

Study finds aboriginal community with strong ethno-cultural identity and connection to the land has lower suicide rates

July 20 2017

July 20, 2017 - A University of Guelph-Humber funded study investigating mental health perceptions and practices of an Aboriginal community in northern Ontario, and its significantly lower rates of mental health services utilization and suicide, suggests that a strong ethno cultural identity and connection to the land are significant factors to positive mental health outcomes in this region.

The study and its findings appear in the latest edition of the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*.

The Cree community involved in the study is one of six First Nations communities located in the James and Hudson Bay region of northern Ontario. Despite a shared history of trauma and oppression with its sister communities, as well as an added trauma of natural disaster and subsequent relocation, this specific community has had markedly lower rates of depression, suicide, and utilization of [mental health](#) services.

"We discovered all but one of the Aboriginal communities had notoriously high rates of substance abuse, mental illness and teen suicide rates," said Dr. Russ Walsh, study co-author and psychology professor at Duquesne University. "Studies outlining the pathology of the Cree communities already existed, so we obtained grant funding in order to pursue qualitative research focusing on the one community that was thriving."

The overall goal of the study was to examine what factors promote strength, resilience and more positive mental [health](#) outcomes in this Aboriginal community.

A qualitative study was conducted, involving interviews with elders, healers and [mental health service](#) providers to identify and further explore the features that distinguish this Cree community.

"It was crucial that our research approach, collect and interpret data in a culturally sensitive and community-compatible way that supported the autonomy of this community," said Dr. David Danto, study co-author and psychology program head at University of Guelph-Humber.

"In addition to taking a qualitative approach to gathering information, it was also important that we consider a culturally appropriate way to organize and interpret participant narratives," said Danto. "We used the medicine-wheel associated with traditional Aboriginal healing to categorize responses according to mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health."

Overall findings from the study suggest that strength and resilience in mental health, as well as physical, spiritual, and emotional health, were positively attributed to having: a strong and deep connection to the land and traditions; an openness to diverse approaches to spirituality; community engagement, and shared parenting roles amongst its members.

"The most notable finding in this study was the way in which a connection to the land was interwoven throughout all responses," said Danto. "Participants' comments regarding physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health often referred to attitudes and practices that affirmed a fundamental connection to the land."

Participant responses also emphasized cultural continuity factors and an overall sense of ethno cultural identity.

"We really want to shift the focus of these communities from one of pathology to one of resilience," said Walsh. "Our goal is to help affirm a sense of pride, strength and health among these Aboriginal communities."

Danto and Walsh plan to conduct a follow-up study to further investigate and better understand the significance of land-based mental health interventions in Aboriginal communities.

More information: David Danto et al, Mental Health Perceptions and Practices of a Cree Community in Northern Ontario: A Qualitative Study, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* (2017).

[DOI: 10.1007/s11469-017-9791-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-017-9791-6)

Provided by University of Guelph-Humber

Citation: Study finds aboriginal community with strong ethno-cultural identity and connection to the land has lower suicide rates (2017, July 20) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-aboriginal-strong-ethno-cultural-identity-suicide.html>

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