

© Copyright 2006 National Aboriginal Health Organization
ISBN 0-9780785-5-1

Writer: Marja Korhonen, Ajunnginiq Centre

OAAPH [now known as the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)] receives funding from Health Canada to assist it to undertake knowledge-based activities including, education, research and dissemination of information to promote health issues affecting Aboriginal persons. However, the contents and conclusions of this report are solely that of the authors and not attributable in whole or in part to Health Canada.

Copies of this report may be obtained by contacting:

Ajunnginiq Centre
National Aboriginal Health Organization
220 Laurier Ave. West, Suite 1200
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5Z9
Phone: (613) 237-9462
Toll-free: 1-877-602-4445
Email: inuit@naho.ca
Website: www.naho.ca/inuit

AJUNNGINIQ CENTRE

The Ajunnginiq Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization shall promote practices that will restore a healthy Inuit lifestyle and improve the health status of Inuit, through research and research dissemination, education and awareness, human resource development, and sharing information on Inuit-specific health policies and practices.

The Ajunnginiq Centre's five main areas of focus are to:

- Improve and promote Inuit health through knowledge-based activities;
- Promote understanding of the health issues affecting Inuit;
- Facilitate and promote research and develop research partnerships;
- Foster participation of Inuit in the delivery of health care; and,
- Affirm and protect Inuit traditional healing practices.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedication

During the early stages of this project, three contributors of knowledge passed away.

It is our wish to dedicate this report to Felix Kopak, Peter Katokra and Eugene Mapsalak of Repulse Bay, Nunavut in recognition of their interest and enthusiasm for this undertaking, the openness and trust they exhibited, and their desire to see this knowledge travel to those who will benefit.

Our Gratitude for Elders Participants' Contributions

This project would not have been possible without the trust, co-operation and wisdom of the participating Elders from the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut. We honour them and are grateful to them for their gifts of insight, patience, collaboration, concern, and direction.

Repulse Bay, Nunavut

Felix Kopak
Peter Katokra
Semi Malliki
Eugene Mapsalak
John Kaunak
Abraham Tagornak
Sephora Malliki
Paniaq Siusangnark
Cecilia Angotialuk
Alexina Nanordluk
Elisabeth Kidluapik

Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories

Persis Gruben
Edgar Kotokak
Helen Gruben
Mabel Chicksi
Adam Emaghok
Sandy Wolki
Annie Emaghok
Fred Wolki

Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik

Willie Emudluk
David Etok
Mary Etok
Susie Morgan
Johnny George Annanack
Sarah P. Annanack
Elijah Sam Annanack
Selima Emudluk

Hopedale, Nunatsiavut

Sabina Nochasak
Andrea Flowers
Amalia Frieda
Andrew Piercy
Sabina Winters
Rebecca Nochasak
Nancy Lane

Organization and Support

Thanks also to our land claim organization partners, respective health organizations, community corporations and key organizers in the four communities, without whom we could not have achieved the successful co-ordination and level of valuable input that we did.

Francene Ross of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Inuvik, and Sheila Nasogaluak and Terry Kuptana of the Tuktoyaktuk Community Corporation, Northwest Territories;

Pat Angnakak of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, Iqaluit and Leah Katokra of the community of Repulse Bay, Nunavut;

Richard Kouri of the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, Kuujjuaq, and Kitty Annanack of the community of Kangiqsualujjuaq, Quebec;

Michelle Kinney of the Labrador Inuit Health Commission, Northwest River, and Marjorie Flowers and Sybil Hunter of the community of Hopedale, Nunatsiavut.

Interpreters were Helen Gruben in the Tuktoyaktuk session, Steve Kopak in Repulse Bay, Kitty Annanack and Emilie Emudluk in Kangiqsualujjuaq, and Mark Nochasak in Hopedale.

Caroline Anawak was project co-ordinator, arranging and conducting the focus groups and preparing the first draft.

Thanks also to Phil Bird for research and analytical support, and to Marja Korhonen for shaping the final report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inuit suicide rates, especially for young men, are many times higher than the rates for any other Canadians.

The Ajungniniq Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization believes it is important to incorporate the knowledge of Inuit Elders in all attempts to change this sad pattern. Suicide was not common among Inuit in the past, and in fact was very rare among young people. Focus groups with Elders were therefore held in each Inuit region, to gather information about the values and methods that helped Inuit overcome problems and survive even when life was very difficult.

To survive, Elders said, people must have hope and belief that things will get better. They must feel they are loved and cared about. They must have safe opportunities to talk about problems and emotions so that bad feelings do not grow too overwhelming. They must have skills to solve conflicts and arguments. They must be willing to face difficulties and take responsibility for making things better. They must have pride and belief in themselves.

They spoke of several important traditional values that were the foundation for a sense of connection, caring, respect, and hope, and which must be passed on to today's youth:

- *patience*: tomorrow is another day, problems can be solved, life will get better;
- *perseverance*: never give up, keep trying, difficulties can be overcome;

- *love and caring among family members and community members*: listen to each other, help each other, understand each other, teach each other, show love and caring;
- *communication*: talk out problems, solve conflicts and return to harmony;
- *awareness of self and others*: think of how your own behaviour affects others, pay attention to others so you will recognize if they need help;
- *confidentiality and respect for others*: do not gossip, do not lie, do not tell other people what you know about someone's feelings or problems; and,
- *personal responsibility*: take responsibility for your own behaviour and try to solve your own problems, apologize if you do something wrong, and also take responsibility for being helpful to others.

Specific helping and coping behaviours grew out of these values. The Elders discussed things that people can do when they feel overwhelmed, sad, or have a problem that seems to have no solution:

- *talk to someone you trust about problems*: keeping problems inside will just make them seem worse;
- *change your thoughts*: remind yourself that although life is sometimes difficult, things will change, days are never the same; tell yourself that you can make changes; tell yourself that you can feel better;
- *get outside into nature, be active*: this will help take your mind off problems and make you feel better;

- *focus on helping others*: you will feel good about yourself and take your mind off your problems;
- *don't isolate yourself*: go out, be with others, be active;
- *pray*; you can always talk to God;
- *stay busy*: learn new things, do things;
- learn how to handle arguments and problems with other people;
- *believe in yourself*: don't put yourself down, learn ways to develop strength and competence;
- *remember that you are not alone*: others care about you, others have had similar problems and made it through; and,
- *learn traditional skills*: you will feel proud to be an Inuk.

The Elders also provided guidelines for helping prevent loss of hope and belief, and for helping those who are feeling distressed:

- parents must listen to and pay loving attention to children, showing they are cared for; Elders and other community members must also show caring to children and youth;
- parents must teach children from an early age that life will always have some problems, but that situations change: children's young minds can't think ahead, and they must be taught to think and understand about changes and the future;
- be tolerant of others: try to understand them;
- approach those who seem worried or sad, offer to listen;

- always keep information confidential: if you are trying to help someone, let them know you will not talk about what they tell you;
- share your own experiences of difficulties, so people will know they are not alone and that problems can be overcome;
- help the person develop a more positive way of thinking; and,
- talk calmly, respectfully and kindly.

A number of specific helpful activities for those who are grieving the death of a loved one were discussed:

- visit people who are grieving: show sympathy and care by staying with them, sharing food, helping out;
- help people remember the whole normal relationship, including good times, and speak naturally about the one who has died;
- remember that grieving goes through stages and can take time, but do not encourage people to stay stuck in grieving;
- encourage people to talk about their feelings;
- remember important dates when the person may need support; and,
- encourage people to get out, be active.

Suicide Prevention

Elders also talked about the fact that young men are committing suicide much more often than women. They suggested that even traditionally, girls may have learned to live better in groups, to communicate better and solve relationship problems better. Men were more alone, out hunting. In the move to communities, women brought these coping skills with them.

The Elders felt very strongly that these traditional values and coping skills are as necessary today as they were in the past. They are the attitudes and behaviours that can help prevent suicide. The Elders welcome – they want – the opportunities to teach young people these Inuit ways.

They understand that suicide probably cannot be avoided completely, and that there will always be a few who make that choice. And they say that we must talk openly about suicide – but that the discussion must be built on the traditions that develop inner strength and belief in the future.

