

SUICIDE

Saving the Sundancers



John Wisdomkeeper

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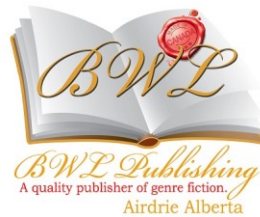
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The Dance of Life

Sundancers stepping and swaying to the rhythmic beat of ancient drums offer their bodies, minds and spirits in an ancient ritual that pays tribute to mother earth and the four seasons.

Suicide, the willful self-destruction of body, mind and spirit strikes at the core of the tributes offered by our ancestors and denies our traditions of honor and self-respect.

Suicide rates have increased dramatically over the past twenty years, but the greatest increases have been noted among Native youth, particularly males. The majority of recognized studies by governments and support groups have identified the following as high risk for suicides.

- Those suffering mental disorders
- Those addicted to Drugs or Alcohol
- Youth aged 10-24 (especially males)
- The elderly (especially men 70 or more)
- Native Americans
- Persons in Custody
- The Bereaved

There are many factors which contribute to the individual's decision to use suicide as a "way out" of their problems. The purpose of this booklet is to attempt to share with Native youth some of the many cultural supports that are available for them to turn to when they are feeling desperate enough to contemplate suicide. Our Nation has been shattered over the past generations by a combination of factors, including the loss of our lands, the placing of many of our children in residential schools, and attempts by various government agencies to destroy our cultural traditions and assimilate our people into mainstream society. Our young people are the hope for our future, and it is only by sharing our cultural traditions with them and instilling in

them a sense of pride in their Nation and their heritage that we can hope to once again take our place as a strong and united Nation.

The foundation for this document has been the experience of the Native American people, but the signs and warning apply to all people everywhere, and the Native American traditional ceremonies and support systems can apply to any cultural group. Every culture has traditions and ceremonies designed to offer emotional and physical help to their people. By seeking out these support groups and “taking a chance” by reaching out to friends and loved ones showing signs of trouble each of us has the power to Save a Life.

Who Commits Suicide?

Seventy five percent of suicide attempters give repeated warnings. They tell their friends, sometimes even their families that they want to die. THEY ARE ASKING FOR HELP.

Nine out of ten teenagers who attempt suicide do so in the home, where there is a good chance that someone will stop them. If someone you know says they are getting ready to kill themselves BELIEVE THEM.

In the months before taking their own lives, seventy-five percent of the victims had seen their family doctor. Many of them are also seeing a psychiatrist.

If you or a friend are having suicidal thoughts seek out a Counsellor, Medicine Man, Youth Worker or Native Elder who can help you.

[Dead Serious, Jane Mersky Leder, Atheneum, New York, 1987]

Stages Leading Up To Suicide Attempt

Experts have identified three stages that potential suicides progress through as they prepare to commit suicide. In order to recognize the potential for suicide in ourselves and/or our friends, we need to become familiar with these stages.

STAGE ONE

Thinking about Suicide

Thinking that we don't want to live anymore

Thinking that we are all alone in the world and no one will care if we are dead Thinking that other people would be a lot better off if we were dead

Thinking that our problems are so overwhelming that the only way to solve them is to kill ourselves

STAGE TWO

Planning Suicide

Deciding how to go about killing themselves Deciding what they would say in a suicide note Deciding what to do with their possessions

Locating a gun or other weapon to use in killing themselves. Hoarding lethal drugs for use in committing suicide Giving away their possessions

Choosing the time for committing suicide

STAGE THREE

One Or More Of The Following Actions Often Precedes A Suicide

Deceased told someone they were unable to cope with life

Deceased warned someone they were thinking of suicide

Family and friends were concerned about the person's suicidal tendencies

Deceased consulted a health professional about their problems

Deceased had previously attempted suicide
Deceased had attempted suicide in the past year
Someone tried to prevent the suicide
Frequent sadness, tearfulness, crying
Decreased interest in activities; or inability to enjoy previously favorite activities
Persistent boredom; low energy
Social isolation, poor communication
Low self esteem and guilt
Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
Increased irritability, anger, or hostility
Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomachaches
Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
Poor concentration
A major change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
Talk of or efforts to run away from home
Thoughts or expressions of suicide or self destructive behavior
Withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
Violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
Drug and Alcohol use
Unusual neglect of personal appearance
Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, decline in the quality of schoolwork
Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions,
such as stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
Not tolerating praise or rewards

