

CULTURE FORWARD



IV. OUR NETWORKS HARNESS BELONGING AND HELP KEEP US SAFE

SECTION OVERVIEW

- ▶ Extended families create community connection.
- ▶ Community networks keep Native youth safe.
- ▶ Belongingness is a critical protective factor.
- ▶ Programs that create, support or extend networks build belongingness and reduce risks.

INTRODUCTION

Our communities have distinct group-level social, cultural and interpersonal assets. Indigenous cultures and traditions favor “family” and “community” above other domains as the nexus of individual strength and as a foundation for resiliency and coping skills development. It is not uncommon for our children to have a caring network that includes several grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters and cousins who may or may not be blood relatives, but are treated as members of the family. Our clan systems, various ceremonies and cultural practices also support the importance of additional spiritual kin, encouraging connectedness as “goddaughters,” “aunts,” “uncles” and “grandparents,” regardless of bloodlines and marriage. Reflecting this value system, Indigenous words for relationships are more detailed and precise than in English.

This network of blood and traditional relationships can help keep our children safe and promote their development with a large extended family watching over them and ensuring their connectedness into the kinship group and larger community. Indigenous healing and puberty ceremonies involve our extended



The above photo has been approved for use by the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's suicide prevention project, THRIVE. For more information please visit www.npaihb.org/thrive

family members in key roles that represent stabilizing or restorative forces. Embedded in Indigenous values, traditions and teachings are also structures for communal problem-solving. Communal thinking promotes a sense of belongingness, shared purpose and security that helps our youth to thrive.

Our military service members and veterans are cornerstones in tribal communities. They protect our youth and communities and honor traditional values and beliefs that lead them to serve in the military. They are often a source of strength for our youth and communities, exhibiting family and tribal traditions and upholding tribal gender and cultural roles. Together military service members and veterans cast a net of protection and strengthen our families and communities.

HOW DO CONNECTEDNESS AND BELONGING TO NETWORKS PROTECT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Connectedness and belonging have been found to help protect against suicide and substance use in research with our communities. Our youth experience connectedness on many important levels—including to their self, peers, family, community and the natural environment. This next section will focus on how connectedness to caring adults helps protect against suicide, an idea that a number of studies support. We will also highlight growing research on the importance of connectedness to school, peers and communities for our youth at risk of suicide.

Our close family networks help protect youth from suicide by providing important sources of strength. Connectedness to caring adults increases the likelihood that negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, including warning signs of suicide, are noticed and addressed before young people think about suicide, make a suicide attempt or die from suicide. Caring adults can also help to connect our youth to community resources. Our youth can be additionally buffered against suicide risk because connectedness has cognitive and physiological benefits through believing one is of value, cared for and belongs. Our youth will be better able to handle upsetting

emotions through belongingness and attachment with caring adults (Native or non-Native). Since we know that cultures and societies evolve over time, it is important that our youth have a continuous sense of belonging to help navigate our changing world.

“Communication over food and water in the home was where prevention was planted, with words of encouragement and affection. That was home-based prevention. There was pure love by our parents and grandmothers as they prepared food and they put that into the food. With that, you left your home with no intention to harm yourself knowing that your parents and grandparents armored you with love and the education that people may throw stones at you or downgrade you but that should not matter in whatever you are doing in your life.”

—Traditional Healer

In one study, Southwestern Native adolescents who made suicide attempts voiced the importance of connectedness to caring adults—these youth indicated that they turned to immediate and extended family when help or support was needed. These Native youth also described their cousins as being “really more like sisters or brothers,” because they were often raised together in the same home. They emphasized the importance of family talking to each other as a way to deal with their problems. Connectedness to adults and Elders was found to protect Yup’ik adolescents against suicide by strengthening family-based factors—specifically family cohesion, expressiveness, passing on of values, affection and praise in a study looking at their social networks. This study also showed the importance of connectedness to community. Community level support, opportunities and role models contributed to the reduction of suicide.

For our youth, school and peer connectedness are also linked to less suicide among students through strengthening feelings of closeness, sense of belonging and meaningful interactions with teachers and peers. Our students' sense of connectedness may also lower suicide risk through increased hope, mastery and self-control.

Lastly, a heritage of strong, culturally based positive social networks within our families and communities are important to decrease a specific type of suicidal behavior called contagion or clusters. Suicide contagion is when suicide or suicidal behaviors among someone's family, peers, community or in the news is related to suicide and suicidal behaviors in others or increases suicide rates locally. Connectedness and network-based approaches to preventing contagion resonate with our natural understanding that mental, physical and spiritual wellness are protected by positive family- and community-level forces.

STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR NETWORKS HARNESS BELONGING AND HELP KEEP US SAFE

Building a Community of Caretakers

The White Mountain Apache Tribe, who reside on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona, implemented a two-day community gatekeeper training (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training: ASIST) as part of their comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention. Tribal stakeholders thought this intervention would help their youth because it trains caring adults in the community to recognize the warning signs of suicide, become more comfortable asking about suicide directly and better understand resources to which they can refer youth. They gathered data from 84 community members over six ASIST trainings between March 2008 and June 2010. Most trainees reported they were satisfied and reported increased knowledge, confidence and intent to use their

skills. Younger trainees reported increased understanding of why it is important to ask about suicide directly and how this does not increase suicide risk (a commonly believed myth). Participants also advocated for adding local culture into the existing training. Today Apache stakeholders teach the culturally adapted training and have changed the name from “gatekeeper” to “caretaker” training.

Promoting Community Conversations About Research to End Suicide (PC Cares)

PC CARES takes an innovative and decolonizing approach in rural Alaska by building a “community of practice (COP)” of village health and human service providers, law enforcement, school personnel, religious leaders, respected Elders, parents, aunts, uncles and others who come together for three hours nine times a year. PC CARES works to strengthen individual and communal learning about suicide prevention with the purpose of inspiring and supporting each other to take practical action on multiple levels to promote holistic health and by doing so, to ultimately prevent suicide. This approach empowers individuals and the community by focusing on their ability to analyze and interpret research findings, to make the best-informed decisions for themselves and to work together toward a shared goal.

The format for the monthly meetings, which are facilitated by local and primarily Indigenous group leaders, includes a brief presentation of research findings and time for reflecting on how their lived experience and the research is relevant to their community through storytelling. Storytelling is an important teaching and empowerment tool that Indigenous peoples have used for generations. Further, meetings include discussions of how they might apply this information individually and collectively using community resources that are aligned with cultural and spiritual preferences.



Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

Elders Pass on Language, Values and Culture to Youth in Schools

White Mountain Apache Elders drew community attention to the importance of culture and language to prevent youth suicide. The Elders feel that language provides youth with a strong sense of self, identity and being connected to the community. The Elders began to teach Apache language and culture in schools on their reservation with a standardized curriculum. Members of the Elders' Council have been visiting the local schools to teach youth about Apache culture, language and ways of life with this curriculum since February 2014, reaching over 1,000 youth. The importance of respect emerged as a theme that was encompassed across all the lessons. The content of the lessons corresponds with seasonal teachings, and include Apache words and stories. Lastly, lessons change to include

monthly responsibilities, such as taking part in cultural activities during that season. Students reported enjoying the program and demonstrated increased knowledge of Apache language and culture. Local teachers have reported that students' experiences with Apache Elders resulted in improved school behavior as well as increased respect, consideration and empathy toward one another.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- ▶ Support programs that strengthen our youths' connectedness and belongingness to their family, school, community and tribe.
- ▶ Strengthen family networks to be better able to talk to one another openly about their problems, to express their feelings, pass on values and provide affection and praise.
- ▶ Promote closeness, sense of belonging and meaningful interactions with teachers and peers in your schools.
- ▶ Host events that promote open dialogue and communal problem solving around suicide prevention. Engage grassroots leaders, those with lived experience and loss survivors to build community-level support, opportunities and role models.
- ▶ Conduct trainings that connect and build networks of helpers.
- ▶ Put together and disseminate a guide of formal and informal community resources.
- ▶ Integrate the strengths of Native networks in your community's response to a suicide death, clusters of suicides or attempts and suicide contagion.

LEARN MORE HERE:

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Montana Department of Health and Human Services. (2017). Montana Native Youth Suicide Reduction Strategic Plan. Retrieved from: <https://dphhs.mt.gov/Portals/85/suicideprevention/MontanaNativeYouthSuicideStrategicPlan.pdf>

National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). (2009). Ensuring The Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit For Tribal Child Welfare Programs. Retrieved from: <https://vawnet.org/material/ensuring-seventh-generation-youth-suicide-prevention-toolkit-tribal-child-welfare-programs>

Mental Health Innovation Network. (2018). Rising Sun: Reducing the Incidence of Suicide in Indigenous Groups—Strengths United Through Networks Toolkit. Retrieved from: <https://www.mhinnovation.net/collaborations/rising-sun/rising-sun-toolkit>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Indian Health Service, & National Indian Health Board. (2016). The National Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda. Retrieved from: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/The-National-Tribal-Behavioral-Health-Agenda/PEP16-NTBH-AGENDA>

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