



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

Strengths-Based/Recovery-Oriented

Strengths-Based/Recovery-Oriented

Strengths-based guiding principle: **Build on existing strengths rather than on identifying and closing gaps.**

Recovery-oriented guiding principle: **Focus suicide prevention efforts on giving people hope, treating them with dignity, and meaningfully including them in the decisions being made.**

INTRODUCTION

The **Strengths-Based** and **Recovery-Oriented** guiding principles put the focus on moving beyond fear and despair and toward the opportunities to take positive action.

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

1. **Embrace a strengths-based approach** – While sustaining and spreading this perspective takes time and effort, it is important for teams to find and model strengths for themselves and their communities.
2. **Mobilize community strengths** – Discovering and building on the strengths and contributions of community partners builds commitment and sustainability. Emphasizing strengths can also help a community pivot to a sense of hopefulness.

3. **Leverage the power of hope** – Stories of hope and recovery have a powerful effect on individuals and communities.

4. **Acknowledge trauma and grief** – Learning about and honouring the many layers of trauma and grief in individuals and communities is an important part of their recovery journeys.

5. **Link suicide attempts and strength** – While some may view suicidal individuals as weak or vulnerable, their ability to overcome the human survival instinct can help us see them as uniquely strong, which powerfully effects how they are engaged and supported.

This case study offers examples of how local project leads applied these themes, along with the insights they gained and the recommendations they thought future Roots of Hope communities might adapt, according to their needs.



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.

EMBRACE A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Suicide is often associated with grief and trauma. For some, it can even evoke fear. Among the benefits of Roots of Hope initiatives are the opportunities they give organizations and community members to move beyond these responses and consider ways to take action and evaluate their many assets for doing so.

Insight #1 Fresh perspectives create possibility

A key assumption in the Roots of Hope model is that positive action on suicide and suicide prevention is possible. Yet, project leads found that holding this perspective can be a challenge. One reason is that a positive, strengths-based view differs from the norm, which focuses on information and data that highlight the scope and significance of suicide as a problem.

Some communities don't want to talk about suicide prevention. They want to talk about life promotion.

In the start-up phase it's quite common for project leads to generate a sense of possibility for the community and its stakeholders while emphasizing the need for shared action. Yet sometimes these two perspectives feel like they're in conflict. In explaining this tension, one respondent said, "Our committee can easily fall into the trap of focusing on what isn't working. This is reinforced by requests for information *and* reporting that highlights the problem (e.g., reporting the number of suicides, number of attempts). We need to figure out how to put a 'better foot' forward."



One way local initiatives address this situation is through their unique ability to profile individual and community strengths. As one project lead noted, “A gift the coordinators bring is a fresh perspective that can see strengths that the community itself just takes for granted.” Such a perspective is possible by embracing the strengths-based and recovery-oriented guiding principles.



MOBILIZE COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Uncovering and fostering the strengths and contributions of community partners builds commitment and sustainability. Emphasizing strengths can also be pivotal in giving a community a sense of hopefulness.

Insight #2 Build commitment by linking community partners around strengths

Discovering and leveraging each partner’s strengths and contributions is an important part of building the foundations for success. Yet, as one project lead said, “Building relationships of trust requires space to listen and share stories with acceptance. We need to suspend disbelief.”

Having community members as part of the Roots of Hope staff team can also be invaluable for engaging partners and building community commitment. According to one project lead, “Staff who are ‘of the communities’ are very effective because they can draw on community knowledge in thinking about how (and who) can best implement the project.”

Another aspect of community knowledge is understanding its history, which is important for developing an effective local project. One project lead offered this advice, “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.”

It’s essential to not only focus on individual strengths but also to have conversations about strengths of the whole community.



Insight #3 Cultivate trust and understanding with partners

Many project leads recognized the importance of respect and empathy in building partnerships. One respondent emphasized how important it was to demonstrate mutual respect and build trust by being “clear with partners that the project won’t necessarily be able to do everything the team wants.” Her advice was to take this situation “as an opportunity to inform/learn about each other and build collective understanding about the issue.”

When building trusted relationships, it may also be important to think beyond traditional approaches to outreach and to be mindful of *how* it is done. This point was illustrated by one project lead, who shared this insight: “We always talk about ‘reaching out,’ but for many people, when they hit a point of helplessness, it’s hard for them to get there. We need to think more about how we reach out in an honouring, gentle way, especially to those who can’t even reach out.”

LEVERAGE THE POWER OF HOPE

Human service organizations typically measure their impact by means of a reduction in psychological or behavioural problems. More recently, there has been a shift toward measuring the impact of growth in a person’s desire to prosper. Of the 24 strengths identified by positive psychology, hope is one of the top predictors in a person’s ability to flourish. Research by the University of Oklahoma’s Hope Research Center has found that people need both knowledge (pathways for how to achieve goals) *and* hope (agency or the ability to direct and maintain mental energy) to achieve their goals. For its founding director [Chan Hellman](#), “Agency without pathways is more likely a wish!”

