SUICIDE PREVENTION
and Two-Spirited People

First Nations communities can support two-spirited people by providing safe spaces that include and respect them, by standing up for them, and by speaking out about the discrimination they experience.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Suicide rates among two-spirited, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered First Nations are not known, but the rates of related risk factors in these groups indicate that the suicide risk is greater than among heterosexual First Nations. Homophobia, isolation and rejection increase the risk of suicide. An individual's risk can be decreased if he/she is connected to his/her culture and traditions in a way that recognizes the impacts of colonization. First Nations communities can support two-spirited people by providing safe spaces that include and respect them, by standing up for them, and by speaking out about the discrimination they experience. The term *two-spirit* is used in this resource because it reflects the importance of First Nations culture as well as sex and gender orientation and diversity. However, it is important to respect that individuals may prefer to identify with other terms to reflect their sexual orientation, sex and gender identity, experiences, or preferences.

"*Recognize the role of the Two-Spirit First Nations' peoples: … The solution [to discrimination] is to educate people [about] the traditionally respected role that Two-Spirit First Nations' peoples played in most communities and to thus remove the stigma that has been associated with this group.*"

Two–Spirited People

Not all First Nations who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) identify as two-spirited or two-spirit people, but for those who do, *two-spirit* is not just another word for GLBT. It is a new term that has been chosen to reflect traditional First Nations gender diversity, which includes the fluid nature of sexual and gender identity and its interconnectedness with spirituality and traditional world views (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006). For some two-spirited people the term represents their distinct experiences and culture as First Nations, the loss of respected traditions through the impacts of colonization and the unique way that culture and gender are tied together (Lehavot, Walters, & Simoni, 2009; Walters et al., 2006). The term can also refer to having both feminine and masculine spirits within one person. Two-spirit recognizes gender as a continuum and includes identity, sexual orientation and social roles (National Association of Friendship Centres [NAFC], 2008). An individual may identify as two-spirited because of their sexual orientation, sexual or gender identity or roles (Alaers, 2010).

Transgender is often viewed as a broad term that acknowledges peoples' fluid experiences of sexual biology, sexual identity and roles on a continuum. *Transgender* encompasses "anyone whose gender identification falls outside the social conventions of male sex/male gender and female sex/female gender" (Taylor, 2006, p. 13). It can include people who feel they are both male and female, or neither (androgenous), or cross-dressers, drag queens or transvestites (Alaers, 2010). It includes *transsexual* people whose identity as a man or woman is different from his/her physical or biological characteristics (e.g.,when a person with female sexual characteristics identifies as or feels like a man) (Taylor, 2006). A transsexual person may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or hetero-sexual. Gender identification may or may not match biological sex, and biological sex is not always clearly male or female. Intersexed people have sexual anatomy that is not clearly male or female but may include aspects of both male and female definitions (Alaers, 2010; Taylor, 2006).

Many words describe specific experiences that are different from heterosexual orientation, stereotypical male and female roles, and/or binary male and female identity. The terms *gay, lesbian* and *bisexual* focus on sexual orientation. The word *queer* has been reclaimed as a positive term that includes anyone targeted by heterosexism and homo-phobia. As mentioned above, the term *two-spirit* acknowledges the importance

of sexual orientation, gender and culture. All of these terms represent an attempt to understand different experiences that are very personal, and the various GLBT groups do not universally agree on their meaning.

Historically, many First Nations cultures supported and honoured two-spirited people; these individuals served important community functions and held positions of high regard and prestige (NAFC, 2008). Traditional social norms typically valued the inclusion and respect of two-spirited people or an understanding of their unique contributions to the family and community (Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni, & Walters, 2004). In pre-contact indigenous societies, two-spirited people often held sacred or ceremonial roles such as counselling, healing, being pipe carriers or being visionaries (Lang, 1997, as cited in Alaers, 2010; Walters et al., 2006). Following contact with Europeans, many of these values were lost through the effects of colonization, residential schools, and Christian practices and beliefs that aimed to erase this rich culture, but today they are being reclaimed with language and cultural revitalization (NAFC, 2008; Walters et al., 2006). Some communities were able to retain their traditions and have quietly continued to protect both the two-spirited members of their community and their sacred ways (A. McLeod, personal communication, March 31, 2011; Walters, 1997).