Inuit never gave up. Inuit always had hope.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background and Introduction	4	Discussion and Conclusions	30
Nunatsiavut	5	Appendices	32
Northwest Territories	5	Appendix A	
Nunavik	5	Traditional Knowledge Project Questions	32
Nunavut	5	Appendix B	
Suicide Research Findings	6	Coding Chart	35
Protective Factors	7	Reference List	36
Project Methodology	8		
Results	10		
General Themes	11		
Values	12		
How to be	12		
Conflict Resolution	13		
Gossip	15		
Responsibility and Apology	15		
How to cope and survive	16		
The Elders' Advice: Strategies for Helping Yourself and Others	17		
Coping	17		
Talking	17		
Thinking	19		
Doing	21		
Helping	22		
Dealing with grief	26		
Gender Issues	28		
Elder Marginalization	28		
Getting the Messages Out	29		

“Indigenous Knowledge is rarely communicated in a direct manner; instead, it is communicated in stories, events, dances, songs and dreams...The very premise underpinning Inuit Indigenous Knowledge is that it must be shared; otherwise it is no longer knowledge.... Indigenous Knowledge consists of finely tuned observations that include information about the environment, wildlife, humans, and information about the whole system.... There is a place for Indigenous Knowledge. It needs to be respected for what it is, a science, in its own right, that can work in concert with western science to solve the complex problems of the world. However, it must be respected and must be used to benefit the holders of this knowledge”

(Kuptana, n.d.: p.43).

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Inuit have survived for many years in one of the most challenging environments of the world, guided by a core group of values and beliefs which taught coping, endurance, connection, and survival. Elders therefore view with concern the loss of life now being experienced by younger Inuit through suicide. They say that historically youth suicide rarely occurred and that there are far better ways of handling and surviving life's challenges.

The high suicide rate seen in the younger Inuit population began in the mid 1970s and continues today. While the reasons for choosing to end their lives were of paramount importance to those who chose death, to others these reasons seemed baffling and too small to have resulted in such loss of life.

Older Inuit speak of being raised with an understanding that life would not always be easy; that many challenges would be faced over a lifetime that had to be acknowledged and surmounted. Elders talk of being guided as children and during their adolescence through stories and modeling of behaviour that taught coping with adversity, getting through hard times and utilizing time-honoured approaches to working through difficult times with energy, patience, focus, resolve, and dignity.

Such new influences as schools, settlement in communities, RCMP, medical services, alcohol, and modern media arrived in Inuit regions mainly in the last 40 to 50 years. Their impact has affected the passing on of Inuit survival attitudes and behaviours. Elders especially are of the opin-

ion that this has resulted in the rising tide of suicide attempts and completions.

They believe that younger Inuit possess a higher level of frustration, view many challenges as insurmountable and tend to suffer alone with their problems, quickly becoming overwhelmed and disconnected from others. This makes for a recipe for hopelessness, isolation and helplessness which may result in self-harm.

Scope and Impact

Today, there are more suicides by Inuit than by any other group in Canada, and the rates are appallingly higher than the general Canadian rate. And while the Canadian rate is dropping, the Inuit rates are rising. Hicks (2004) shows that the Canadian rate had fallen from 16.5 suicides for every 100,000 people in 1980, to 14.0 for each 100,000 in 1998. In what is now Nunavut, the 1989-1993 rate was 79 cases in 100,000, but had risen to 119.7 cases for the years 1999-2003.

Inuit of Nunatsiavut, formerly known as Labrador, (239 suicides per 100,000) and Nunavik (181 per 100,000) have the highest average annual rates per population. Because Nunavut has the largest Inuit population, it has the highest actual numbers – 135 deaths or 53 per cent of all Inuit suicides in the period 1999-2003. The Inuvialuit Region has significantly fewer suicides, as will be noted below.

The age of suicide is dropping, with increasing numbers of teenagers taking their own lives. Because Inuit suicides are young, the gap between Canadians generally and Inuit is even more striking when these rates are viewed in terms of potential years of life lost (PYLL)¹. Nunavik, for example, shows 7,665 potential years of life lost in 2001, compared to a Canadian PYLL of 399 (Hicks, 2005).

And although the rates for Inuit women are far below those of men, they are far above the Canadian average for women: in 2001, the overall rate was 4.9 suicides per 100,000 for Canada, 24.6 per 100,000 in Nunavut and 52.4 per 100,000 in Nunavik (Hicks, 2005).

While tracking and information collection systems vary among Inuit land claim settlement areas, a review of the number of suicide completions is testimony to the need for this high level of concern.

Nunatsiavut

Nunatsiavut has the highest per population rate. In the past 12-plus years, 55 Nunatsiavut Inuit have committed suicide (Hicks, 2004). Twenty-two per cent of respondents to a 1997 Regional Health Survey had seriously thought of suicide, and 15 per cent had made at least one attempt (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2004).

Northwest Territories

The Inuvialuit Settlement Region, in the northern Northwest Territories, has a suicide rate dramatically lower than the rates in the Eastern Inuit regions. There were 12

suicides in the period 1999-2000. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's 2002 report, based on statistics from the mid- to late-1990s, shows the overall Inuvialuit rate as being 18 per 100,000 (compared to a Canadian rate of 13 per 100,000). A Public Health Canada report on Northwest Territories suicide (Isaacs et al., 2000) showed that the male Inuvik rate was 40 per 100,000 as compared to a Canadian male rate of 20.8 per 100,000.

Nunavik

Death by suicide from 1973 to 2004 totals 188. Youth aged 10-29 accounted for 84.5 per cent of these deaths, and teenagers 11-17 accounted for 25.5 per cent of all deaths by suicide in these years. Males account for 78 per cent of all deaths by suicide in the past 30 years. In the past four years, death by suicide accounts for almost one out of every four deaths. (Kouri, 2005).

Nunavut

In the region that is now Nunavut Territory, suicides have occurred every year since 1975. From April 1, 1999² to August 2005, 177 suicides have occurred. Males predominate. The majority of suicides occur in the age group 14-24 years of age. Hicks (2005) shows that in the Qikiqtani (Baffin) region, the 1999-2003 average annual rate of suicide for young men aged 15-24 is an astounding 280 per 100,000 population.

¹ PYLL is the number of years of potential life not lived when a person dies "prematurely". The average number of years that a person can be expected to live is 75.

² Nunavut Territory officially came into existence on April 1, 1999. Before that, this region was part of the Northwest Territories.

Suicide Prevention

Suicide Research Findings

It is not the purpose of this report to discuss all the research regarding suicide. However, an overview of findings shows that the following risk factors have been identified for suicide:

- mental health issues, particularly depression; low self-esteem; feelings of hopelessness;
- previous suicide attempts;
- problematic alcohol and substance use;
- family or caretaker history of mental health problems, including alcoholism or other drug abuse, or depression;
- family or caretaker history of suicide; family or caretaker history of child abuse;
- impulsive or aggressive tendencies;
- barriers to accessing mental health treatment;
- recent stress or loss (relational, social, work, or financial);
- physical illness;
- easy access to lethal methods;
- unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health and substance abuse disorders or suicidal thoughts; and,
- isolation, a feeling of being cut off or separate from other people.

(First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, 2005; U.S. Public Health Service, 1999; White and Jodoin, 2004; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2001.)

In addition to those listed above, the following are some common risk factors for suicide among Aboriginal populations:

- breakdown of cultural values and belief systems;
- suicide clusters (where a number of suicides occur in a relatively short period of time);
- sexual orientation challenges;
- community instability or lack of prosperity;
- poverty;
- limited opportunities for employment;
- lack of proper housing and inadequate sanitation and water quality;
- isolated geographic location; and,
- loss of control over land and living conditions.

(First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, 2005; White and Jodoin, 2004; Chenier, 1995.)

Kral (2003), doing community suicide research with youth in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut, identified “problems in romantic relationships, the single most common precipitating factor associated with suicide. Anger and jealousy were common themes in stories about such relationships” (p. 38). This is of special significance considering Inuit suicides are so frequently young men who are just starting out in relationships.