*American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2009. 15
Wisconsin Avenue Washington, D.C. 20016-3007. acap.org*

RESPONDING TO EARLY WARNING SIGNALS

Depression

“There are at least six kinds of depression, ranging from unipolar depression—depression that usually lasts for a few months before lifting—to bipolar (manic) depression that causes its victims to go up and down in mood indefinitely. The most important thing to understand is that depression can range from the ordinary “downs” that everyone experiences at one time or another to crippling kinds that may require hospitalization.” Depressed people often describe their feelings as living under a “black cloud” and constantly being down in the dumps. Most of them describe the following feelings:

Sadness

Feeling miserable and unhappy with no joy or laughter in your life. When someone reaches the point of contemplating suicide—or even self injuries such as cutting or burning—they are in so much pain that it seems like the only way to escape it is by ending their lives, or in the case of cutting, causing an external pain to distract them from the internal pain. People who are contemplating suicide have lost all hope that their lives will ever return to normal and that they will be happy again. Many of them are unable to understand that they can be treated and be ‘saved’. Most people who kill themselves do not want to die, they just want to escape the pain they’re feeling.

Alcohol and Drugs

People who abuse drugs and alcohol are significantly more likely to attempt suicide. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that substance abuse is, in itself, a risk factor for

suicide. This may be due to one or more of several factors: The abuser may be more impulsive than the general population, the drugs may cloud decision-making abilities or the drugs may act as depressants. Individuals with another concurrent mental disorder in addition to substance abuse are even more likely to attempt suicide.

Negative Thinking/Hopelessness

Feeling that nothing ever works out right for you, all your luck is bad and nothing is ever going to get any better;

Guilt and Regrets

You never satisfy anyone; your parents are disappointed in you; your friends are disloyal to you; you always do and say the wrong thing; you have done some terrible things and if anyone ever found out about them they would all hate you;

Self-hate

You can't stand yourself so how could anyone else like you; you have no boyfriends/girlfriends; you are ugly, fat, skinny, boring, unpopular, stupid, and even your parents hate you;

If you commit suicide at least some of the people who have been so rotten to you will have to realize that you're a person and they will feel guilty and sad that they have failed you;

Relationship Problems

Everyone of us has experienced relationship problems or will experience them in the future. At the time this happens it seems to each of us as if nothing else in the world can be as important as the trouble we are having in our relationship. If someone we care for has suddenly decided that they don't care for us anymore this can be devastating and shake the entire foundation of our life and our reasons for living. It is at this time, when we are going through these kind of problems that we most need the support and understanding of our family, friends and community. Unfortunately, all too often those closest to us fail to take seriously the strong feelings we have concerning our relationships. Too often we are dismissed with the words

“you’ll get over it” “you’ll soon find someone else” “she/he wasn’t good enough for you anyhow”.

These words do not help us, and in many cases they only serve to make us feel more alone and abandoned. What we need to do at a time like this is find support within our community from others who have experienced the same kind of problems. A sharing circle with other youth can be a strengthening and reinforcing experience for us. Not only will we discover other youth who have had relationship problems, but we will also be in the company of others and this will help to draw us away from dwelling on our relationship problems. Traditionally Native people have had to go through many trials and tribulations as they advance through life, and just as it was in the time of our ancestors, we are still called upon to suffer many trials and tribulations and through them we are expected to grow stronger. The only difference is that in the modern world we have different kinds of trials and a lot of the pain we experience is emotional pain whereas in traditional times it was more likely to be physical pain. This is all part of the process of growing stronger and working towards achieving warrior status. We are needed to be warriors and leaders in our community if our nation is to grow strong again, and we therefore need to learn how to find ways to deal with all of the emotional pain that we have to go through without destroying ourselves and resorting to suicide.

The sweat lodge is a strong traditional way for Native people to cleanse their bodies, minds and spirits, and when we are overcome with sadness and despair over a relationship, it is very important for us to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony in order that we can cleanse ourselves from the despair we are feeling and be ready for the next lesson we have to learn in life.

