboriginal suicide resilience. In the journal article, "Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention: A Post-Colonial Community-Based Approach," Dr. Thira wrote that "Aboriginal youth suicide is often misunderstood as a (mental) health crisis...This article



redefines Aboriginal youth suicide as a community crisis with a social cause (i.e., the impacts of colonization) and cultural “cure” rooted in the reclaiming of Wellness through the contemporary expression of Traditional values.”

The message is clear: enhancing Aboriginal youth wellness begins with community relationships as the foundation, whether talking about training and education, overcoming substance abuse, reducing suicide rates, unemployment, and all the other issues plaguing Aboriginal youth. It is a major reason why TD investments made to assist Aboriginals are not just focused on helping entrepreneurs or simply handing over money to organizations working with Aboriginal youth. TD also invests in communities to provide increased access to skills development among Aboriginal youth, preservice Aboriginal arts and culture, and steward the environment. TD community investments focus on increasing Aboriginal high school graduation rates, promoting access to and participation in post-secondary programs, among other goals. In 2013, TD pledged \$350,000 over two years to the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre to purchase new facilities to allow for increased youth programming.² The programming is designed to help Inuit who resettle in Ottawa stay connected to their culture.

[Resettlement programs celebrate Inuit values, traditions, education, and culture.](#)

Community-based solutions are the right approach to developing youth wellness in Aboriginal communities. Dr. Anne Marshall with the Centre for Youth and Society at the University of Victoria lead a three-year research project to explore how indigenous youth understand and enact identity through community, family, learning, and education. She also partnered with and Bruce Parisian, a Cree Frist Nation member, to form one of four community and academic partnerships with their project focused on EAGLE Pre-Employment Training. EAGLE stands for Exploring and Acknowledging Guidance and Leadership through Employment. The 12-week job re-entry program teaches Aboriginal youth pre-employment and life skills with programming that incorporates traditional teachings and cultural practices.

As Canadian firms, nonprofits, and government agencies search for ways to connect with Aboriginal youth, they are discovering the process begins with community. Being able to form healthy and satisfying relationships is important for everyone, but for Aboriginal youth it determines how well they can connect with their cultural values and beliefs. Physical, mental, and emotional wellness for the youth depends on capitalizing on the strengths of community, including sharing, respect for Elders, and connection to the land and nature.

Community resilience fosters youth wellness. This harkens to the traditional principles in which Aboriginal communities maintained their own health, drawing upon the wisdom of the Elders and people of traditional medicine. When community reliance was diminished, self-esteem suffered.

[Gift of Wellness](#)



One of the difficulties non-indigenous people have is accepting the importance of culture on wellness. While Western cultures emphasize traditional wellness, like doctor appointments and nutrition counseling, Aboriginals bring communities together for wellness in ways that reflect their culture, such as drumming or talking circles. Engaging youth in activities like wellness gatherings is important to their health and success.

A corporation can provide pre-employment training in the belief it creates future opportunities for economic success, but when the cultural foundation is crumbling, wellness is not possible. As any employer knows, an ailing spirit or poor emotional state can interfere with productivity for any employee. Remember that Aboriginals do not catch the whale or hunt the deer. They receive gifts from God. For Aboriginals, wellness is a gift from God bestowed on a community.