Protective Factors

Research has shown that certain circumstances seem to make it less likely that a person will commit suicide. A number of protective factors have been identified:

- family and community support;
- sense of belonging;
- positive self-esteem;
- skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and non-violent handling of disputes;
- cultural values and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation instincts;
- good school performance;
- positive attitude toward school;
- good physical and mental health;
- early identification and appropriate treatment of psychiatric illness;
- easy access to a variety of medical and psychological services;
- effective medical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders; and,
- support from ongoing medical and mental health-care relationships.

(U.S. Public Health Service, 1999; First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, 2005.)

The sharing and transmission of traditional knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs have been disrupted in Inuit regions. It was thought that a structured effort should be made to approach Elders about how they used to handle situations. What was said in the past? What should be said and done today to address the high incidence of suicides in their areas? The focus groups were an attempt to gather some of the beliefs and strategies that were used by Inuit to promote and preserve life.

Between December 2004 and March 2005 a series of four two-and-a-half to three-day Elder focus groups was facilitated by Caroline Anawak of the National Aboriginal Health Organization's Ajunnginiq Centre. Inuit Elders were invited to share how they had historically learned to cope with difficult times, prior to the introduction of outside services.

One Elder focus group was held in each of the four Inuit land claim areas. Working with our partners, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services and the Labrador Inuit Health Commission (now Nunatsiavut Health and Social Services), key communities were selected. This included Tuktoyaktuk in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Repulse Bay in Nunavut, Kangiqsualujjuaq in Nunavik, and Hopedale in Nunatsiavut.

Participants were selected by contact groups within each of the four communities. A total of 33 Elders were interviewed: seven from Tuktoyaktuk, eleven from Repulse Bay, eight from Kangiqsualujjuaq and seven from Hopedale. Forty open-ended questions³ focused on traditional coping values and strategies, but allowed for Elders to shape content and direction.

Comments from Elders were later coded and tracked for analysis.⁴ A table was created for each of the four focus groups, showing each question, the speaker (identified by initials), the verbatim responses to the question, and content code(s) relevant to each response.

Originally, the coded data was intended to be transferred into a spreadsheet that would facilitate qualitative and quantitative assessment as well as the comparison of responses among Inuit regions. In the end this proved too awkward and time-consuming. An alternative strategy was considered, using a software program called The Ethnograph that is specifically designed for qualitative analysis. Like the spreadsheet, however, this strategy makes sense if there is a large amount of text data involved. The focus group sessions, however, only produced between 100 and 120 pages of text in the table format. In addition, the need to train members of the project team on basic use of the spreadsheet program and The Ethnograph software program proved to be a limiting factor. In the end, it was decided to proceed with a manual review and interpretation of the session group material.

³ See Appendix for questions.

⁴ See Appendix for code chart.

All participants signed a consent form agreeing to this material being utilized for the project, including for archival purposes and to serve as a valuable foundation for future initiatives. Participants did give permission to use names and pictures, but we chose to remove personal identifiers from comments in order to protect confidentiality.

Elders received a small research fee for their participation.

The project co-ordinator maintained regular contact within each partner organization as to the progress being made on the report. Debriefing of land claims organizations and contacts with relevant health authorities occurred in person when possible.

Inuit own their knowledge. Yet research among Inuit does not always make its way back to the communities or individuals who provided valuable information, nor is it always produced or presented in ways that make it accessible to community members. The Ajunnginiq Centre therefore arranged for teleconferences in each focus-group community in order to share and validate the draft report results with organizers and Elders prior to the translation and printing of this report.

Copies of the published document will be sent to the project's community organizers for distribution to the Elders who participated, and distribution will include pertinent community organizations and agencies, schools, land claims settlement organizations, Regional Inuit Associations, heritage bodies, research institutes, respective territorial and provincial Health Authorities, territorial and provincial governments and federal government departments. The full report will be posted on the NAHO Ajunnginiq Centre website at <http://www.naho.ca/inuit>.

Through discussion and reflection, the subject of how people themselves used to reach out to those who were troubled was explored. Talks included information about how people counselled their peers, motivated others, consoled those experiencing loss, confronted inappropriate behaviour, supported growth, change and development, and encouraged and maintained connection. The importance of teaching and living according to Inuit values and beliefs, as a preventive factor, was a theme repeated by participants.

As the participants responded to the questions it became apparent that they themselves had many issues surrounding family suicides, sadness, depression, keeping things inside, alcohol abuse, and other difficulties and that the process of doing the focus groups was in itself a healing process. While these life events were difficult enough for them to endure, they were even more distressed at the behaviours and attitudes of their younger generations, including those that led to suicidal thoughts, attempts and completions.

The Elders discussed their opinions about the effect of modern introductions to the North such as alcohol, drugs and violence on television, and of changes, both negative and positive, in community, social and family interactions. The groups' focus, however, was to gather the values, attitudes and strategies that enabled and encouraged resilience⁵. There was agreement that there was much to learn from how things were done before. It was thought that the number of suicides could be greatly reduced

through information and action that included promotion of Inuit values and reaching out to encourage people to seek help for their problems.

*“We know we cannot go back to how we lived but, by talking, we can get good things back and use them.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)*

“If some traditional ways were returned, it would be a big help.” (participant, Hopedale)

Ultimately, it was felt that there is no full answer to stopping suicide completely. Elders recognized that people have different reasons for killing themselves, but we do not necessarily understand the reasons and therefore there is no one way that will always work in prevention. As Elders from Repulse Bay emphasized:

“There are two types of suicide: [those who are depressed and] a person who is given everything and is loved by their parents but commits suicide and no one knows why – people don't know why.”

“No matter what you do, what is being said, no one is going to have a complete answer to prevent all suicides.”

“We cannot completely stop the suicide, but we can try to slow it down.”

⁵ Resilience means the ability to overcome problems and continue on in life in positive ways.

Despite very differing recent histories, there was a similarity in responses in all four focus groups even though they were separated by dialects, geography and thousands of miles. A clear and consistent pattern emerged in which coping was based on a foundation of communication, positive attitudes and thoughts, and involvement with each other and the world.

They spoke of learning this resilience through:

- direct experience;
- listening to their parents make specific points on how they should view and live their lives;
- stories and legends which taught how to think, behave, react, and manage;
- hearing indirectly, through others, how situations should be viewed;
- observing living examples of how to be; and,
- sayings that reinforced values and beliefs.

They were accepting of their role in carrying this knowledge and insight, and certain that this must not end with them: younger people must take up the responsibility to carry it too. One participant noted that it would have been helpful to invite young people to the focus group:

“We should have invited some young people and that could have helped them to listen.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

General Themes

Elders had much to say on a wide variety of subject areas but there were common themes and reference points throughout their commentary.

Family and connectedness were key themes in all the groups. Family is at the heart of all matters and there is an ongoing need for family ties. Family can play a role in either helping or hindering younger people contemplating suicide. Connectedness is a priority, and community and all its members are a resource that can be accessed. Parents must take time to listen to their children and to spend time with them.

“When my granddaughter shot herself, my son stood up and said, ‘Parents, talk to your children, to your families, [share] what you learned from your Mom and Dad, and also tell them you are there to listen.’”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

The theme of resilience and coping was central. In the past, Inuit learned to deal with problems, found strategies to overcome difficulties and understood that bad times will get better. The Elders thus placed a heavy emphasis on the urgent importance of re-introducing these coping and survival attitudes and strategies to youth. It was acknowledged that life is not easy. Elders indicated that from childhood on, they were often told that they would face hard times

Suicide Prevention

and many challenges in life. They were also given experiences of difficult situations appropriate to their age. They grew up knowing that difficult events would occur but they could handle them and survive. They grew up knowing it was expected and possible to cope positively and move forward to better, easier times.

Elders stressed that open communication is crucial to addressing the issue of suicide. In addressing life's difficulties, they said, youth, Elders, parents and other family members and community members must all be willing to discuss feelings and to be good listeners.

“My young one can ask me anything, when her mind wants to be angry; she comes to me and we talk it over – that is why talking is important. Teenagers should go to whoever they want to talk to; it would be good that way.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

Values

Elders in all four focus groups discussed traditional values and beliefs about how to be (for example: love, honesty, respect) and how to survive (patience, perseverance and moving forward).