Coping

When you feel unable to cope with life you need to share these feelings with others who are also feeling overwhelmed. A sharing/healing circle is a traditional place for Native people to gather and express their feelings. Once you realize that you are not alone in these feelings it will make them easier to bear. Chances are others in the Circle will have experienced feelings similar to yours and they will be able to share with you ways in which they dealt with the feelings and received help for their problems.

Native counsellors and family resource workers understand the pressures that Native people are undergoing in adjusting to mainstream society. They are trained to listen to your problems

and offer possible solutions to them. Also, they have information on a vast number of helping resources that they can turn you towards. Friendship Centres and Native support centres have counsellors and/or family resource workers. To get help from one of them all you need to do is drop in to your nearest Friendship Centre and inquire about what resources are available to you.

It is far wiser to seek help early for a problem of depression or the feeling of being unable to cope than to allow the feelings to progress to the point where you are seriously contemplating suicide.

Telling Someone

If you are contemplating suicide, chances are you have attempted to convey your feelings to a close friend or relative. Unfortunately though many people are uncomfortable with even the thought of suicide and they may have either ignored or made light of your feelings. This is not because those close to you do not care about your life, but because they are unfamiliar with the dynamics of suicide and they are afraid that if they discuss this issue with you it will encourage you towards following through with suicide. It is very important that you tell your suicidal feelings to someone who is trained to help you deal with these feelings.

Do not feel that you have to keep these feelings hidden inside yourself. You need to be able to express your feelings and you need someone to turn to who can help you overcome the depression that is leading you to contemplate suicide. Cultural alcohol/drug counsellors, family resource workers, medicine man, or youth workers all have either training in helping someone who is contemplating suicide or access to someone who is trained in helping. Your life is extremely valuable both to yourself and to your Native nation. All of our youth are critical towards the strengthening and rebuilding of our Nation. Our ancestors were once strong and proud and great in number. Native people turned to their leaders and medicine men for support and help in solving the problems of daily life. We must learn to do this once again.

We as a Nation have great cultural traditions which are able to help and support all of our people. In order for the non-Native community to begin to recognize and accept the value and importance of these traditions it is necessary that all of our people learn to turn to their cultural traditions for help and support in dealing with life. Suicide is stealing too many of our young people, and it is critical that all members of the Native community come to realize that we need each and every one of our young people to live and grow strong so that they can take their place

and fulfill their role in the rebuilding of our nation and the re-establishing of our Native cultural ways.

Expressing the Silent Rage

Many young people have experiences in their backgrounds such as sexual and physical abuse, abandonment, physical and emotional pain, and spiritual breakdown. These experiences have accumulated and piled up inside of them over a long period of time, and eventually these feelings explode into a kind of “silent rage.” This rage is unlike ordinary anger in that it is overwhelming and all-consuming. During an episode of silent rage a normally quiet and pleasant person can suddenly turn into an uncontrollable monster. It is possible for this person to commit horrible crimes against themselves and others, and during these episodes the person almost seems to lose control of reality.

For Native people the only way that we can deal with and combat the strength of these rages is to turn to our cultural ceremonies. We have always been a people of intense emotions and part of our strength is derived from our ability to draw from all of the elements around ourselves to build up great power and force. Now, when we no longer follow the traditional ways of the hunting and fighting warrior, we still need to find outlets for the forces that are intrinsic to our natures.

We must learn to use these forces in positive and helpful ways rather than turning them outward against others or inward against ourselves. The sweat lodge, the pipe ceremony, and the practice of smudging ourselves to cleanse our bodies and spirits are all part of traditional practices that have always helped the Native person to deal with these silent rages. Now, more than ever in the modern world it is vital that we again begin to implement these practices into our lifestyle. We no longer have the outlets of fighting for survival and hunting for food for which these intense emotions gave us strength, but we still have the intense emotions and we must be aware of the emotions and recognize the need to express the emotions in a way that will not destroy ourselves or those we love.