Ojibway Translations

Homosexual → ininiwiijininiwangaa-nooji'aad (gemaa ikwe)
Literal translation: a man who is attracted to or pursues his fellow man

Lesbian → ikwewiijikwemangaa-nooji'aad
Literal translation: a woman who is attracted to or pursues her fellow woman

Homophobic → ogosaan ininiwan wiijininiwan gaa-nooji'aanid
Literal translation: he/she is afraid of him/her

Ningewance, 2009, pp. 194–200; P. Ningewance through A. McLeod, personal communication, April 2, 2011

Suicide Risk

Suicide rates vary by First Nations community (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), but the national rate is reported to be almost twice as high as that for the general population in Canada. In 2000, suicide was the leading cause of death among First Nations aged 10 to 44 years, and almost one quarter of all deaths among First Nations youth 10 to 19 years old were due to suicide (Health Canada, 2005). These statistics may underestimate the actual number of suicides because 25 per cent of deaths recorded as being accidental are also thought to be due to suicide (White & Jodoin, 2007). Unfortunately, suicide rates cannot be broken down by sexual orientation or gender identity because coroner reports and death records do not require this information (Haas et al., 2011; Taylor, 2006). However, of the 81 children and youth who died by suicide in British Columbia between 2003 and 2007, 17 (21 per cent) were Aboriginal (16 were First Nations) (Wilcox, 2008). It should be noted that Aboriginal people constitute only nine per cent of the population of BC. Two of the suicide risk factors that Wilcox (2008) identified were (1) being Aboriginal and (2) being gay, lesbian or bisexual or questioning one's sexuality.

Wilcox (2008) also found that past suicidal behaviour or suicidality was the most significant risk factor for carrying out suicide.

Suicidality means thinking about, planning or attempting suicide. A large American study of over 2,400 lesbian and bisexual women (85 of whom were Native American) reported that the Native American participants experienced significantly more frequent suicidal thoughts and attempts than the participants from the general population (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). In a study in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario that included 73 transgendered and two-spirited people (20 of whom identified as Aboriginal), 28 per cent of study participants reported having attempted suicide at least once "because of the way [they were] treated with regards to [their] sex/gender identity" (Taylor, 2006, p. 38). A large American study conducted in four major cities included approximately 86 gay or bisexual Native American men in a total sample of 2881 homosexually oriented men. Thirty per cent of the Native American participants had attempted suicide compared with approximately 11 per cent of all other participants (Paul et al., 2002). In another large American study that included 5,602 American Indian and Alaska Native adolescent men, 65 identified as gay and 23 per cent of these participants reported having attempted suicide (Barney, 2003). The two-spirited adolescent males were twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to have thought about or attempted suicide. This finding of an increased

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risk for suicidality among two-spirited Native youths (compared with heterosexual Native youths) is consistent with the results of studies that show that non-Aboriginal gay, lesbian and bisexual people attempt suicide two to three times as often as heterosexual non-Aboriginal people (King et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2002). An Alberta study that investigated young men's serious attempts at ending their lives by suicide reported that homosexually oriented males were 14 times more likely to be at risk (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997). Population-based surveys in the United States have consistently reported rates of suicide attempts among gay, lesbian and bisexual high school students to be two to seven times higher than among heterosexual students (Haas et al., 2011, p. 17).

"Suicide rates vary by First Nations community, but the national rate is reported to be almost twice as high as that for the general population in Canada."

