Mental Health Commission of Canada

Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Roots of Hope

A Community Suicide Prevention Project

Roots of Hope Case Study

Culturally Appropriate/ Lived Experience/Community-centred

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Culturally Appropriate guiding principle: **Develop, implement, and evaluate interventions that respect a diversity of cultures and are responsive and appropriate (for the overall community and specific subpopulations).**

Lived Experience guiding principle: **Recognize the important role of suicide attempt and suicide loss survivors, persons with lived experience, individuals bereaved by suicide, and caregivers in guiding suicide prevention efforts.**

Community-centred guiding principle: **Develop initiatives that are community led, tailored to its current level of readiness, and driven by engaging and empowering local stakeholders.**

INTRODUCTION

What links these three guiding principles is the commitment to discovering, learning about, and considering the unique characteristics and history in each Roots of Hope community. They also help project teams adapt their approach and be sensitive to the realities and strengths in their local area.

Project leads identified three key themes in connection with these principles:

1. **Listen** — There is great value in listening to what matters to a Roots of Hope community and learning about their history of addressing suicide.
2. **The lived experience perspective is essential** — The unique perspectives of people who have lived and living experience of suicide are key to designing and implementing an effective local project.
3. **Be respectful and sensitive to the needs of diverse cultures** — Effective Roots of Hope projects are sensitive to the diverse history, cultural traditions, needs, and priorities of different groups within their community. This knowledge is invaluable for building trusting relationships and designing and implementing local projects.

ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

Roots of Hope is a Canadian community-led suicide prevention model. It draws on strengths and expertise within communities to design and implement tailored local initiatives. Using a collaborative approach across many sectors, it seeks to reduce the impact of suicide in each participating community.

We developed Roots of Hope with experts and communities from across Canada and around the world. Its five pillars and 13 guiding principles provide a framework that each community can adapt to their own needs.

The seven Roots of Hope case studies in this series reflect the wisdom and experience of project leaders from Early Adopter communities across the country, who represent diverse populations in a range of urban, rural, and remote settings. The series focuses on what project leads found to be effective in tailoring and implementing Roots of Hope in their communities. While each case study highlights up to three guiding principles, every project leader interviewed stressed the collective value of all 13.

The work to create and test something new is very different from implementing a proven program. We would therefore like to acknowledge Early Adopter project leads for their courage and willingness to pilot a new approach with us. We would also like to thank them for so generously sharing their wisdom and insights, which will make the work of future communities easier and more effective.

LISTEN

Insight #1 Invest time to learn about the community and its history

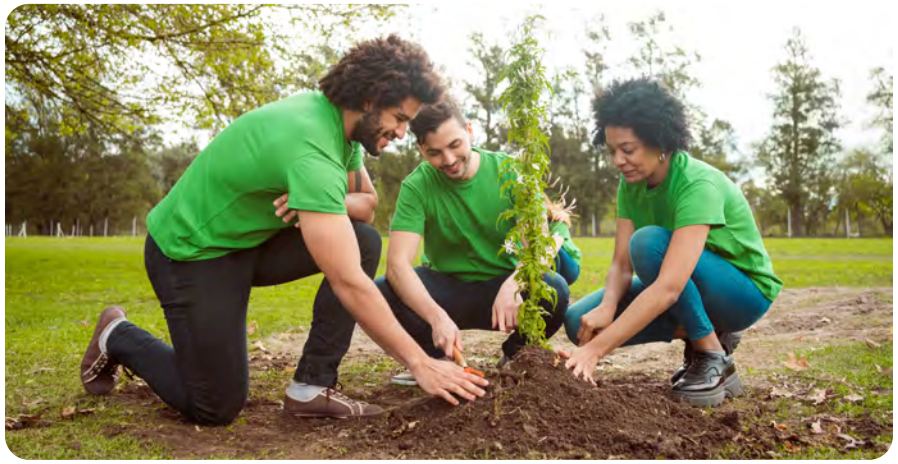
To be community centered, a Roots of Hope project must have an in-depth understanding of the culture, challenges, strengths, and history of the local community. This begins by ensuring that the project team identifies key partners and potential community champions. Engaging these people and learning about current and past suicide programs and services is where a project team's understanding should begin. As one project lead noted, "The coordinator needs to listen with empathy and hear what folks are saying." Once local partners and champions are identified, they can support the project team to engage additional groups and individuals. That process deepens the team's understanding of community members' perceptions about suicide — as well as their hopes, needs, and priorities for addressing the issue. According to one respondent, "Any time I host an event, I always ask myself: Who are these people? Why are they here? What do they want?"