Aboriginal Suicide in British Columbia, Mary Cooper, Anne Marie Karlberg and Lorretta Pelletier Adams, B.C. Institute of Family Violence, April, 1991

Cultural Traditional Healing Practices

Smudging

One of the ways of controlling the silent rage is to find places that are calm and peaceful and to meditate on the things that have happened to us and to allow our feelings of anger and despair to wash over us. Going off alone into the woods and preparing a smudge to allow the smoke to cleanse us so that we can move into a place of meditation and reflect on the problems we are having to deal with is a positive beginning towards resolving our own inner turmoil..

The Vision Quest

In traditional times Native people used the Vision Quest as a way to reach inside of the dark places in their own spirits and come to terms with the anger and resentment that had accumulated there. The Vision Quest is a time of deep meditation and searching for direction. Alone, isolated from other people, we are able to learn to spend time with nature so that we can learn that we do not have to have human contact in order to keep us from being alone. Mother Earth has many lessons to teach us, and it is only when we are alone and away from the distractions of modern life and other people that we can shut out the physical noise that surrounds us and open our inner ears to hear the lessons that Mother Earth has to teach us. A Medicine Man or Native Elder can instruct you in the procedure for preparing for a Vision Quest. A Vision Quest should only be attempted under the guidance of a Medicine Man or Native Elder. Now, in modern times it is even more important that we begin to re-experience some of the traditional ways of dealing with extreme emotions.

The Pow-Wow

Traditional Times:

Ceremonial gatherings where Native people learned to get along with each other and to accept the different ways of other tribes were a part of traditional life.

Modern Times:

In continuing their traditions Native people hold the Pow-Wow. At these celebrations Native people gather together to dance and listen to drummers and singers and share with each other the lessons of their ancestors. It is during these celebrations that Native youth learn about their culture and traditions and experience the feeling of oneness and community that comes from being with other Native youth, , sharing experiences, respecting each others cultural practices. Native youth learn that they are not alone, but that they are part of a distinct Nation deserving of respect and honour. Just as it is important for Native youth to learn how to be alone and to meditate and draw strength from Mother Earth, it is also important for them to socialize with other Native people and to hear the teachings of Native Elders so that they can understand their own place in their Native community and nation.

The Pipe Ceremony

Traditional Times:

Smoking the Sacred Pipe has always been a part of our Native culture. Originally the pipe was smoked in friendship amongst the Native peoples to create the unity that was necessary for a strong Nation.

Modern Times:

Our nation is scattered and fragmented within urban society, and it is important that Native youth find opportunities to participate in and be a part of those ceremonies that offer them the comfort and support of their cultural traditions. Friendship Centres, Healing Circles and Native Elders in urban communities will know where and when a Pipe Ceremony is being held, and will gladly guide the young person to one of these ceremonies.

The Healing/Sharing Circle

Traditional Times:

Members of Native tribes would gather into a Circle to discuss the needs of the tribe. Individuals with concerns would share them with the Circle, and the other members of the tribe would help the individual to work out their concerns.

Modern Times

Members of Native communities gather together into a Circle with other people from their community who are going through difficulties, and each member of the Circle tries to help the other members deal with the needs each person has expressed. It is understood by all that what is shared in the Circle stays in the Circle so that everyone can feel secure that their problems and issues will not be discussed outside of the Circle.

C.A.R.E.

What To Do If You Feel Like Killing Yourself

Communicate your suicidal feelings immediately to an elder, Medicine Man, Physician, Counsellor or Crisis Clinic. If you communicate with someone who does not take you seriously go to someone else, and keep telling people until you find someone who believes you.

Attend a healing Circle and share your feelings of despair with the members of the Circle. One or more of them will have had similar feelings and they will be sympathetic and anxious to help you.

Reach Out to your community. Participate in a pipe ceremony and share your feelings with the pipe carrier. He/she will understand your feelings and will offer you positive guidance in dealing with those feelings. If you have a religion then reach out to your church leader, or a community leader, or a mental health member, or suicide line in your community. Don't keep these feelings locked up inside yourself -- Tell someone.

Elder Support. Discuss your feelings and fears with an Elder in your community. Seek out Elders in your family or your neighborhood and ask them to share their wisdom. Ask them how they have coped with depression and feeling discouraged at living.

