

First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework Summary Report



Health
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Introduction

Mental health and substance use issues continue to be a priority concern for many First Nations communities. While there are different kinds of specific mental health issues that can affect communities, mental wellness is a broader term that can be defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and is able to make a contribution to her or his own community.

Mental wellness is supported by culture, language, Elders, families, and creation, and is necessary for healthy individual, community and family life. First Nations embrace the achievement of whole health -physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and economic well-being - through a comprehensive and coordinated approach that respects, values and utilizes First Nations cultural knowledge, approaches, languages and ways of knowing.

While federal, provincial, and territorial mental wellness programs and services seek to address the mental wellness challenges faced by many First Nations communities, there are gaps between and among these services: they could be better coordinated, and are not always delivered in a culturally safe manner. As a result, First Nations communities and leadership have been calling for the development of a coordinated, comprehensive approach to mental health and addictions programming. As a result, the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB), the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and Indigenous mental health leaders from various First Nations non-government organizations worked together through a joint process toward the development of a First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework.

*Mental wellness is a balance of the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional. This balance is enriched as individuals have **purpose** in their daily lives whether it is through education, employment, care giving activities, and cultural ways of being and doing; **hope** for their future and those of their families fueled by a desire to live life and based on knowing ones identity, unique indigenous values and having a belief in spirit; a sense of **belonging** and connectedness within their families, to community and culture; and finally a sense of **meaning** and an understanding of how their lives and those of their families and communities are part of creation and a rich history.*

Culture

The cultural values, sacred knowledge, language and practices of First Nations are essential determinants of individual, family and community health and wellness. Despite the impacts of colonization, First Nations people have maintained their cultural knowledge in their ways of living with the land, with each other and in their language. These foundations have ensured First Nations people strength, laughter and resiliency. Cultural knowledge that informs specific practices to address mental wellness do not narrowly focus on “deficits” but rather focuses on strengths and gifts. Culture is the foundation for “good life” and knowledge contained within culture applies across the life span, and addresses all aspects of life.

First Nation languages, culture and teachings are tied to the past, the present and the future – they are the stepping stones to a brighter tomorrow. First Nations individuals, families, and communities have a wealth of knowledge from which to draw to know how to live in balance, to care for themselves and others, and to restore balance when it is lost.

First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Model & Continuum of Mental Wellness Services

