Promising Practices in Indigenous Mental Health

Laurence J. Kirmayer, MD, FRCP, FCAHS, FRSC

PANEL 2A: HEALTH SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE: PROMISING PRACTICES
Cultural Safety

- Understand the historical and contemporary social, economic and political contexts that create health disparities, social inequities, and structural violence
- Build relationships with others based on recognition, respect, and inclusiveness
- Establish a safe situation for dialogue by sharing power and control
- Recognize diverse knowledges and ways of knowing


Unique Situation of Aboriginal Communities

- diversity of Aboriginal cultures and communities
- link between mental health and historical trauma
- high prevalence of specific problems (e.g. suicide, substance use)
- importance of cultural identity, values and traditions
Historical & Contemporary Determinants of Mental Health

- Colonization, cultural suppression, forced assimilation
  - Sedentarization, forced relocation
  - Residential school system, systematic out-adoption
- Economic marginalization, poverty and ‘relative misery’
- Crowded housing, food and water insecurity
- Exposure to violence, disrupted parenting
- Political disempowerment, bureaucratic/technocratic control
- Racism and discrimination
- Lack of recognition of Indigenous identity and human rights
- Environmental degradation and climate change

The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma

Amy Bombay
University of Ottawa

Kimberly Matheson
Carleton University

Hymie Anisman
Carleton University

Abstract
The current paper reviews research that has explored the intergenerational effects of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada, in which Aboriginal children were forced to live at schools where various forms of neglect and abuse were common.
Distinctive Features of Indigenous Suicide

- rates much higher than the general population & in some regions, have increased in recent years
- rates vary widely across communities
- young males most affected by death by suicide
- prevalence in young women increasing
- suicides often occur in clusters
- rates of depression, alcohol and substance use, and trauma exposure are high but proportion of suicides attributable to these problems and to social disadvantage is unknown

Alternative Interpretations

**Local control**
- sense of empowerment, collective self-efficacy & self-esteem

**Better infrastructure**
- more activities for youth

**High level of community organization**
- order, solidarity & support, power sharing

**Larger community**
- buffering effect

**More economically successful**
- more opportunities for youth

**Adaptation rather than pure traditionalism**
Indigenous Strategies of Resilience

- Connection to land and sense of place as ways of constituting and regulating the ecocentric self
- Recuperation of tradition, language, spirituality, healing as personal and collective resources
- Stories and storytelling as privileged way of knowing and transmitting collective identity
- Political activism as source of collective and individual agency


Gaps in Knowledge

• very little psychiatric epidemiology
• limited data from RCTs in general population available on suicide prevention, mental health promotion
  ◦ school-based programs (SOS, GBG, Sources of Strength)
  ◦ improvement in knowledge and attitudes
  ◦ reduction in risk factors; no evidence for reduction in suicide
  ◦ for youth who have made an attempt
  ◦ follow-up from emergency/hospital
  ◦ treatment of depression; dialectical behaviour therapy
• no RCT or CCS evidence for First Nations, Inuit, Métis
• limited data on culturally-based interventions

Promising Practices in Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Promotion

• provide mental health services: crisis, therapy, postvention
• promote community empowerment and address inequities
• support positive parenting and family life
• strengthen cultural identity, language, belonging
• create youth educational, recreational, vocational opportunities
• address marginalization, racism, discrimination, structural violence in wider society
Listening to One Another to Grow Strong

Mental Health Promotion for Aboriginal Youth

Cultural Based, Family Centred Mental Health Promotion for Indigenous Youth

www.mcgill.ca/mhp
How does the intervention work?

- engaging community in action on mental health
- valuing Indigenous culture, history and community
- strengthening cultural identity
- helping youth learn coping strategies and social skills
- improving family communication and parenting skills
- connecting across the generations to Elders
- increasing sense of belonging within community

Key Questions & Challenges

• How can we strengthen the evidence base on mental health needs and solutions?
• What role do specific cultural knowledge, values and practice play in resilience, well-being and recovery?
• How can adequate mental health services be provided to culturally and geographically diverse communities?
• How can mental health promotion and illness prevention be advanced through collaboration at community, health systems, and larger social networks?

References