Most participants indicated that no one value was more important than any other; however, connecting, helping, respecting, listening, sharing, and surviving are some of the values that have the most impact on preventing suicide.

These values were taught to the participants by their parents with words, legends and stories⁶, and by example, and must now be passed on to youth.

“My teachers were my Mom and Dad – they showed me what I have to know about living.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

How to be

Participants described the rules of living that they had been taught, and how these rules provided guidelines for behaviour throughout their lives.

“We were told what to do, what not to do. As they aged, when they get to that problem what they were told that time becomes a reality. It was true. What we were told we didn't always take it [in] but when the time came, we thought of that advice. We were told when we were young that you will be going through heavy times later and it will be very confusing for your future.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“I was given advice – you should be good to your brother, your sister, your relatives...growing up I was advised how to treat my wife when I got married and told there were things that could easily break up a marriage. I was given advice on hunting, what to do, not to do, what to expect. ...I was also advised on what to do when I got a child...Advice is always towards how to live a good life, conducting yourself in a very good way which will make life a lot easier.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

⁶ Participants, when recounting legends, made great efforts to be particular and to repeat exactly what they had been told as children and throughout their lives. They spoke about the importance of actively listening to and passing on stories exactly as they were told, so that stories would remain intact over time.

“...my Dad was always telling stories to be kind to people, don’t take people’s stuff or do bad things to others....Then after he was gone, I have it all in me and try to live that way.” (participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“We were all told to get through hard times and keep going.” (participant, Hopedale)

Honesty, consideration and respect for others was essential. All the groups gave many examples that demonstrated that the following behaviours are essential for a good life:

- be modest; don’t show off;
- remember your connectedness – love one another;
- help out and share – don’t wait to be asked or told;
- treat other people as you want them to treat you;
- don’t gossip, spread rumours or tell lies about others;
- don’t do anything to hurt people’s feelings; and,
- don’t take things that don’t belong to you.

“Not to be against a person, help out a person in need, never leave a person feeling bad about themselves, never gossip about others, never go against them... this is what I was taught as a child.” (participant, Repulse Bay)

“I was told never to gossip about other people, good or bad, not to show your knowledge too much or others will get jealous. About outsiders, don’t try to make yourself big. Always share with hungry people whoever they are. Don’t be shy towards them, love one another whoever they are.” (participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Treat each other well, then they will not have too many problems with others.” (participant, Hopedale)

“Treat other people as you want them to treat you. Don’t talk to hurt other people’s feelings. Leave their belongings alone. When my parents and Elders used to talk to me, they would tell me these things.” (participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

Generosity, sharing, helping, and connectedness were all critical values for Inuit who needed to rely on one another in the Arctic environment. Openness to others, awareness of how one’s own behaviour could affect others, and attention to others when it was obvious that they were troubled were essential elements of community and family life. Things seem different to the Elders now; the movement to settled communities created a different dynamic – more people, less time to spend together, new ways of doing things.

“It is hard to live among so many others. With no communities, we had a lot of time to be together, and tell stories.” (participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

Conflict Resolution

Maintaining peace or quickly returning to a state of harmony was seen as a necessary and important goal. The group could not live well together unless conflicts were solved and relationships were rebuilt. One must always try to be aware

Suicide Prevention

of the impact of one's actions on others. Good ways of living were discussed and modeled to discourage conflict.

"Back then, they lived a life a lot better in a lot of ways, compared to now. A lot of these people had never seen their parents arguing with each other, they were living in harmony."
(participant, Repulse Bay)

Elders also talked about the fact that people may sometimes do things that upset us, but we should keep such events in perspective and make efforts to have good relationships again.

"Try to remember the good things about people; they are not all bad. There are many things about them that we can see and we can like. We should not be against them for small things but try to get closer to them."
(participant, Hopedale)

"There is always a rough life sometime....Forget and forgive and talk to whoever hurt you, go to them and forgive them."
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

It is always important not to say bad things about the other person, or to spread rumours and gossip. Words are important to Inuit; words have power and angry words are very painful.

"We knew that hitting physically wasn't going to hurt as much as what words could do."
(participant, Repulse Bay)

A number of participants discussed how they would deal with somebody who is angry. They would ask why the person is angry; they would try and talk to the person and calm them down. If necessary, they would wait until the person is no longer angry, for it is difficult to solve problems when people are angry.

"If you see someone that angry, just leave and wait until they are not so angry, then talk with them and try to help... There is no good reasoning with someone that is that angry. It may only make things worse."
(participant, Hopedale)

Suggestions for dealing with one's own anger included taking a long walk, phoning or talking to a friend, leaving it for awhile (the anger could go away by itself, or the issue could be dealt with when one was calmed down), and forgetting and forgiving.

The community as a whole should also show disapproval of expressions of anger such as hitting. A story was told about a man who hit his wife. He was told he would be left alone and could not be with the group. He changed his ways.

Gossip

Repeatedly, special mention was made of the need not to gossip, and the need for confidentiality when helping someone with a problem. Rumours and gossiping are considered very harmful, with the potential to create even bigger problems, or problems in the whole population.

“Rumours, even when not true, tend to destroy life and make people’s life more miserable than it already is.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

People must not talk about what they hear or know about someone else’s life. Those with problems were advised to find someone they could trust to keep issues confidential.

“Speak to young people softly, tell them they are important. Let them know you care about them. Let them know you will not gossip and talk about what they said to others. Let them know they are safe and that they are in a good place to let it out. Then really listen to them.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“Find someone you can trust...and talk to them.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“One rule [is that] whatever is being said stays within the house ... avoid babbling and gossiping. This should be encouraged – whatever is being said in that house stays in that house.” (participant, Repulse Bay)

“If someone was a gossip they did not include them with the group....One went to the other person with someone else to get into his problem and talk with them and say it just gets solved. We didn’t gossip about it to others.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

Responsibility and Apology

There was much discussion about taking personal responsibility for solving problems. Elders agreed that one should not blame others or avoid looking at one’s own role in a problem. Children were taught this from an early age. Even if you yourself were not the main cause of the problem, you still had a responsibility for trying to make things better.

“In my young days I witnessed the rules we had to follow....If you have a problem with a person you go to that person, see them and solve the problem. That was for both Elders and young people.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

One participant related the story of his own unhappy pre-arranged marriage, his wife now deceased. In the past if a married couple was in disagreement they were brought before the Elders and the issue was put out in the open. But unless they themselves changed their behaviour – started to live better – the disagreement would be with them until they died.

Suicide Prevention

If someone has done something wrong, they must admit it right away and apologize. This was seen as very helpful to the immediate situation as well as lifting a burden that would allow people to progress and move ahead in some way.

“Even if you went through a problem you have to get back to normal, apologize and repent for that problem even if you went through a hard time and go on and have a normal life.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Pick a time to approach them, tell them you have missed them and want to make up for that.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

A number of Elders also mentioned the importance of allowing children to learn responsibility and problem solving. If a child had a problem with another child, parents did not side with the child or provide sympathy. Instead, they told him or her to work it out. This taught children interpersonal problem-solving skills, as well as helping them learn to take responsibility for their own role in a problem.

How to cope and survive

The most important values needed to survive include patience, resilience, perseverance, and endurance. Life was hard, problems arose, but difficulties could be overcome. There is an end to every problem, no matter how big or small.

The ability to solve problems was a valued aspect of moving forward. People were expected to learn to solve problems whether the problem had to do with another person, or hunting, or their own feelings, or any other aspect of life. Although the Elders said that generally parents tried to avoid having children see or hear arguments or discussions about problems, because of confidentiality or because the children might not understand, children would nevertheless be aware that problems happened. By observing that their parents and Elders dealt with problems, and by being expected to solve problems themselves, children learned that problems could be solved.

“When Elders were discussing things, kids were sent outside to play. They would come back in and those Elders would be crying and they did not know what they were crying about. After they went out again and came back, they saw people who had solved the problem and they fixed it among each other and were smiling and laughing.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

Young people find it hard to think ahead and they need to be reminded that every day is not the same; things change – tomorrow or the next day would be better. Repeatedly and unanimously, Elders expressed the crucial importance of this traditional attitude of patience, coping and moving forward.

