

# INDIGENOUS SUICIDE: RISK & RESILIENCY FACTORS



Suicide is a critical and tragic public health concern. According to the World Health Organization, nearly one million people die from suicide around the world each year<sup>1</sup>. For American Indian/Alaska Native populations within the United States suicide is the 8th leading cause of death across all ages. For non-Indigenous populations, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death across all ages, 2nd leading cause of death for people aged 10-34. This rate is 2.5 times higher than the national average for that age group<sup>2</sup>.

Notably, suicide does not affect each community equally<sup>3</sup>. While some communities experience high rates of suicide, it is virtually unknown in other communities. Thus, it is important to recognize the risk and resiliency factors associated with suicide by engaging community specific strategies as well as identifying common best practices across cultural groups.

## SUICIDE RATES FOR AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE POPULATIONS<sup>2</sup>

**8th**

LEADING CAUSE  
OF DEATH  
ACROSS ALL AGES.

**2nd**

LEADING CAUSE  
OF DEATH FOR  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE  
AGED 10-34.

**2.5** times

HIGHER THAN THE  
NATIONAL AVERAGE  
FOR THAT AGE GROUP



## IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS SUICIDAL:

- Listen and show that you care without shaming or minimizing the person's feelings
- Stay with the person
- Find out the level of risk. Is there a specific plan? Does the person have means to carry out the plan?
- Determine if there is a history of depression or suicidal behavior running in the family
- Offer to help the person find professional help, and make sure to follow through
- Find out your community's specific traditional or cultural responses to depression, illness, or loss

## ADOLESCENT SPECIFIC RISK & RESILIENCY FACTORS

Indigenous adolescent identity development is a complex issue that is informed by many cultural, historical, political, and social influences. Some scholars suggest that Indigenous adolescents are growing up in a more geographically and historically distinct environment than any other cultural group.

**GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION:** An adolescent's geographic location will inevitably affect the experiences that are offered within his/her/their cultural community such as whether or not they are on reserve or off reserve, located in an urban area or a remote area, have access to equitable education and job opportunities<sup>4</sup>, and whether or not their land is being violated and polluted (e.g. uranium mining, Keystone pipeline)<sup>5</sup>. In addition, one's geographic location will also determine whether or not they have access to elders, traditional knowledge, or other traditional activities.

**ENCULTURATION:** One's individual or collective cultural identity, when fractured, places the individual or community at specific risk to suicide<sup>3</sup>. Opportunities for participating in one's culture vary depending on individual location and personal level of enculturation; these contextual influences are directly related to one's sense of cultural identity and belonging in a collective community.

**COMMUNITY LEVEL FACTORS:** The health of the community, which includes the financial and political resources available to the community aimed at supporting the survival of sustainable Indigenous communities, will inevitably affect individual identity development. If the community is economically self-sustaining, it is likely that youth will have opportunity for individual development, education, and/or training, which will impact their possible futures. Further, economic self-sustainability will affect the health and mental health services, child welfare services, housing, traditional food and hunting practices, and tribal policing/judicial systems that are available to young people and their families. When provided with a supportive community environment, which includes factors of economic viability, young people will have a greater chance of securing a positive sense of self-identity.

**COMMUNITY SPECIFIC CULTURAL INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES:** Culture can serve as a protective factor against addiction, suicide and community breakdown<sup>5</sup>. We strongly recommend that organizations take into account the need to add culturally appropriate modification to their literature and programming as a means of violence prevention. The more that communities feel akin to the information being shared and the skills being taught, the more likely they will be able to use that information to their benefit. We recommend that all agencies and interventionists, take a community engagement approach to modifying their literature to be culturally sensitive and applicable.