The importance of understanding the community in these ways is essential. Several project leads mentioned that being from the area was extremely valuable. Because they are known and trusted, they can better appreciate the community's people and dynamics. As one project lead said, "Being community centered is a commitment to being flexible and letting communities set their priorities and approaches to suicide prevention."

It's important to have both broad and deep engagement in the community to 'knit' a safety net for this work.

Understanding the community includes assessing its readiness to engage in a local initiative. One project lead used her own readiness assessment in addition to the situational analysis that was part of the community selection process. In fact, as the Roots of Hope model expands, some project leads felt that it would be beneficial over time to be able to distinguish which communities are well suited for a local project and which are not.

Knowing a community's history is particularly important when it has previous experience with suicide. As one project lead said, "Be aware of the degree to which your community is already traumatized by suicide. Otherwise, you can be unintentionally insensitive when introducing Roots of Hope." Another respondent advised that, "When using a trauma-informed approach, you have to realize that several key partners are also already impacted, and potentially triggered, as you are doing the work." In spite of these challenges, one project lead pointed out that "opportunities for acknowledgments while working with partners and communities actually create another level of community healing. These situations emphasize the importance of local involvement and the challenge of continuing to be engaged in this work."



Insight #2 Be open and curious

A willingness to be humble (and not assume you need to have all the answers) is a good attitude to embrace according to project leads. This mindset demonstrates a commitment to shaping the project around community priorities while building on its strengths. One respondent, while stressing how important it was to manage community expectations, said that teams should "expect to be flexible in their planning and confident about tailoring the initiative to meet their community's unique needs — and also be willing to change course if their initial plan isn't resonating."

> *In our experience, acting as an intermediary heightens community ownership because we don't impose a standard solution.*

Several project leads recognized the value of having teams ask questions, particularly when working with cultural groups and priority populations. While it can be unpleasant not to have answers, especially when partners and/or community members are expecting you to tell them what you'll be doing, project leads stressed the importance of continually conveying how Roots of Hope is designed: as a project to be created *with*, not *for* each community. One interviewee pointed out the benefit of emphasizing "how (and why) to build a 'whole community approach.'" Some project leads suggested that teams can address a community's concern with having answers by promising to circle back and share what you've heard, along with a draft action plan for further feedback and input. This approach enables you to stress that the plan needs to be a shared one, owned by all, and that many groups and individuals will be needed to put it into action.

Insight #3 Be aware of assumptions in yourself and others

Being aware of assumptions — yours and others — is another key aspect of listening. Project leads highlighted the importance of being teachable and being able to recognize teachable moments when they arise. The moment one project lead sensed tension in a meeting, she would ask questions and seek to understand. When the local health director "publicly recognized [her] as a 'big sister,'" she was deeply moved because she had seen that person as an "equally valuable teacher and had actively sought her advice."

The value of being aware of assumptions was further highlighted in a project lead's story about a faith leader who assumed he couldn't work with First Nations communities due to the legacy of residential schools and Christian churches. This man was not from Canada and was very sensitive to his "lack of knowledge about the context of truth and reconciliation." Yet such an acknowledgment is a prime example of how exploring assumptions and bringing them to the surface can help create powerful learning moments for all involved.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVE IS ESSENTIAL

Project leads strongly emphasized the value of incorporating the insights and leadership of people with lived and living experience of suicide (even if doing so wasn't always easy). According to one respondent, "Engaging people with lived experience was really important. We had folks who were very keen to join our work and our action. Having them from the beginning made the project so much better." A second lead highlighted the value of the lived experience perspective for helping the project team "shape messages specifically targeting men." For a third interviewee, input from priority populations was "instrumental in helping us intentionally take inspirations from other places and adapt it to our 'place.'" One other project lead said that, "Those with lived and living experience helped us better understand what gives a sense of hope, which in turn led us to understand the skills and supports that were needed."

