Cultural Safety and Knowledge Sharing: Work on Mental Wellness at Inuit Tuttarvingat, NAHO

Knowledge Sharing and Inuit Cultural Safety

The term cultural safety has us ask what we need to understand about Aboriginal peoples’ sense of danger or risk when they bring themselves to a place for screening, counselling or therapy. If there is a sense that one’s values, language or ways of life are threatened or locked down upon, then we speak of the environment not being culturally safe.

In order to be effective, any act of knowledge sharing and counselling needs to happen in an environment perceived as safe. Quotations of Inuit Elders’ statements can help create this sense of cultural safety for Inuit and therefore encourage sharing and learning.

Knowledge sharing

- is a concept applied in an Aboriginal context.
- is an outcome.
- is defined by those who receive the service.
- makes programs and services more effective.
- is built on respectful engagement that can help find paths to well-being.

Cultural safety goes beyond the three related concepts of:

Cultural awareness – the acknowledgement of difference.
Cultural sensitivity – the recognition of the importance of respecting difference, a term often associated with cross-cultural education or diversity training.
Cultural competence – the skills, knowledge and attitudes in practice.

Origin of concept: The concept ‘cultural safety’ arose from the colonial context of Indigenous peoples in New Zealand and the insistence that service delivery change profoundly. Promoted by Maori nurses, cultural sensitivity became a requirement for nursing and midwifery courses in New Zealand in 1990.

Cultural Safety in Aboriginal Canada

In Canada, the concept of cultural safety is being discussed among health-care providers and academics working in an Aboriginal context and it has become part of teaching nurses and other health and human service workers.

In a guide for health-care administrators, providers, educators and researchers, among other things, NAHO describes approaches that help in educating the health-care workforce in cultural safety (1):

- recognizing the historical context within which the worker practices.
- recognizing diversity between Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis).
- understanding health care worker-patient power relations.
- raising organizational awareness.

Another Canadian example is the formulation of five principles recommended to achieve cultural safety in health service delivery to First Nations in British Columbia (2). The principles identified are:

- personal knowledge (know who you are).
- cultural protocols.
- process.
- partnerships.
- positive purpose.

Applying the Cultural Safety Concepts to Inuit Mental Health Care Requires:

- believing that health is a holistic concept.
- knowing that Inuit ways of thinking and being are important to the restoration of Inuit health.
- recognizing that mental health is developed and is maintained through connectedness with family, community and the environment.
- understanding how history may influence experiences.
- accepting that different healing processes exist for different people.
- establishing a connection between health-care professional and client, based on cultural safety.
- respecting each other’s strengths and abilities in helping.

Resilience: Overcoming Challenges and Moving on Positively, 2008

- poster produced upon request by Inuit community health-care providers
- purpose is to provide positive messaging in an Inuit-specific context

What is Mental Illness?, 2006

- explains the types of mental illnesses, their causes and the possible treatment choices

Suicide Prevention: Inuit Traditional Practices that Encouraged Resilience and Coping, 2006

- summarizes results from focus groups with Inuit elders to understand historical resilience and coping methods used by Inuit in difficult times
- Inuit elders explain how certain behaviors are necessary to live a good life

Citing Inuit Elders’ Statements as a Means of Creating an Environment of Cultural Safety

We have used citations in particular in our work relating to mental wellness and have been encouraged to continue to use this technique to support the creation of:

- culturally safe environments.
- opportunities for knowledge exchange.
- safe learning environments.


- shares knowledge about coping strategies
- presents Inuit traditional ways of coping
- explains research results and coping strategies coming from Western counselling models

Inuit Voices, Modern Methods: Inuit Elders’ Statements as a Means of Creating an Environment of Cultural Safety

- explains resilience in plain language
- provides explanations on how to cope

Inuit Tuttarvingat of NAHO is dedicated to improving the physical, social, emotional and spiritual health of Inuit and their communities. Up until Fall 2006, Inuit Tuttarvingat was known as Ajpingorvik Centre.

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