CHANDLER & LALONDE, 1998

Understanding the Increased Risk of Suicide for Two-Spirited People

A risk is a quality, characteristic or experience that increases the likelihood that something will occur. Violence, oppression and loss of culture are considered risk factors for suicide. Two-spirited First Nations experience double oppression: racism and heterosexism (Balsam et al., 2004). Two-spirited women who experience sexism in a male-dominated world experience a third type of oppression (Lehavot et al., 2009). In addition, transgendered people experience cissexism, which is the assumption that everyone should look, behave and identify as a stereotypical feminine woman or look, behave and identify as a stereotypical masculine man. Although there is protection in First Nations communities from the racism of the mainstream world, some two-spirited people may be sent away from the reserve or may feel they need to move away to find acceptance for their sexual orientation and gender identity, because of homophobia and transphobia in First Nations communities (Ristock, Zoccole, & Passante, 2010). Unfortunately, this acceptance comes at a cost: loss of family, loss of community connections (culture), and racism (Brotman, Ryan, Jalbert, & Rowe, 2002; Walters, 1997; Walters, Horwath, & Simoni, 2001; Monette, Albert, & Waalen, 2001). Although they may find support in the GLBT community in the general population, these costs create new problems. Therefore, two-spirited people experience oppression and exclusion from three potential sources: their First Nations community because they are two-spirited, GLBT communities because they are First Nations and mainstream communities for both reasons (Brotman et al., 2002).

It is important to remember that before European contact, two-spirited individuals in First Nations communities generally were accepted and experienced a sense of belonging.

It is important to remember that before European contact, two-spirited individuals in First Nations communities generally were accepted and experienced a sense of belonging. With colonization, the European view that sex and gender roles were strictly binary (and anything different was wrong or immoral) was enforced, and two-spirited people were coerced into stereotypical sex roles, marginalized and increasingly alienated, sometimes resorting to suicide (Alaers, 2010; Désy, 1993). Walters (1997) notes that the process of acculturation (the indoctrination of White Western values) resulted in both increased intolerance and an erosion of traditions, and these can impact identity development.

Although all Native people experience racism, two-spirited people are more likely to experience violence than heterosexual First Nations (Balsam et al., 2004), and they are twice as likely to experience assault (including physical assault, sexual assault, and assault with a weapon) than GLBT people in the general population (Walters et al., 2001). The sexual orientation bias to which two-spirited people might be exposed (including judgments, assumptions and exclusion) can have a variety of violent consequences: they might be verbally insulted, threatened with an attack, have objects thrown at them, be chased, be followed or spat upon, be physically assaulted, be assaulted with a weapon or be sexually assaulted. This anti-gay violence can result in loss of trust, safety and self-worth, increased fear and isolation, internalized homophobia (Walters et al., 2001), depression, a sense of powerlessness, anger, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Paul et al., 2002).

An American study reported that two-spirited women were four times more likely to be sexually and physically assaulted than members of the general population and 50 per cent more likely than heterosexual Native women and White lesbian or bisexual women (Lehavot et al., 2009). Victimization has been associated with an increased likelihood of suicide attempts (Hamby & Skupien, 1998). Among the transgendered and two-spirited participants in the previously mentioned Manitoba study, only 52 per cent had never been chased, 55 per cent had never been threatened with physical violence and 60 per cent had never had objects thrown at them because of their sex/gender identity (Taylor, 2006, p. 55).

Mental Health

I do get isolated... I have mental health needs that are directly related to [my] Two–Spiritness.
(BROTMAN ET AL., 2002, P. 82)

Anti-gay violence has a direct and substantial impact on mental as well as physical health, and homophobia and heterosexism can be equally damaging. It is important to note that self-hate, self-harm and suicide are not directly caused by being two-spirited but are due to the toxic or harmful way other people or communities treat the two-spirited person (Alaers, 2010; Taylor, 2006). "Isolation, exclusion and rejection by families, communities and society have a substantial negative impact upon GLBT people's sense of self [and] their ability to come out and self-affirm" (Ryan, Brotman, & Rowe, 2000, as cited in Brotman et al., 2002, p. 69). Two-spirited people can face additional challenges reconciling identity conflicts related to being First Nations and two-spirited and may feel they need to split or hide parts of their identity to be accepted (Brotman et al., 2002; Ristock et al., 2010; Walters et al., 2006). The disconnection between these two key aspects of self (two-spirit and native) can lead to self-destructive behaviours, hopelessness and suicide (Walters et al., 2006).

Lack of two-spirit supports and resources or previous negative experiences with health services can erode a two-spirited individual's trust in health care services and lead to feelings of shame and disentitlement; as a result, the two-spirited person may not seek help when needed (Brotman et al., 2002). The authors noted that "as a result of shame, denial and isolation, compounding health and mental health issues emerge, including suicide and drugs/alcohol addictions" (p. 78).