Approaches to engaging individuals with lived and living experience varied across the different projects. As some initiatives prepare to continue their work, they're already thinking about how to expand the role of leaders that have such experience. As one project lead said, "We've been fortunate to have many brave individuals with lived experience, who've given much to this process. Now we are seeking to grow and centre this experience across all aspects of our next implementation cycle — most importantly, by having these individuals direct our next governance model and (hopefully) more of the work moving forward."

> *"You absolutely can't do this work without leadership from folks with lived experience of suicide. Clinicians alone miss huge opportunities to address this issue or offer things that are relevant and much needed."*

Insight #4 Define lived and living experience broadly

Many project leads emphasized the importance of defining "lived and living experience" broadly. As one project lead explained, "folks that are designated as 'lived experience' aren't the only ones in our project whose lives have been touched by suicide. This realization only came up in one-to-one conversations, and many of these individuals didn't actually share their personal experiences when acting in their formal 'role' with the project."

Recognizing that different priority populations may have distinct needs or require particular approaches, some project teams have learned that these groups also have much in common. According to one project lead, "We've had significant engagement with five priority populations. Initially, we had a high-risk community team, while groups for each subpopulation operated separately. But these groups asked if they could be brought together to work, and then each go out to different circles. This way of working enabled us to tailor our activities to the various priority populations."

Insight #5 Sharing stories is powerful and can be a source of hope

Project leads saw the power of story as particularly useful when working with many different people on the issue of suicide. Stories have always been central to how humans make sense of the world, but they are also memorable because they engage our rational mind and our emotions. Through this process, they help us create meaning out of patterns, foster a sense of community, encourage empathy across differences, and change our values, mindsets, and attitudes. For one project lead, "Sharing stories connects you spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. Any healing work that incorporates this perspective helps you reach more people, specifically those that are hardest to reach. Stories are also very culturally appropriate." Another project lead noted that, "Suicide is one of the most powerful turning points that humans can go through. To hear stories of hope can have a great impact. Deep connection with someone who hasn't experienced this is incredibly profound."

BE RESPECTFUL AND SENSITIVE TO THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE CULTURES

Many Early Adopters noted the significance of having local project leads who can view their work through a cultural lens. They included several examples that highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity in working with First Nations communities.

Insight #6 Cultural sensitivity when engaging First Nations communities

One project lead emphasized that, "When working with a First Nation, it's essential that their leadership be honoured and respected. They need to be involved and consulted. It was most effective when I met partners where they were at and helped them advance what was important to them." This advice was echoed by another respondent, who said that, "First Nations are very consultative and expect the community to be part of the process. So it's important to get broad buy-in and feedback. The first

Roots of Hope meeting with the Mental Health Commission of Canada had more stakeholders in the room than health officials." Another project lead said they received advice about how to be culturally sensitive before reaching out to their local Indigenous communities, which was invaluable in their local project's relationship-building efforts.

Insight #7 Appreciating the distinct needs of different populations and groups

For some projects, engaging people with lived and living experience also meant doing so from each project's priority subpopulations and ensuring that each of these individuals' leadership was leveraged and supported. For example, teams provided funding to enable first responders (a high-risk priority population) to run the ASIST suicide prevention program for first responders. They also offered funding and support to leaders and organizations in Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ communities to develop or offer their own initiatives in culturally sensitive ways.

> *Working closely with First Nations communities really taught us the importance of relationships and keeping thoughts and ideas of reconciliation in mind.*

CONCLUSION

One project lead felt that the guiding principles were more useful than the 5 pillars. "When you think about groups that want to engage in and implement this work," she said, "the guiding principles need to be the foundation of the pillars. They answer the pillars' 'to what end' question and are ultimately what the outcome of the work should be about."

The insights and advice current project leads shared when reflecting on the culturally appropriate, lived experience, and community centered guiding principles remind future project leads to build relationships and get to know the needs, strengths, and priorities of the community your project will serve. This approach is also invaluable for making connections and developing relationships with community champions and key project partners, whose knowledge, resources, and commitment are essential to long-term success.

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