“Hope was told to us – have hope for anything.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“People were encouraged to continue life despite problems they have. It will never be the same problem all the time; they will be different ones. You will encounter problems in life and have to deal with them from time to time. That was the advice.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“My father said never give up even if you think you are way down; keep on trying, don’t give up and you will get there. That is the only way you will get somewhere.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“Stop thinking of other things; just keep moving forward.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

The Elders’ Advice: Strategies for Helping Yourself and Others

The Elders spent much time discussing their advice to young people who are feeling depressed, hopeless or troubled. They also provided suggestions for those who try to help others. Throughout, there was a constant emphasis on hope, resilience, loving connectedness, and the possibility of change.

“Treat everybody good and they will feel that way. If you talk to someone who doesn’t know any better how to be, do it in a kind way, when they can listen better. Take the time to show them how to live better, how to think differently to have a better life. Tell them what you had to learn too and it will help them know.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

Elders stress that they should tell their own stories, describe what they went through, open themselves up to young people, and lead by example. They must emphasize that every problem has an ending, which they know from experience.

They have survived. We have therefore used mostly their own words in this section, allowing them to say what is necessary, what they did, and what they have learned about coping and helping.

Coping

The Elders shared many things they had been taught about coping, and their personal experiences of how they had dealt with minor and major difficult events and emotions. All emphasized three main strategies for coping:

- talking out negative feelings and problems;
- changing thoughts and the way one views a situation or one’s own abilities; and,
- learning and doing activities and behaviours that lead to more positive feelings and thoughts.

Talking

Talking out one’s problems with someone trustworthy was seen as essential because worries, fears and sadness would grow if the feelings were kept locked up. Elders advised that everyone should ask for help from someone they trust when they feel overcome by problems.

Suicide Prevention

“Don’t keep it in when you have problems; it will make things worse. Talk it out, get it out and tell someone you trust. Talk about it until it is all out.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“I say never give up. Don’t be scared to always go forward. Today we have more help from other services too...never stop or give up when there is help out there.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Go to your closest friend and talk to them, nothing in the world cannot be said, they will listen because they care about you. A really close friend can help you.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“When I was young my parents used to say if you have something you need to say, say it to the person who you trust most who would not pass the word around.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Trust people closest to you to be able to talk with them. They can listen and help you. Don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need help.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“If you’ve got any problems, approach someone you can trust, talk to and feel comfortable with.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“The problem you are going through is not different. You have to talk about it and there is nothing to be shy about.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“When a person was called to a meeting you would tell that person to try and let those feelings out. It will stay among the Elders and not go anywhere else. If you keep everything inside it will just get worse. Let your feelings out there and you will feel better.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“A stranger is sometimes easier to talk to, maybe someone who has chosen to talk to us.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Talk to each other when you are in a crisis, which is like bad weather. When you talk to another about things, it starts to feel like good weather.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

Some Elders did caution that “everyone is different” and may not be comfortable in talking about their problems. A person should nevertheless try, because it will help:

“I am a pretty quiet person. I don’t like to bother people when starting to feel bad about something. I don’t bother others, so I keep it to myself, which is a bad thing to do. I can’t say that people should do this all the time; everyone is different. But you should contact someone you know who loves you, who is good to get in touch with and talk with them. They could tell you what to do or whatever, what the good side is. If you do this, you may be feeling better.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

Thinking

Thoughts are powerful. Dwelling on thoughts of hopelessness and negative experiences makes things worse. The Elders describe their experiences, which show it is important to:

- be aware of our thoughts and how they are affecting us;
- try to leave the past behind;
- think about the consequences of our behaviour;
- change our thoughts and perceptions about a situation if necessary;
- develop a more hopeful view of the future and ourselves;
- build belief in our abilities to cope; and,
- keep telling ourselves that problems will pass, even in situations that seem very bad.

“My father noticed the frozen hands and said, ‘Your hands are frozen but the rest of your body is functioning very well. If you lose your hands, you can still function well without them.’”

(participant, Repulse Bay)

“Try to see things brighter and go forward more.”

(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Life is short and they have to try to make up their minds to find things to do and be happy.” (participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“We cannot be surprised when hard times come to us. We have to know how to face problems and get through them. We can’t lose our way when we have worries; we

have to keep ourselves calm and be steady. We can’t let ourselves get scared or down. We need our energy to solve the problems, not to get too down about them.”

(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Love yourself and love others...Be honest to yourself and others.”

(participant, Hopedale)

“...you have to force yourself to look ahead to the light to a better future.”

(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Life will be hard; it will not always be easy for us and we still have to live it. Lots of times we will have problems that we have to face and talk about. There will be happy times and hard times – that is how it is and we have to know this.”

(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“You could pull yourself out [of bad feelings or negative behaviour] by saying, ‘I shouldn’t be like this.’ That is supporting yourself. It cannot always go on in a bad way and I say that to myself, ‘I should not go on in this way.’”

(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Get your self-esteem back up whatever way you can. It will help.”

(participant, Hopedale)

Suicide Prevention

*"...try and leave [problems] in the past, try to forget about it and move forward in life."
(participant, Repulse Bay)*

*"Pray for the others who say bad things about you.
Pray for them."
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)⁷*

*"Each day is different, things aren't always the same.
Maybe the next day happy things will be happening.
Days are never the same."
(participant, Hopedale)*

*"I say, 'Stay calm, don't do anything stupid and hold on.'
I say this on a regular basis."
(participant, Repulse Bay)*

*"We talked with someone who was so down, my husband and I. My husband and I want to tell you to forget it or it will drag you down. Go ahead and be happy, don't think of what people have done to you."
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)*

*"It is also good to support yourself as well as get help from others....I used to think to myself that I have to go forward, not always stuck on one spot. If you are in that bad situation... you should look forward and go forward."
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)*

*"If you put yourself down, you will keep going down. If you listen to the Elders and get help from them, you will get your respect back and go the other way again."
(participant, Hopedale)*

*"I do get angry too, so I am aware of it. If you just leave it alone, don't even think about it, it usually goes.
When it goes, I try to analyze how I got angry, what could have happened or not happened. Once you are over it, because you can't hold in anger forever, it helps trying to look back on it."
(participant, Repulse Bay)*

*"[When you are angry or frustrated] just leave it, try to forget. It is not worth getting angry about; leave it alone.
Sometimes we start hating another person for no reason...when it happens just leave it and before you know it, you care about them again. Just ride it out."
(participant, Repulse Bay)*

*"After I lost my husband, I turned to alcohol and did not eat and did not stop for seven or eight months. One night I had a beer, and looking at it and couldn't touch it, saying 'What am I doing here? Why am I drinking?'
I went home and thought about it and next morning I decided I needed help....[After counselling]
I could see what I was going through....I should have got help and talked to someone earlier."
(participant, Hopedale)*

⁷ That is, change your way of thinking about the other person. Try to understand that people who feel the need to say bad things have problems of their own, and need help too.

“...some days you will have a very heavy load of worry but you have to get over it. Try to forget about it and try to live a better [life]. Forget and forgive and talk to whoever hurt you; go to them and forgive them.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“[When people were putting you down, saying bad things] it seems like the world is small and you are isolated.... I used to try and cure myself by thinking, ‘They are not saying it to me,’ and that I have help from God. I started to feel less heavy and that is how I helped myself and didn’t need a lot of help from others.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Try to go forward when you are really down and looking for some support or have been in some kind of trouble. Get out of the problem you created for yourself. Don’t do anything your Mom and Dad don’t want. Some have no Moms and Dads but they should think about what they would want.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“As an example, I lost my first baby and I was grieving day and night....I asked myself, ‘What am I doing?’ I started telling myself I am not supposed to be grieving that much. It was too heavy on me and I started to grieve less as I had been getting sick grieving.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“When I lost my 14-year-old grandchild, I thought I would never smile again. Then I started thinking – he let me have him for 14 years. I had my brother for over 30 years. Those are the things I should be thankful for, having them that long. I started to think about changing my mind and smile and pray....I am happy to be here with my friends and relatives now.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Try to remember the good things about people, they are not all bad. There are many things about them that we can see and we can like. We should not be against them for small things but try to get closer to them.”
(participant, Hopedale)

Doing

Doing something new, something active, going out into nature, or doing something for others can take our minds off problems, make us feel better and build self-esteem:

“She lost one of her loved ones and was crying for a whole year, depressed. No one was there to comfort her at all. She used to get water in the spring. When she was pouring it, she started listening to the water being poured and forgot the incident right away. Doing things helps comfort yourself. It is a tool.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

Suicide Prevention

“My mother used to tell me she asked him not to think about it all the time and try to get out in public and try to enjoy life as much as he can....[He] now knows if there were games or feast or dances, etc., he never remembers what he was stressed out about when he’s in public. So Elders used to ask us to try and have as much fun as possible.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“If you are at home being depressed and unhappy there is a place you could go – outside; that is the best place to take away bad things from your mind. Even seeing little animals outside, it helps your mind; you see more open space instead of being at home isolated.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“When they help other people, they become good people and live a better life themselves. It is never too hard to be good with others.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“I said I was never going to smile again, when I lost someone. A woman came to be with me. My husband said to make her a pair of slippers, even though I didn’t want to. I did it anyway and that was a turning point. I bet that is something he knew from a long time ago.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“[My son said about going to meetings] ‘When I listen to others I learn and get ideas and bring them home. He almost decided not to go [because his brothers

weren’t going] but I told him, ‘don’t quit, you keep going and learning and bring home ideas.’”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“One of the ways...is to keep them busy...making them do things so they are preoccupied with what they are doing, being strong to make them do it and get them to stay with it, so their mind is not on other things.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

Finally, all the Elders stressed the helpfulness of prayer. Talking to God was seen as helpful for release of worry and deep emotional pain even in the worst of circumstances. When those strong negative emotions have been relieved by prayer, the Elders say, the person is able to move on with more peace and hope. Prayer was seen as an important self-support.

Helping

The Elders had many ideas for building the connectedness and sense of hope that can help prevent suicides. An essential element is ensuring that people know they are loved. Children and young people may become depressed if parents and peers are hard on them; love and acceptance must be communicated even in discipline. Parents were urged to talk to their children kindly and encourage open expression of feelings. It was noted, however, that sometimes children/youth might find it easier to talk to someone other than the parents. This should be encouraged, as long as information is kept private.

Sometimes it is obvious that someone has a problem and needs to talk; other times it is not easy to see. To encourage people to talk, it is important to make the person feel comfortable – let them know they are not alone and that others have had this kind of problem as well. It may be necessary to push them gently and kindly to talk, by sharing personal experiences or by asking questions.

Youth must be told repeatedly and lovingly that problems can be solved and difficult times will pass, not to put themselves down even though they are experiencing a hard time, and that they are loved and not alone.

Young people must also be shown that things change. This includes the way they think about a situation or themselves: they can change their thoughts and interpretations about a situation; they can look for positives.

In their own words, Elders give advice about how to effectively help people stay strong and resilient:

“Some people are forced to talk about themselves. Even if they don’t want to, they should. Ask them ‘How are you feeling, how are you doing, how are you really?’ This pushes them a bit to talk about themselves.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“It is good to help someone by sharing my own experience with them.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Only certain people used to know about the problem and solved it. Confidentiality really applied in those days, and if you were going to gossip about the discussion, you might as well not include yourself.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“A lot of these people think nobody loves them at all. Especially if they lose their parents or close relative, they start thinking no one cares, but in reality, people do care and love them, but they don’t know it and it is ruining their life. They have to realize other people do love and care for them. We have to make the person aware of this.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“Tell them it will not always be this way, things will change. A change will come. Tell them they have to get through this so change can come.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“I think that we should get hold of the person who is feeling down, talk to them to see if you can be of any help, and try to keep a good spirit and make him happy in some way. Make up his mind, try to make him happy...that helps.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Never tell a young person they can’t do nothing. No matter how poorly they do it, praise them for trying. It helps them feel better about their life....They are never to be discouraged about what they can and can’t do. They will always try harder then, to exceed their expectations.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

Suicide Prevention

“We know when our families are unhappy...I learned to keep quiet, until they started talking about what is bothering them.”

(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“There is a need to think before you speak. Try and see what the problem is doing to the person, whether they can think straight or not. Say things in a way that is encouraging. Try to share some of what you went through and how you did it.”

(participant, Hopedale)

“If someone approached who look unhappy, I say, ‘Talk to me, maybe I can help you in that area.’ Talking it out is very helpful. I always ask them, ‘What is in your mind bothering you, you are really unhappy, maybe if you tell me you will feel better.’”

(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Get youth to see that tomorrow or the future may be quite different from today. Talk to them about things changing. Let them know that what they are going through today won’t always be the way things are. It is very important to teach them this because sometimes their young minds cannot think ahead and know this about the future.”

(participant, Hopedale)

“There are times when a person feels very depressed and feeling low about themselves and they need help to feel secure

again and feel better about themselves again...Respect that person – if you don’t, the feelings will be even lower than they already are.”

(participant, Repulse Bay)

“People have different strengths...Some have a lot of strength and faith in themselves, and others have no strength in themselves and look at their problems as the end of the world....For example, some people have a lot of strength dealing with bad weather or when they are out hunting or stuck with nothing to survive with. You could use what strength they have [in those situations] and measure with that one, if there are family problems or any other kind. Their strength could be measured with how they deal with it and how much they can handle.”⁸

(participant, Repulse Bay)

“Ask them kindly, ‘What is your problem?’ Don’t scold them when they have been upset, or they could go back to the pain. Talk calmly so they will be more open to talking... Be kind and peaceful so they will not get upset more.”

(participant, Hopedale)

“We never used to hug anybody; now hugging is a thing that makes you feel better....someone came in and put his arm around me and that effort really helped me.”

(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“When I was going through hard times, even someone younger would come and say, ‘Don’t forget there is someone there to help you.’ Whatever was said to me, I try to return to somebody....When someone says, ‘You are not

⁸ In other words, build up people’s faith in their own coping skills and strengths by showing them they’re capable of handling other problems. They can use those strengths in a variety of problem situations.

alone, don't forget, that is a great help....So I keep it in mind and when I have to counsel someone I say it to them: they are not alone.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“It is important when listening to them to be careful what you say or it can make a problem worse, making things worse than they already are.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“I have been approached a lot of times in the past by young and older people closer to my age. I talk to them or [my husband] does. We have to make a commitment to maintain confidential stuff among ourselves within the house, not anywhere else. We talk to the person softly, encouraging them to not take their life away, try to keep living no matter what happens. They start feeling better, their bodies relax, no more tensions and they feel a lot better than before.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“What I was seeing about some young people – they see their problems as too big. It is important to tell them, it is not as big as you think. It can be fixed. I know that; I have been through it and can help you.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Speak to young people softly, tell them they are important. Let them know you care about them. Let them know you will not gossip and talk about what they said to others. Let them know they are safe and that they are in a good place to let it out. Then, really listen to them.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“They were not scolded. They were talked to in a way that showed them that another way would be better. That way they didn't get mad or turn away from us. We showed them if they kept doing it the wrong way, what could happen to their life and to other people.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Tell them to treat each other well, then they will not have too many problems with others. Let them see you treating them well and they will treat others that way too. If they see older people doing the right things about the problems they have they will see how it is done correctly.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“Talk softly, talk to them very slowly, saying ‘You are not alone, you are the same as me.’”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“We have to get young people comfortable with wanting to get out what is bothering them, so it will not stay stuck inside, because then they get stuck in their thinking. When they can't think clearly, they will be unable to make good decisions and to handle their problems in the proper way.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“They are not alone when they have problems. They have got to remember that. People care about them. Others will be affected by what they do to themselves.”
(participant, Hopedale)

Suicide Prevention

“We promised the person we would not tell others, but to listen to what they needed to say, that we were trying to help them. Some are not easy to talk to because they have very heavy thoughts. Some want to die, some do not, but when they get help they are easier. I learned that it is very delicate and you have to take care. Try to make them understand they are not alone. Everybody is the same, small baby, young or adult when they have that crisis. You are the same like all other humans.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Tell them what we went through up to now, open ourselves up to the younger people. Tell them every problem has an ending regardless of what you think or happens. From there on, we encourage the young people to talk about themselves and open up more than they would like to talk about their life. Talk about my problems before hearing from them about problems.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“When someone is very depressed, the way to reach them is to be very open and kind to that person. As you go along, they will start to realize what decision they have to make and that we can help them make it. You have to support them and cannot come to the decision; you help them and let them talk and as time goes on the decision comes up and they can come to a decision with our support.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

The Elders also talked about watching out for depression and more serious mental illness.⁹ Some signs they would keep an eye on would include: when a person starts isolating themselves and not talking to anyone, being angry, shutting everybody out, not eating, and not doing normal activities. Facial expression and body language – for example, the way somebody walked – could signal a problem.