Insight #4 Hope mobilizes action

Hopefulness is equally valuable for individuals and communities. As one project lead said, “Local Roots of Hope initiatives can be important in transitioning a community to a sense of hopefulness, which is a precursor to action.” In one example she noted that, before the project could get underway, “the community needed to *see* progress and believe something *could* be done” to address suicide.

Another initiative launched a successful four-episode podcast series called Stories4Hope in which people who had lost a loved one to suicide raised awareness about the issue. Some of the stories shared showed how people had experienced, “‘post-traumatic’

growth [or powerful and hopeful shifts].” The series attracted about 800 listeners as part of a month-long Resilience *and* Resiliency campaign, which included PSA announcements on five local radio stations, a social media strategy, and an editorial in the local paper.

Really embrace a strength-based perspective, seeing the positive and honestly believing that recovery is possible.



ACKNOWLEDGE TRAUMA AND GRIEF

Suicide and suicide prevention are inextricably linked with grief and trauma. Many project leads recognized the importance of acknowledging this link (and the value of bringing a trauma-informed lens to their work) while considering its implications in the design and delivery of their initiative. Acknowledging grief was also seen as a powerful way to foster greater empathy, understanding, and connection.

Insight #5 Learn about and honour grief and trauma

Individuals and communities that have experienced suicide continue to hold multiple layers of grief and trauma. Project leads saw the knowledge and capacity to adopt a trauma-informed lens as critical to a well-implemented initiative. Learning about and honouring these complexities is an essential part of everyone's recovery journey. As one respondent noted, "Coordinators need to be able to bring a sensitivity, knowledge, and appreciation of the multiple layers of grief and trauma that many folks have already experienced."

Project leads working in First Nations communities particularly emphasized the importance of having cultural and community awareness. When working with these communities, sensitivity to the realities of multi-generational trauma is essential. As one community member pointed out, "Unresolved trauma makes all kinds of conversations challenging. Our communities have lots of unresolved trauma spanning numerous generations. Knowing our 'wounds' helps us to be careful to not inadvertently reopen them." Project leads stressed that making their initiatives safe requires knowledge of "the extent of trauma, suicide loss, and re-traumatization risks, so that community members do not experience terror, helplessness, anxiety, disassociation, etc., due to project activities."

Insight #6 Unresolved grief and trauma can be a focus for Roots of Hope

One initiative in a community that had already had many suicide-prevention programs and services talked with community partners and stakeholders about what value-added contribution Roots of Hope might have. Through this process they found that their greatest contribution would be in focusing on unresolved grief and loss. As the project lead shared, "Unresolved grief and loss is an important risk factor for suicide. Our initiative has made community-based grief work an important area of focus for how we serve the community. We understand the impact of healing and grief that the other entities in the community do not have the bandwidth to deal with."

"I think our project has finally found our value-added contribution with a focus on grief."



LINK SUICIDE ATTEMPTS AND STRENGTH

How we perceive an issue affects the options and possible solutions we can see. Embracing the strengths-based and recovery-oriented guiding principles encourages a more positive and proactive approach to what we can do to prevent suicide and support those whose lives it has impacted.

Insight #7 Reframe suicide as a sign of strength

One of the most powerful insights project leads shared was a compelling reframing of how suicide is seen. Instead of the dominant view that suicidal individuals are weak or vulnerable, some project leads helped to promote the understanding that people whose lives have been affected by suicide have strength.

As one project lead stated, “Suicide and suicide attempts are often seen as weakness or deficiency. Another way to look at this is through Thomas Joiner’s perspective, that ‘Suicide is *not* the domain of the weak.’ People who attempt suicide have the strength to overcome the strongest life force: the desire to live. They are people who strongly desire something better in some aspect of their life.” This change in perspectives can have a powerful effect on how people who have been impacted by suicide are engaged and supported and how they view themselves.



CONCLUSION

Bringing a trauma-informed lens to a Roots of Hope initiative means taking the time to learn about and be sensitive to the unique history of the community. Doing so will help ensure that you aren’t unintentionally insensitive and don’t perpetuate further trauma.

Fostering a sense of hopefulness by offering a fresh perspective on a community’s assets and strengths can also enable positive action among its members.





Mental Health Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

Financial contribution from



Health Canada Santé
Canada Canada

Mental Health Commission of Canada

Suite 1210, 350 Albert Street
Ottawa, ON K1R 1A4

Tel: 613 683-3755
Fax: 613 798-2989

 @MHCC_  /theMHCC

 /1MHCC  @theMHCC  @theMHCC

 /Mental Health Commission of Canada

mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca
www.mentalhealthcommission.ca



Roots of Hope

A Community Suicide
Prevention Project