

A New Prevention Paradigm for Native Americans

Transcript of SPARK Talks

Speaker: Doreen Bird, MPH, Program Specialist, University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center

Hello, my name is Doreen Bird. I'm from Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico, and today I want to talk to you about suicide prevention in Native American communities. I do tend to use the term *tribal communities* a lot, but I'm talking about Native American communities, American Indian communities, rural and urban populations.

So, one of the challenges we have in suicide prevention is that our Native American youth have some of the highest suicide rates in the country. And although that is a generalization that's made, I think it's really important to note that tribal communities are really unique and genuinely different amongst each other. So it's important to not generalize and say *all* Native American communities have high suicide rates. Some of our tribes have very low suicide rates, and some have zero.

Some of the challenges that we're facing in doing our work in suicide prevention is that some communities consider it taboo to talk about suicide or to even say the word *suicide*. And so it's important to gauge how ready your population is to tackle this subject. There are generational differences in communities, as well. I've seen where elders have a harder time saying *suicide* and talking about death; whereas, the youth are ready to talk about it — it's no sugar-coating with them.

Another challenge that I'm seeing when doing the work in suicide prevention with Native American communities is cultural competency. There are so many unique tribes in our nation; you can't be culturally competent with each tribal community. And so it's important to note that you don't know everything. And it's also important to build off the human aspect. We're all humans, and so when doing work with Native American communities that you may not know everything about, I like to go back to being human and being genuine.

When we have people coming new to our community, we often like to share a meal. And I say, break bread with the people that you're working with. That's a very important and easy way to build authentic relationships with the communities that you're working with.

Another one of the challenges that we're facing is using evidence-based practices in our communities. Oftentimes, that evidence was based on a population that didn't include Native Americans. So when we try to bring those evidence-based practices into our communities, oftentimes, there's a clash of values that occur. There's a term called *practice-based evidence* that's kind of the flip side. When you're facing a clash of values, you need to go to the people that you're working with and include them in your program development. Because ultimately they know what works in their community, and you can build off of the strengths that they have.

One of the recommendations that I'd like to share is changing the paradigm of the way we talk about Native American communities. Oftentimes, we hear of all the risk factors, all the negative health problems that we have. And I think it's time to change that paradigm and start talking about what are the strengths in our communities. What's protective? What's made us so resilient that we are still here today given all the trauma that some of our ancestors have faced? We're here still and we're proud and we'd like to move forward in a positive way.

When I heard the surgeon general say that "connectedness" is a protective factor in suicide prevention, I was really excited because I think that is something that Native Americans are really used to, and it's something we can build off of. We're connected to our culture. Native Americans are connected to the land that we come from. And we're connected to each other in a way that's really hard to explain. It just comes through our being that we have this connection as native people no matter where you are in the world. And so when you're doing your work of suicide prevention in Native American communities, consider the term *connectedness* and see how you can use that to inform your program.

Working with tribal populations on suicide prevention, it's really important to bring the community members into the work that you're doing. This empowers the community, and it ultimately makes your program, your services, your engagement with the community a whole lot better in reducing suicides.