Teengs and Travers (2006, p. 21) reported on some of the issues related to mental health and suicidality that young two-spirited individuals who leave their homes and migrate to larger cities can face:

I was tormented all the way until I was in the ninth grade.
(TRANSGENDERED MALE–TO-FEMALE YOUTH, AGE 22 YEARS)

I moved here because the reserve that I'm from... they're totally against gay or bisexual people. I lived pretty much my whole life trying to pretend to be straight. I had enough of it.
(BISEXUAL MALE, AGE 19 YEARS)

I had the worst time coming out of the closet in my reserve. They gay–bashed and everything. My family dropped me... my cousins, my friends... basically I was driven off of the reserve.
(GAY MALE, AGE 25 YEARS)

Sources of Strength and Support

Connections to their culture and traditions can help protect all First Nations from the risk of suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), but for two-spirited people this takes on additional meaning. Alaers (2010) notes that "knowledge of traditional cultural roles and identities has the power to instill positive identities and healthy self-concepts in two-spirits" (p. 72). If First Nations communities learn about positive traditions, beliefs and practices regarding two-spirited people and engage in those practices, their two-spirited community members are more likely to feel supported and accepted. However, some two-spirited people have found that it can be challenging to connect with traditions in communities where so much was lost through the Euro-colonial influence that the reclaimed traditions or practices may be entangled with Christian views without the conscious realization of the community members (Alaers, 2010). Respect, inclusion and support on and off reserves, in urban and rural communities and in GLBT communities help two-spirited people to develop a positive self-identity, which is important for the development of self-esteem, which in turn contributes to good health (Brotman et al., 2002). To develop a positive identity, two-spirited people need to integrate the First Nations and two-spirit aspects of their selves so that these two aspects can co-exist in harmony (Walters et al., 2001): they need to feel whole and be proud of both their First Nations and two-spirit identities.

Talking with others can be a great source of strength, particularly if the person discloses their sexual orientation. Such disclosure, especially to one's parents in a supportive environment, decreases psychological stress and distress, which in turn decreases risk of suicide. Two-spirited women are more likely to tell others about their two-spiritedness the longer it has been since they self-identified (Morris et al., 2001). Many two-spirited individuals gain strength from being comfortable with who they are and by being part of a supportive community, either on reserve or in urban centres (Ristock et al., 2010).

In a qualitative study using indigenous research methods, Wilson (2008) spoke with eight two-spirited people in Manitoba who identified as being two-spirited and asked them how a two-spirited person can develop an empowered identity in the context of sustained homophobia, sexism and racism. Participants shared a process described as coming in, which involves an affirmation of being oneself and embracing identities that fit with who one is, rather than trying to conform to a pre-existing identity or label. Wilson (2008) notes that "two-spirit identity is about circling back to where we belong, reclaiming, reinventing and redefining our beginnings, our roots, our communities, our support systems and our collective and individual selves" (p. 198).

Things started to clear… I realized it wasn't about colonization and oppression…. It wasn't about measuring up and comparing and not being good enough or smart enough… It wasn't about wasn'ts… It is about our strength, our land…our hearts. (WILSON, 2008, P. 197).

How You Can Help

- Learn about the contributions of two-spirited individuals in your community and educate others about the history and traditions of two-spirited people.

- Learn about your culture and traditions and help to revitalize cultural activities.

- Reclaim lost traditions and teachings about the role that two-spirited people played in your community in the past.

- Reclaim your culture and spirituality.

- Reclaim traditional First Nations values of inclusiveness and diversity. Involve Elders and youth (Meyer-Cook & Labelle, 2004).

- Create positive, affirming resources or safe spaces in the community for two-spirited people. These help young people to develop a positive self-concept and have positive impacts on the health of two-spirited people of all ages. Safe spaces can be anywhere: in a family, social circle, community or work setting. The Annual International Two Spirit Gathering is an example of how an affirming, safe space can be created in an international context www.nativeout.com.

- Include two-spirited people as valued community members in all aspects of community life. Recognize that inclusion is an ongoing process (NAFC, 2008, p. 29). Invite them. Embrace them. Involve them.

- Speak out against homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and cis-sexism, particularly if you are in a leadership role.

- Be open about your acceptance of two-spirit diversity. Stand by and stand up for two-spirited people.