Dealing with grief

The Elders emphasized that we can survive even events that cause us great grief, such as the death of a loved one. They spoke of internal strengths in handling grief, as well as how others can help. Many discussed their own numerous personal and community losses and expressed grief at the loss of their spouses, children and relatives. There was a clear consensus in supporting the bereaved through active involvement that emphasizes connection and demonstrates love, empathy and solidarity.

“When they came and talked with the ones who had lost someone they always slept at least one night with them...when people grieved back then, people would stay with family, sleeping over until they are a lot better after losing the person; even if it is not their relative that is the only thing we still see today. We have not lost that and still do it today... We show our sympathy and stay with them and help them in any way. The whole family has a lot of people there trying to help comfort them, buying food to feed a lot. The closest ones are told ... there is nothing we can do to bring them back to life but we are told in the future we will see them one day...they tell us

⁹ It was noted that sometimes mental illness runs in the family.

not to grieve that much and not for too long or the soul will not reach where they are supposed to go.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Keep track and remember dates of passing. Go and see the person who is grieving to remember the loss with them on the date of death, the first Christmas, Easter, camping, Thanksgiving or birthday, so they will not feel alone. Speak to them, tell them you remember and are there to support them. Begin to talk naturally about the one who is gone to be able to remember other things about them, not only their death. This can help.”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“As Inuit, we know who is lost and who is grieving... we are told not to grieve for so long. People differ but some grieve for a short period but others for a long time...Elders said don't just cry for them for so long and never cry outside...we just helped each other. I witnessed some deaths in some families, but didn't see people grieve so long. People just got together and helped them.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Stages of grief occur over several months or years. People need support at all stages of their grief and not only up to the funeral taking place.”
(participant, Hopedale)

“If people could visit someone who is grieving, talking, doing things, trying to do something that keeps the person busy so their mind will be preoccupied too.”
(participant, Repulse Bay)

“It is good to talk about the one who passed away, to remember the good times, the funny times, the normal activities so that we feel better and realize the whole relationship we had with them, not only at the time of their death. This helps people who are grieving and they need others around them who are willing to do that too. Sometimes those who are grieving are shy or think no one wants to hear, but it can be good for other people to talk about it too.”
(participant, Hopedale)

Other ways to deal with grief included encouraging people to get out – to not stay at home with the hurt – and to pray and take comfort from God. One participant described how, when one man was sick and dying, despite his condition, he took his family travelling to the lakes, along the coast, to familiar places to create memories for his family when he was gone.

Elders also talked about the belief that a person should not grieve too much or for too long. Too intense grieving could lead to sickness. It could also keep the soul of the departed from going where it had to go. One should cry and talk all the grief out and say goodbye.

Most importantly, encourage people to have hope.

Suicide Prevention

Gender Issues

Most participants stated that boys and girls were treated the same. When a person was brought before the Elders they would be told the same thing – boy or girl. A problem is a problem and the same ways of coping were taught to both boys and girls.

In passing on skills such as hunting and sewing, mothers talked to the girls and fathers talked to their sons. If a child didn't have a mother or father, they went to an older sibling or other relative. If a family had only girls, the father taught the girls to do a man's job, like hunting.

There was a general discussion about the fact that so many more boys than girls are committing suicide. The question of whether or not they should be treated differently was discussed. Generally women attempt suicide more often than men outside of Nunavut. Within Nunavut, however, it is clear from statistics and discussion in all forums that men are both attempting and committing suicide more often.

One group suggested that previously men did not have to relate in larger groups as they were out hunting, and perhaps girls had learned how to live in groups better. The move to living in settlements and communities meant men were constantly exposed to more complex relationships in their new environment yet they lacked previous experience in this regard. On the other hand, women had historically

functioned in groups, and may have developed a broader range of coping skills and strategies which aided them in adapting to newer, complicated and busier circumstances.

In response to a question about how people were assisted in working through their problems one participant commented that men are easier to work with than women. One participant suggested that the introduction of women's equality upset the previous balance between men and women and that is one of the reasons men commit suicide more. This was not a recurring theme, however, and Elders were aware of and concerned for helping young boys and men learn to cope better with whatever problems and challenges they were facing.

Elder Marginalization

Elders felt strongly that the contributions they can make have been ignored or pushed aside. They believe greater efforts should be made to include them and the knowledge they can provide in schools, and with more control over what they can do or say there. They frequently felt they could have done so much more good if they had been allowed to spend time on these topics rather than pre-planned topics. They also want to be included in other helping initiatives, and community activities that encourage Elder and youth contacts.

“We have to voice out, speak out about the important Inuit values and beliefs.... We have to teach them our way in schools, create posters, work together as organizations on that, publicize them more and they will start taking things through those.... We left our way of thinking of life, we have to put them back alive for the future even if they were in the past, it is also needed now.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“Elders have the traditional knowledge, but have been quiet so long and we should get the schools to let the Elders in to discuss the facts of life, to teach them what might be good for them in the future. We have to teach living, and suicide prevention and pass it on to the schools and that way it could get in to their hearts. ”
(participant, Tuktoyaktuk)

“Now some traditional ways are trying to be revived. Even the police are trying to bring it back and if it was brought back in looking after that problem, it would be the best way....”
(participant, Hopedale)

“We need to start moving a little further down and show young people the way of life, get into the schools, educate them about living and they will start thinking.”
(participant, Kangiqsualujjuaq)

Getting The Messages Out

A number of recommendations were also made by all four focus groups about how the Inuit values, attitudes, and strategies that encourage resilience and coping could be made known to young people:

- involve more Elders in schools, in effective ways;
- use modern methods to communicate Inuit values: posters, radio, stories, CDs, public service announcements, curriculum development;
- teach children Inuktitut;
- use meetings of all kinds;
- incorporate Inuit values and practices in court and corrections practices;
- teach Inuit values in schools;
- publicize toll-free crisis line numbers¹⁰; and,
- deal with problematic use of alcohol and drugs.

Elders also felt youth should be taken out on the land and taught survival skills. Fear was expressed that despite obtaining a formal school education, youth have not learned about survival on the land. Elders felt there is a real need for youth to learn survival skills and to understand the older way of life¹¹. It was recommended that only small groups be taken out at one time because they will be able to listen and learn more. Not only would youth learn traditional land skills, they would learn the valuable coping skills of patience, perseverance, and competence, as well as pride and self-esteem in being Inuit.

¹⁰ Nunavut/Nunavik is serviced by the Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Crisis Line; Inuvialuit and Nunatsiavut also have regional toll-free crisis services.

¹¹ One participant noted that when the young people go somewhere with snow machines, they do not know how to read the wind or snowdrifts to know where they are going.

The resilience skills of patience, perseverance, doing what must be done, and finding a way to get on with life have always helped Inuit get through the hardest of times. Children were taught from an early age that life will always present difficulties but that problems can always be overcome, either by actively doing something to change the situation or by changing one's thoughts and perceptions about the situation. These values of patience, perseverance, communication, and positive attitude were passed on through stories, discussions and behavioural modelling. From childhood on, Inuit were also expected to put those values into practice, using and learning the benefits of such basic coping skills as:

- paying attention to each others' needs;
- focusing on helping others as a way of promoting connection and a sense of usefulness;
- doing something productive, active and healthy;
- talking things out;
- solving conflicts with others; and,
- accepting that life is not always easy but that tomorrow can be better.

The Elders say these values and behaviours must again become the core of Inuit life. They must be taught and practiced in the home, in the school and in the community. Inuit, and especially Inuit youth, face a host of situations and problems that were unknown to these Elders and their ancestors, just as the situations the Elders faced are not the experience of youth today. The structure, activities and challenges of life have changed, but the need for and appli-

cability of this foundation remains. Whatever the problem, challenges must be faced and can be overcome with thought, caring, sharing, and learning.

