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Title

Engaging youth in mental health and wellness through authentic engagement: a strength-based participatory approach

Priority 1 (Research Category)

Community based participatory research

Presenters

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Abstract

Context: Sturgeon Lake First Nation (SLFN) in 2016, participated in the Enhance Mental Health Services program supported by the ACCESS Open Minds network where youth accessed mental health services. The Elders and healthcare workers in SLFN chose to analyze their data using a strength-based lens rather than the usual deficit base. Objective: To identify and inform an analysis from a strengths-based approach such that it would enhance wellness by, for, and with youth in the community.

(Methods)Design: Secondary data analysis informed by an integrated framework of community-based participatory research (CBPR) and transformative learning. Setting: Youth ACCESS Centre at SLFN. Participants: Youth between 11 to 25 years. Intervention: Enhance Mental Health Service Program organized by the ACCESS Open Minds Network. Results: Forty youth between 11 to 25 years who accessed mental health services participated in this study, 90% of which were in something affirming (e.g., are currently in school, completed school, or volunteering) and all youth were living in a home with parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Moreover, over 70% of the youth considered their health to be quite good or outstanding, demonstrating their resilience and strength. While the youth acknowledged the persistence of mental health challenges within the community, their focus was on the strengths found within the community (rather than the deficits) which included: the gift of family, the gift of friends, having a home, opportunities to enjoy and nurture relationships in the community and access to fun cultural activities for youth. Conclusions: Research with Indigenous peoples should reflect their norms, values, and customs. This strength-based participatory secondary data analysis identified inherent community strengths, which were facilitated through authentically engaging with the youth in the community. Our study showed that engaging youth as co-researchers facilitates building confidence in youth to use their voices to address community concerns.