- Break the silence. Talk about suicide and gender/sexual orientation to family members, friends, leaders, Elders and service providers. If you talk openly, respectfully and compassionately you will help to overcome stigma, fear and shame (Walters, 1997).

- Include gender and sexual orientation topics in health, education and employment conferences.

- Educate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mental health providers about two-spirited people.

For Service Providers:

- Focus on your clients' resilience and positive coping skills in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of their lives and in their relationships.

- Help develop supportive resources and help clients access GLBT and two-spirit organizations and gay-positive spaces.

- Help clients find culturally relevant ways to "come out" that enable them to accept both the two-spirited and First Nations aspects of their selves.

- Help clients connect with people and organizations that have supportive values. Help them develop positive relationships with other resources in their community.

- Help provide access to positive two-spirited role models specific to the client's culture and traditions.

- Get involved in creating organizational changes and implementing institutional policies that facilitate a positive and safe culture for two-spirited people. Health care providers and leaders play a key role in this regard.

- Be assertive about the standards you expect for workplace relationships. Take anti-bullying training, provide training opportunities for others, and implement policies in your workplace or school setting.

- Become familiar with the *Canadian Human Rights Act* [laws.justice.gc.ca/PDF/Statute/H/H-6.pdf]. It has been in effect on reserve since June 2008, and it prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

- Advocate for comprehensive research so that all may better understand two-spirited individuals, their problems and their needs.

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Glossary of Terms

Cis-sexism: prejudice and discrimination against people for whom their assigned sex, internal sense of sex, assigned gender and internal sense of gender do not all match up. It is the presumption that the norm is to be either a male-assigned and identified man or a female-assigned and identified woman and this is the way everyone should be. Cis-sexism corresponds to transphobia and assumes the rightness of a cis person (a person whose sex, gender identity and role behaviour are consistent) (JKBC, 2010).

Heterosexism: the presumption that hetero-sexuality is the norm and that any other form of sexual expression is deviant, bad or wrong. Opposite-sex relationships are seen as the preferred or superior form of relationship. Heterosexism is a way of thinking and behaving that denies, denigrates and stig-matizes any behaviour, identity, relationship, or community that is not heterosexual (Ryan, 2003).

Homophobia: negative attitudes and feelings, irrational fears, hatred, and intolerance of GLBT people or homosexual behaviour. It can lead to discriminatory actions and behaviours such as exclusion of, rejection of, and violence toward two-spirited people (Ryan, 2003).

Internalized homophobia: negative feelings toward oneself related to a person's own homosexual, GLBT or two-spirit orientation. It can include lack of acceptance, discomfort with or disapproval of one's own sexual orientation (Ryan, 2003).

Transphobia: negative attitudes and feelings, irrational fears, hatred, and intolerance of people who do not fit the stereotypical idea of a masculine man who behaves according to male roles or a feminine woman who be-haves according to females roles. It can lead to discriminatory actions and behaviours such as exclusion of, rejection of, and violence toward transgendered or two-spirited people. (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2007).

Resources

2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations: www.2Spirits.com

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network – Healthy Sexuality and Fighting Homophobia Native Youth Photography Campaign: nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/youthphotoproject.html

The North American Aboriginal Two Spirit Information Pages: people.ucalgary.ca/~ptrembla/#rowe-08 people.ucalgary.ca/~ptrembla/aboriginal

Increasing Awareness of GLBTTsQQASuicide Issues: people.ucalgary.ca/~ramsay

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www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/
film/?id=55983

Two Spirited. (2007). Directed by Sharon A. Desjarlais, this is "the empowering story of Rodney 'Geeyo' Poucette's shattering encounter with prejudice and his journey to overcome it." National Film Board of Canada:
www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/
film/?id=55303

Two Spirits. (2009). Directed by Lydia Nibley. This film "interweaves the tragic story of a mother's loss of her son with a revealing look at a time when the world wasn't simply divided into male and female and many Native American cultures held places of honor for people of integrated genders."
twospirits.org

Two Spirit People. This episode explores "the issues faced by Aboriginal gays, lesbians and bisexuals and shows the extraordinary efforts being made by those trying to end this discrimination."(episode from season 14 of The Sharing Circle). Directed by Curtis Kaltenbaugh.
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