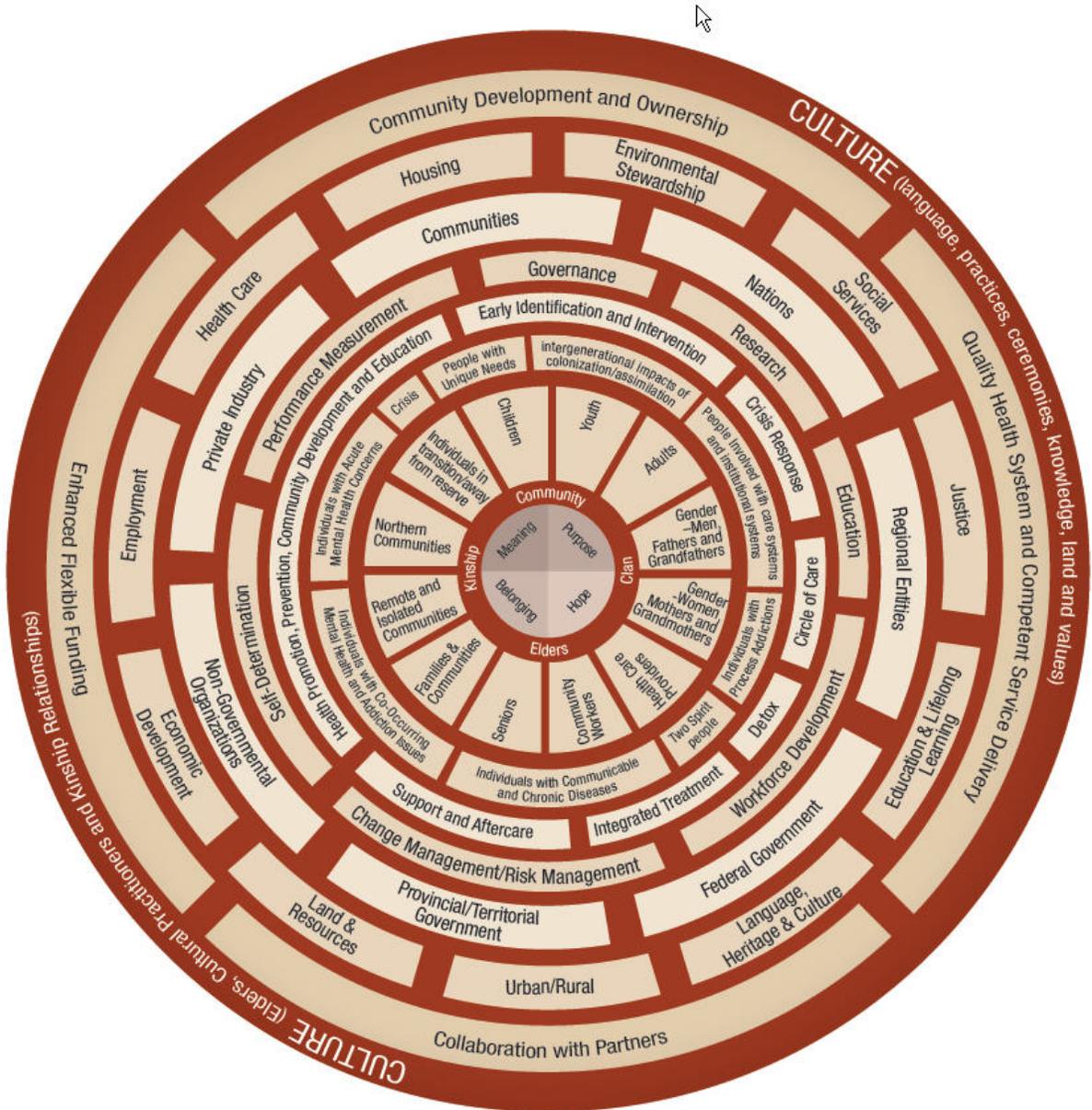
The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum is a comprehensive model comprised of several layers and elements foundational to supporting First Nations Mental Wellness. The model is rooted in culture as the foundation throughout all of the elements. Embedded within the model are the key themes which have emerged through this work, as well as the social determinants of health which are critical to supporting and maintaining wellness. The First Nation Mental Wellness Continuum must be supported by a number of partners at several levels, such as:

- Communities
- Nations
- Regional entities
- The Federal Government,
- Provincial and Territorial Governments,
- Non-government Organizations, and
- Private Industry.

The model also includes a number of components necessary to support the health system, such as: governance, research, workforce development, change management, self-determination, and performance measurement.

The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum aims to support all individuals across the lifespan, including those with multiple complex needs. The centre of the model refers to the interconnection between mental, physical, spiritual and emotional behaviour – purpose, hope, meaning, and belonging. A balance between all of these elements leads to optimal mental wellness.

Figure 1: DRAFT First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Model



Continuum of Mental Wellness Services

Consistent with the Model, a full spectrum of culturally competent supports and services is necessary for mental wellness to be attained. This continuum includes access to the following supports and services:

- Promotion, Prevention and Community Development
- Early Identification and Intervention
- Crisis Response
- Coordination of Care/Care Planning
- Treatment
- Support and Aftercare

It is recognised that all of the services described above are not going to be available in every community, but it is important that through collaboration and comprehensive planning that all communities have access to these key services. By identifying the key services it is possible to identify gaps and avoid duplicating services that are already available either from within the community, an adjacent community, or possibly from the provincial/territorial governments.

Key Themes

Through regional discussion sessions and national gatherings, several key themes emerged that have shaped this framework and the model outlined above. In the full framework document, there are implementation opportunities specific to each priority - which provide guidance to communities and partners at the community, regional, provincial/territorial, federal and national level – on concrete strategies and activities to support implementation of the framework.

Theme 1: Culture as Foundation

First Nations leadership, youth, community members and Elders have made it clear that culture must be at the centre of mental wellness. Culture must not only guide our work, it must be understood as an important social determinant of health. Culturally specific interventions are holistic; they attend to the spirit, mind, body and emotions simultaneously. Culture as a foundation implies that all health services and programs related to First Nations go above and beyond creating culturally relevant programs and safe practices. As such, culture as a foundation means starting from the point of Indigenous knowledge and culture and then integrating policies, strategies and frameworks currently in existence.