This information will be useful to many stakeholders interested in including the Inuit perspective in care-giving, training initiatives, planning and policy, teaching strategies, and those conducting resiliency studies.

Parents can teach, demonstrate and use these Inuit foundations by paying attention to the needs of their children, learning and using good open communication, teaching skills that generate pride and problem solving, and generally encouraging and modelling connection with others, hope and coping.

Schools can build them into curriculum and expectations, and provide opportunities for children to develop a sense of community and sharing, pride, competence, and skills based on both tradition and the needs of modern life.

Youth must also be provided with the social, educational and economic opportunities that enable them to combine these traditional ways of being and ways of thinking with the needs of their life in the modern world.

When helping, formal and informal teachers and counselors can provide direction and activities that teach the traditional emphasis on relationship-building, communication, problem-solving, and a focus on both traditional and modern positive activities that develop competence, pride, hope, inner strength, and connection to others.

There are also broad-ranging suggestions concerning the transmission and understanding of Inuit values and beliefs that may be of interest to many individuals, institutions and organizations. This could include the use of a wide range of modern media and communication strategies. In one instance, the local high school's interest in the focus group resulted in their students being equipped and enabled to take part in filming the session for education and community purposes. Initiatives like this were welcomed by the Elders who also acknowledged the practicality of capturing their information in this manner.

Opportunities for the Elders to be a central part of this knowledge transfer are essential. They have the knowledge. They use the knowledge. They know it works. Continuing dialogue and relationships with them are required to recognize and receive the gifts they have to give, while lessening their feelings of marginalization, isolation and fear for the future.

Appendix A

Traditional Knowledge Project Questions

Communication Strategies and Techniques

1. What should be said by Elders so younger people will know they can talk to them and find support? How could you let other people know?
2. What messages should be given to youth about not quitting life?
3. What messages should be communicated about getting problems out and letting problems stay inside a person?
4. How should messages of concern for people be communicated?
5. What examples should be used for showing how to cope?
6. Were there different ways of talking to boys and girls about problems? Why?

Intervening

7. When there was great loss, what was said, why and how? How were people comforted?
8. What thoughts can keep people from sinking lower when they have problems?
9. When people disagreed with each other, how was this handled? What words were used and why? How was this handled when two people were in a relationship?
10. How was it decided that people were suffering mentally? What signs and symptoms were noticed in their attitude and behaviour?
11. What things work when a person is angry or frustrated? What can they say to themselves to handle things better?
12. When people have deep emotional pain inside them what should they do about it and why?

Learning To Reach Out

13. How were people encouraged to talk about what was bothering them?
14. How were people assisted in working through their problems?

15. How did people learn new and better ways of handling problems?
16. What can people do when they feel depressed and when they need to reach out for help?
17. When a person has to make a good decision, how should they go about making it?
18. If a person became “stuck” in their grief, what actions were taken to help them?

Values and Beliefs

19. What are the most important Inuit values and beliefs and how should they be communicated to youth?
20. How did individuals show their respect and caring for each other?
21. What was done or said to correct and encourage change in behaviour, to be more ‘inumariik’?
22. How were young people taught how to help others?
23. What was said to encourage co-operation, patience and endurance?
24. How were people helped to feel better about themselves?

Resiliency

25. How were people encouraged to deal with their life?
26. What strengths do people have that they can use to overcome their problems?
27. How can a person avoid being overwhelmed by the difficulties they are facing?
28. What can we say to young adults and adolescents so they will never feel hopeless about their life?
29. How should children be taught about coping with and solving their problems?
30. What things can people do to look at their problems differently?
31. What was the best way to think when you faced your greatest challenges?
32. What is it that keeps people going, despite them facing very hard times?
33. What sayings or expressions say it the best about the need to cope and not give up when times are tough?

Suicide Prevention

34. What do people need to think and say in order to make up after they have not dealt well with each other for awhile?
35. How can communities use the Inuit way to become closer and more involved with each other in a good way?
36. What life-affirming messages can we give our young people? Why?
37. How should we go about helping others understand what we are talking about?

Medicines

38. What plants or foods were given to a person to help them feel better when:
 - Upset
 - Depressed
 - Grieving
 - Not sleeping well or not eating well
 - In mental/emotional pain from their problems

Summary

39. What are the survival stories that taught people not to give up and not to quit life?
40. What should we be saying now to young people that could save lives?

Appendix B

Coding Chart

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Prv	Prevention – establishing positive environment so suicide does not occur
Inv	Intervention – engagement to discuss, confront problem, behaviour, attitude
Psv	Postvention – follow-up after intervention, to monitor, reinforce, support
TK	Traditional knowledge
V#	Values and beliefs
PEX	Convey one’s own personal experience – sharing struggles, solutions, surmounting challenges, changing
PE	Prompters and encouragers
GA	Guidance and advice
LV	Taking the long view – viewing challenge as limited, looking beyond it
D	Diagnosis, signs, symptoms of malady – description, awareness of signs that indicate person is not doing well
BS	Bereavement support – techniques, insight, support
Gr	Grief
O	Outreach – active/proactive/ engages/ connects/seeks teachable moment
PA	Availability – passive, waiting, able to be engaged
GR	Gossip and rumours
C2	Confidentiality
CD	Cultural discontinuity – break from past cultural norms
GG	Generation gap – different worlds
GG2	No reference points – lack of understanding, communication, incredulity
GD	Gender differences
ES	Elder specific
ER	Elder recommendations
VT	Vicarious trauma – compassion fatigue, taking on burden, transferred stress
F	Future – fears, concerns, focus
IA	Individual responsibility, action
CA	Collective/group responsibility, action
SC	Crisis lines, external, contemporary, third party services
SHV	Seeing/hearing voices – to die
GS	God, spirituality, religion

Chenier, N.M. "Suicide Among Aboriginal People: Royal Commission Report." Ottawa: Library of Parliament Parliamentary Research Branch, February 1995.

First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. "Acting on What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations." Ottawa: Health Canada, 2005. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/pubs/suicide/prev_youth-jeunes/index_e.html

Government of Nunavut, Office of the Chief Coroner. Government of Nunavut: Iqaluit, August 29, 2005.

Hicks, J. "Nunavut Kiglisiniaqtiit: Evaluation and Statistics: Presentation to the Founding Conference of the Nunavut Suicide Prevention Council." Iqaluit, January 24, 2004.

"Statistics on deaths by suicide in Nunavut (and other Inuit regions in Canada) 1975-2004." Iqaluit, February 2005.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. "Suicide Prevention in Inuit Communities: A Review of Capacity, Best Practices and Recommendations for Closing the Gap." Ottawa, January 2002.

Isaacs, S., Keogh, S., Menard, C. and Hockin, J. "Suicide in the Northwest Territories: A Descriptive Review." In *Chronic Diseases in Canada*, Vol. 19, No. 4. Public Health Agency of Canada, 2000.

Kouri, R. "Death by suicide, Nunavik, 1973-2004." Kuujuaq, QC: Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, January 31, 2005.

Kral, M.J., "Unikkaartuit: Meanings of Well-Being, Sadness, Suicide and Change in Two Inuit Communities." Report to Health Canada, February 2003.

Kuptana, R. "Relationship between Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Cultural Properties; an Inuit Perspective." National Gatherings of Indigenous Knowledge Discussion Paper, Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada, n.d.: p.43.

Leenaars, A.A., Wenckstern, S., Sakinofsky, I., Dyck, R.J., Kral, M.J., and Bland, R.C. *Suicide in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

National Aboriginal Health Organization. "First Nations and Inuit Health Surveys, 1997: A Synthesis of the National and Regional Reports." Ottawa, 2004.

Taparti, L. "Foreward." In *Suicide in Canada*. A.A. Leenaars et al., eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998: xv.

U.S. Public Health Service. "The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent Suicide." Washington, DC: 1999. <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/suicideprevention/calltoaction.asp>

White, J. and Jodoin, N. "Aboriginal Youth: A Manual of Promising Suicide Prevention Strategies." Calgary: Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2004.