## THINGS TO CONSIDER

**CULTURAL CONCEPT OF PERSON<sup>6</sup>:** Many Indigenous peoples conceptualize their implicit model of self based on a cultural concept of person. An Indigenous conception of self is closely interrelated with others, the natural world, and connection to the spirit world or ancestors. In contrast, Euro-American conceptions of self are influenced by an individualistic or egocentric views of self. Ontological views inevitably interact with one's sense of identity, belonging, and development and help shape one's perception about his/her/their own future. For Indigenous peoples, there is significant emphasis on a sense of collective responsibility and cultural continuity. The Indigenous conception of self is closely related to one's family, cultural traditions and knowledge, and belonging to a collective community; understanding the unique cultural, historical, and ontological context of Indigenous peoples may help us understand why some Indigenous peoples suffer from higher suicide rates than any other identifiable population.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT:** The loss of culture and the history of traumatic events have had a lasting impact on Native individuals, families, and community<sup>7</sup>. The history of trauma includes separation from land through the federal creation of reservation policy as well as separation from their children through residential schools<sup>8-10</sup>. Federal policies such as the Indian residential school program aimed to strip Native American peoples of their language, culture, land, and practices<sup>11</sup>. Children returned back to their family homes without the cultural teachings. When tasked with socializing their own children, residential school survivors are faced with the dilemma of how to transmit cultural values, beliefs, roles, rules, and moral guides often without having experienced what it means to be a part of a family or a cultural community<sup>12</sup>.

## CRITICAL REFLECTION

→ What are the traditional healing and helping ways in your community?

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

As community caregivers, it is our ethical responsibility to balance historical events, contemporary symptoms (e.g. poverty), and oppression when working with Indigenous clients. When we can balance these three factors, we can help the individual make sense of their experiences. Practitioners must acknowledge the collective and cumulative emotional wounding that has resulted from historically traumatic events and the

residual effects of colonization. If we do not acknowledge how these forces operate in the background, we are not serving our Indigenous clients ethically. Without accurate or complete knowledge of the history, we may respond with indifference, disbelief, avoidance, repression, and denial of the community's historical experiences; these responses serve to exacerbate the patient's trauma response.

SUCIDE RISK FACTORS ACROSS GROUPS & AGES	CULTURALLY SPECIFIC RISK FACTORS	RESILIENCY FACTORS ACROSS CULTURAL GROUPS & AGES	CULTURALLY SPECIFIC RESILIENCY FACTORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ A previous suicide attempt is the strongest indicator for suicidal risk<sup>4, 12-13</sup></li> <li>→ Having a friend or family member commit suicide<sup>14</sup></li> <li>→ Psychopathology or psychiatric disorders including depression<sup>15</sup></li> <li>→ Childhood physical or sexual abuse or maltreatment<sup>16</sup></li> <li>→ Alcohol or substance abuse<sup>17</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ For individuals: loss of cultural teachings, language knowledge, and cultural identity threaten sense of selfworth and connection<sup>7, 18-19</sup></li> <li>→ For families: alienation from or disruption in family system (divorce, removal of children, death)<sup>14, 20-22</sup></li> <li>→ For communities: loss of language, perceived discrimination, rapid socioeconomic &amp; cultural change, peer/ family suicide or suicide clustering, and levels of acculturation<sup>7, 13-14, 19, 23-24</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ High level of social, familial, and community support<sup>13, 25-26</sup></li> <li>→ Community cohesion<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Sovereignty: achieving a measure of self-government, involvement in land claims, control over local health, education, &amp; policing, and an established common place for cultural preservation<sup>3</sup></li> <li>→ Cultural (re)connection and a return to practicing traditional ways<sup>3, 14, 27-28</sup></li> <li>→ Acknowledgement of collective conceptions of self (versus Western notions of individualized self)<sup>13</sup></li> <li>→ Traditional spiritual and religious methods of healing<sup>11</sup></li> </ul>

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### ALSO SEE INDIGENOUS TEACHING TOOLS: RESEARCH BRIEFS

- #2 Indigenous Evaluation
- #8 Research Methods with Youth

### FOR MORE RESOURCES

- [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255

### CONNECT WITH US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- Facebook- Indigenous Teaching Tools
- Twitter- @indedtools; #traditionalhealing; #indigenousresiliency; #nativeeducation

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Image Page 1: Courtesy of Emma Elliott, 2014.

Image Page 2: Courtesy of EMMAS Project: Native Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math Summer Youth Program, 2014.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND CULTIVATING INNOVATION-BCCI is designed to develop resources and practices that will have exponential impacts on efforts to improve Native student success across a variety of sectors.

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