Suicide is a final step. Don't let fear of rejection or misunderstanding take away your future. Reach Out and Keep Reaching out until you find someone who listens. It's your life, you deserve to have it protected.

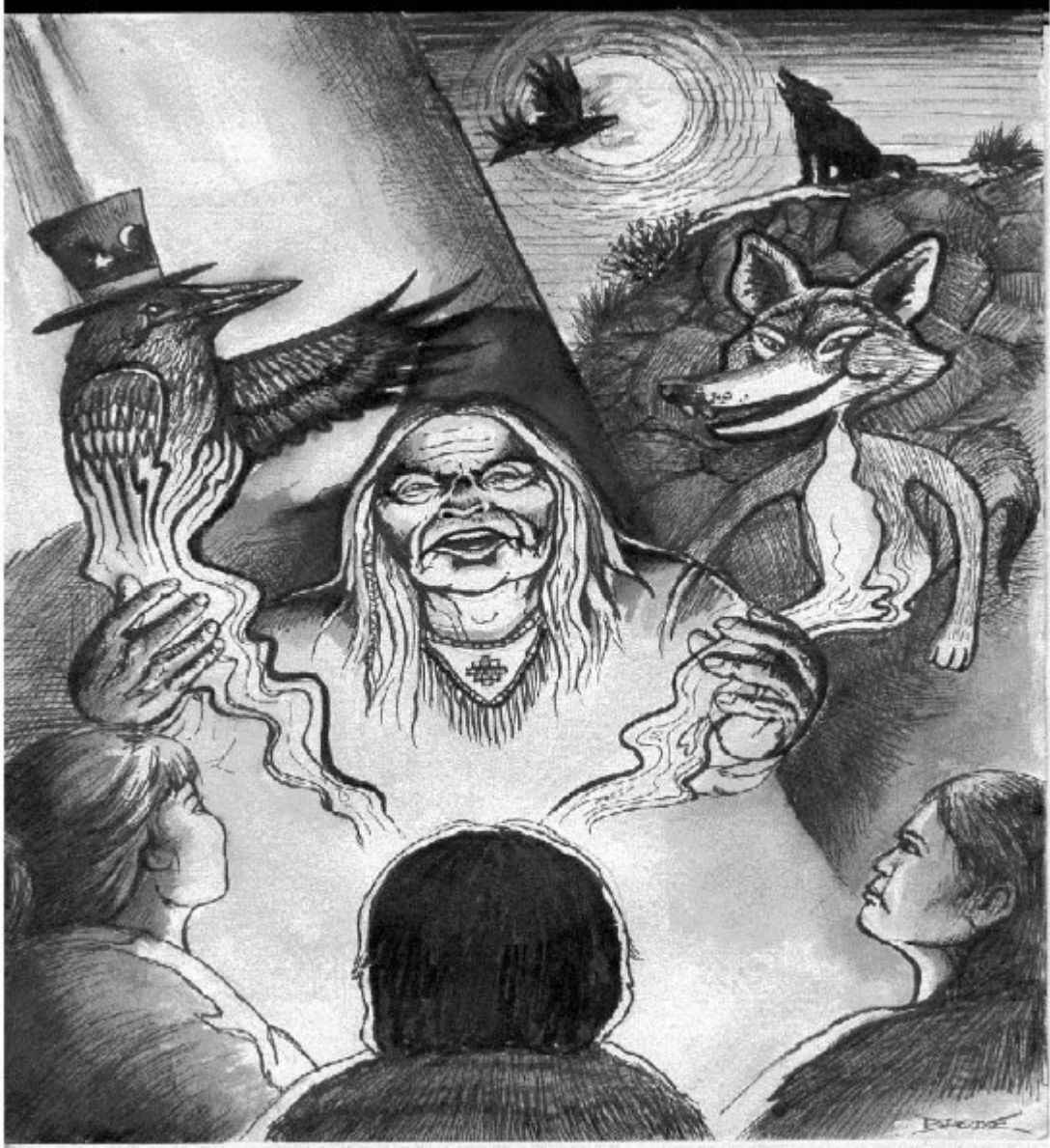


Illustration by Mike Brodie