

# Promoting Mental Health in First Nations Youth: A Wilderness Program Evaluation Toolkit

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## INTRODUCTION

- In 2009 the Provincial Health Officer of BC released the *Report on the Health and Well-Being of Aboriginal People in BC*. Of the 64 indicators of health detailed in this report Aboriginal people's results were much lower than the rest of the population on most of these indicators.

*"Many factors are responsible for the lower socio-economic status and the consequent lower health status of the Aboriginal population. A long history of colonization, systemic discrimination, the degrading experience of residential schools, and other experiences have led to adverse, multi-generational health effects on Aboriginal families"* (PHO Report, 2009).

- Positive mental health is associated with having a strong connection to one's culture (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009).
- In terms of mental health, many Aboriginal communities are developing wellness and prevention programs that involve "on-the-land" and ocean components.
- What these programs share is a need for an evaluation tool to show their efficacy.

## BUILDING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

### How Wilderness plays a role?

- The content of these "on-the-land" programs varies from one community to the next, from programs that concentrate on traditional food gathering and preparation, to traditional medicine, to wilderness safety and survival skills.
  - Research has shown that time spent in wilderness can foster positive mental health (eg. Ability to cope and recover from stress)(Parsons, 1991).
  - In 1986 the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion noted the protection and conservation of natural environments as an essential component to any health promotion strategy.
  - Living closely with the natural world is fundamental to the health of First Nations people.
- "Our health as a people and our society is intricately tied to the health of the land and waters"* (Nancy Turner, in Brown, 2009).
- "As Coastal First Nations we believe there is an eternal and inseparable relationship between our people and the land and forests and sea"* (Brown, 2009).

### What is Tribal Journeys?

- Tribal Journeys is an annual canoe journey that coastal First Nation communities can choose to participate in.
- The journey itself requires up to two weeks of paddling a traditional canoe in open ocean water. Participants are known as a "canoe family", and spend every day paddling side by side.
- The objectives of the journey are for participants to:
  - >learn more about their culture and environment
  - >develop friendships
  - >experience living close to the land and sea
  - >participate in a journey that was a way of life for their ancestors.
- Tribal Journeys is a memorable event for the youth who participate, and an initiative that is an excellent example of cultural revitalization.

## ABSTRACT

Currently there is a significant health gap between Aboriginal people and the rest of the Canadian population. On almost any measure of health and well-being, Aboriginal people fare worse than other Canadians. In response, Aboriginal communities are mounting programs that aim to improve their health. In the Yukon Territory, for example, all First Nations have "on-the-land" programs for their youth. The content of these programs varies from one community to the next, from programs that concentrate on traditional food gathering and preparation, to wilderness safety skills. What the programs share, however, is a need for an evaluation tool that could assesses these programs. This tool would offer a way to communicate the efficacy of these youth programs in general and to document the specific benefits of particular programs.

Preliminary results from a community-based project will be discussed regarding the process and development of a culturally relevant program efficacy measure. This measure was created in the form of an evaluation toolkit that reviewed the youth experience of participating in the annual Tribal Journeys program. Tribal Journeys is a traditional canoe journey on the Pacific North West coast for First Nations communities. This opportunity is a memorable event for the youth who participate, and an initiative that is an excellent example of cultural revitalization. This evaluation toolkit was created to reflect the mental health benefits of the program. By evaluating the youth experience of Tribal Journeys, the researcher is investigating the notion that having a connection to the land will have a positive impact on the mental health of First Nations youth. This relationship is especially significant for the coastal First Nations communities who have had a deep relationship with the natural world since time immemorial.



*"As a First Nations person I think it's very important for your sense of identity to do this type of thing..."*



*"You get stronger physically, emotionally, mentally... You get stronger as a person"*

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Participants

- N = 18 (12 female, 6 male, mean age = 18)
- The participants of this study were all participants in Tribal Journeys 2011 with either the Victoria Native Friendship Centre or the Heiltsuk canoe family.

### Procedure

- Completed initial interviews were with key informants to learn more about the goals of the Tribal Journeys program. Three goals were identified: (1) to enhance ethnic identity, (2) to improve well-being, and (3) to develop group cohesion.
- Designed an evaluation tool-kit to assess the youth experience of Tribal Journeys in terms of these three goals. Working drafts of the tool-kit were shared with community partners and their feedback was integrated into the final version.
- Tool-kit was used to survey and interview the participants before and after the journey at various locations on the Tribal Journeys 2011 canoe route.
- Pre and Post mixed methods design. 93-item quantitative survey, and qualitative semi-structured interview.
- Quantitative survey was comprised of: The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), The Dimensions of Well Being Measure (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and the School Culture Scale (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sath, 1997).

## FINDINGS & FUTURE STEPS

- Preliminary evidence of interviews point towards improved well-being and overwhelming enjoyment from the youth who went on the Journey.
- "... (my daughter's) been practicing her language, yesterday I heard her speak in her language. That for me (as a parent) is a proud moment... Living your culture, and living the language that's really important to me..."*

- Upcoming data analysis will reveal if the Journey fostered the development of the proposed objectives.

### Future Steps

Use the findings from this study to...

- > locate long term funding for community partners.
- > increase capacity and accessibility of Tribal Journeys.
- > influence policy change.
- > help shape and re-design future evaluations.

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