Priorities for Action:

- Recognizing the diversity of First Nations Communities
- Supporting Cultural Competency, Safety and Indigenous Knowledge
- Recognizing and Supporting the role of Language in Mental Wellness

Theme 2: Community Development and Ownership

Community development and ownership are significant factors which must be taken into account in enhancing First Nations mental wellness. Community experiences and research has demonstrated the positive impact of community ownership of local programs and infrastructure such as health services, on First Nations mental wellness. Community ownership is essential to ensure the continuum of mental wellness programs and services for First Nations are relevant, effective and meet community needs.

Priorities for Action:

- Community Wellness Plans
- Investing in Community Development and Capacity Building
- Working Together in Partnership
- Building on Community Priorities
- Transfer to First Nations Control

Theme 3: Quality Health System and Competent Service Delivery

Mental Wellness depends on access to a full spectrum of culturally competent supports and services. The continuum of essential services (outlined earlier in the document) is supported by partners at multiple levels, but also requires an emphasis and supports to quality, such as performance measurement, governance and workforce development.

Priorities for Action:

- Strengthen accessibility
- Improve quality Mental Wellness Programs and Services
- Emphasize Responsiveness, Flexibility, Reliability
- Ensure Crisis Supports – Proactive Planning
- Foster Trauma Informed Care
- Promote and Recognize a Culturally Competent Workforce
- Support Education, Training and Professional Development
- Ensure Worker Wellness

Theme 4: Collaboration with Partners

Enhancing First Nations mental wellness requires strategic action that goes beyond the mandate of the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. It involves other federal government departments, provincial and territorial governments, and First Nations communities, including supports and services that cross the health, justice, employment, and social service sectors working collaboratively and cooperatively to ensure that a comprehensive continuum of mental wellness services is available to those who require it. Currently, funding, policy and decision-making which affect First Nations communities are siloed. Although it is recognized that there are shared roles and responsibilities, these roles and responsibilities are not always clear.

Priorities for Action:

- Ensure Clear Roles and Responsibilities
- Encourage Leadership
- Support Partnership and Networking
- Support System Navigators/ Case Managers
- Advocacy
- Address Awareness – including Reduction of Stigma/ Privacy

Theme 5: Enhanced Flexible Funding

Funding alone isn't sufficient to ensure a comprehensive approach to mental wellness. However, participants in the various engagement sessions communicated that additional funding and the flexibility and permanency of current funding are critical to ensuring a comprehensive continuum of mental wellness services. The lack of adequate and sustainable funding and a continuous focus on project funding was identified by participants in regional and national discussions as harmful to mental wellness. Currently, funding and decision-making that affect First Nations are siloed within several federal departments (and provinces and territories), making it challenging to address the determinants of health and develop comprehensive approaches to mental wellness.

Priorities for Action:

- Additional funding specific to needs
- Move Away from Time Limited and Siloed Funding
- Increased Flexibility of funding

Moving Forward

The strength of the *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework* process to date has been its connection to a wide range of regional and national First Nation health and wellness networks. These networks have provided guidance to the Framework development process, shaped the vision for the Framework, and supported engagement with First Nations communities. Specific direction for the implementation of the Framework has been developed in collaboration with key partners, and will continue to be refined in partnership as implementation of the framework begins and continues to unfold.

The *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework* will guide communities to better plan, implement and coordinate comprehensive responses to the full range of mental wellness challenges, consistent with community priorities. Strategic implementation of the Continuum, through leveraging relationships with provincial and territorial governments as well as other Federal departments, will help to advance mental wellness for First Nations. The Framework supports a shift away from siloed programming toward a comprehensive mental wellness system for First Nations that is based on a continuum of care.

Changes over time will need to be tracked and measured to know what progress has been made and where more resources and efforts are needed to fully achieve the shared goal of providing comprehensive, culturally relevant and safe community-based services to First Nations individuals, families and communities. Monitoring progress toward achieving system change can be accomplished through the development of program and service delivery standards and indicators.

Change happens when momentum builds. Work has already begun in several regions across the country. Stronger partnerships are being developed and gaps are beginning to close in meeting the mental wellness needs of First Nations. Existing networks and partnership tables will be essential in their ongoing support and leadership of the process. This may include using the Framework as a tool at both regional and national levels to initiate conversations with major healthcare providers,

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other service providers, and jurisdictional partners to enhance collaboration and build partnerships in order to ensure the needs of First Nations people are being met.

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