

# CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN THE SERVICE OF CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT SUPPORTS INDIGENOUS WELLNESS: INDIGENOUS SCIENCE & SUICIDE POSTVENTION

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## ABSTRACT

This document contains research, information on traditional stories, and identifies research-based practices Creative Decolonization, LLC (CDLLC) employs in creating, collaborating, developing, and implementing our creative projects. The research, stories and information presented is not comprehensive of what is available on these topics nor is it a full account of all research stories and practices CDLLC uses in our work.

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## CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Expressive arts therapist, philosopher, and educator Stephen K. Levine wrote, “There is in the use of art a capacity for self-expression that is desperately needed by those who suffer intensely.”<sup>1</sup>

The use of creative expression, such as in creative writing, songs and cultural performance, is an effective practice in behavioral health and across cultural and creative communities to support wellness. Creative expression is beneficial for both the creator and the person or people experiencing the creation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, S. K. (2009). Poiesis: The language of psychology and the speech of the soul. London: Jessica Kingsley.

“Venting raw emotions and falling back on platitudes does not lead to health benefits. But sustained and thoughtful writing does. It helps us move beyond our initial reactions to something deeper. In fact, Pennebaker found expressive writing is uniquely healing. Subjects who were asked to express through dance didn’t benefit as much as the writers did. Pennebaker argues that’s because writing allows someone to systematically process an event, bring order to it.”<sup>2</sup>

“Expressive writing through journaling is another way to access the unconscious self. Journal writing has been linked to creativity, spiritual awareness, and expansion of the self.”<sup>3</sup>

One respondent to a survey put out by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in Canada to assess the use and benefits of the creative arts in Iñuit, First Nation, and Metis nations healing programs said when they understand the creation of sound as a *feeling* they allow themselves permission to express themselves in song.<sup>4</sup>

“We sing to our seeds before planting — without a voice, you couldn’t offer this spiritual part.” *Janice Kahehti:io Longboat, Turtle Clan of the Mohawk Tribe, Elder, educator, writer, herbalist, cultural advocate and visionary.*

Health researcher Heather Stuckey, PhD, and medical researcher Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH, conducted a review of current research on the connection between art and health. They published their findings in 2010. One study found that after only four weeks of instruction in theater, participants showed significant increases in “problem solving, self-esteem and psychological well-being.”<sup>1</sup>

A well-developed creative project honoring or empowering cultural identity can root a person’s work in something that is meaningful. Cultural engagement through creative expression helps perpetuate creative work by cultural peoples specifically, and as a whole. BSCD is dedicated to developing creative projects that support individual and community creative expression in the service of community and cultural wellness.

## CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

We are all cultural. Everyone experiences and interprets the world according to their cultural identity/ies, whether or not they are aware of their cultural association(s).

“Culture can be understood as the dynamic framework by which a society makes meaning, constitutes ways of being, and reproduces itself as a recognizable community.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, E. E. (2017). *The power of meaning: Crafting a life that matters.*

<sup>3</sup> Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health: a review of current literature. American journal of public health, 100(2), 254–263. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>

<sup>4</sup> Archibald & Dewar (2010). Creative Arts, Culture, and Healing: Building an Evidence Base. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal Of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* 8(3).

<sup>5</sup> Wexler & Gone (2012). Culturally Responsive Suicide Prevention in Indigenous Communities: Unexamined Assumptions and New Possibilities. *Am J Public Health*. 2012 May; 102(5): 800–806. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300432

Cultural engagement supports wellness in indigenous communities and can help people heal from trauma, mental health afflictions and suicidality. Cultural engagement in the classroom can also improve student success.

"In the interview study in two Inuit communities, we found that family, talking, and traditional cultural values and practices were seen as most central to well-being and happiness. Sadness was considered primarily to be the absence of these. The family was most prominently at the center of well-being."<sup>6</sup>

"Incorporating culture into the curriculum can give American Indian students a sense of pride in their education. Taking time to build culture into the curriculum sends a message that who they are and where they come from is important."<sup>7</sup>

Whenever possible, CDLLC also incorporates the Iñupiaq Learning Framework (ILF) by introducing the four realms of the Iñupiaq world as presented by Jana Pausauraq Harcharek and Cathy Tagnak Rexford in their paper on the stories and development of the ILF.<sup>8</sup>

## IÑUIT CREATIVE EXPRESSION

"Among the arts of the [Iñuit], poetry and music are by far the most prominent" wrote anthropologist Franz Boas in 1888 (*The Central Eskimo*, p 240). The Iñuit were outstanding song makers and poets. Oral song was a part of every Inuk's way of life."<sup>9</sup>

Iñuit peoples have been engaged in creative expression through a number of creative outlets such as singing/poetry, drumming, sewing, carving, performing and storytelling for as long as we have been living in the Arctic. Creative expression was and continues to be a source for entertainment in Iñuit communities; for the vast majority of Iñuit existence, creative expression has also been used to celebrate, honor and heal.

[To celebrate]: "When they have a Nalukataq [whaling festival]... [t]he elders would sing right there [by the windbreak]... whenever it is time for something to happen they had a song for it."<sup>10</sup>

[To honor, remember]: "People don't necessarily go out hunting and gathering all the time now. They have 9 to 5 jobs too. And the young people grew up without having to work too hard for what they have on the table, or what they put on in the morning when they wake up. It is just a matter of going to the store and there is no respect for the care you had to have when you had to go out and hunt for the food and clothing. The

<sup>6</sup> Kral, M. J. (January 01, 2012). Postcolonial Suicide Among Inuit in Arctic Canada. *Culture Medicine and Psychiatry*, 36, 2, 306-325.

<sup>7</sup> Hudiberg, et. al (2015). Moving toward a culturally competent model of education: preliminary results of a study of culturally responsive teaching in an American Indian Community. *School Libraries Worldwide* (Vol. 21, Issue 1)

<sup>8</sup> Harcharek, J. P., Rexford, C. T (2015). Remembering Their Words, Evoking Kirjuniivut: The Development of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework. *The Journal of American Indian Education* (54): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Petrone, P. (1988). Northern voices: Inuit writing in English. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>10</sup> PUIGUITKAAT, the 1978 Elder's Conference, Cora Ungarook, Chapter 9, p 335

activities that pertain to hunting and gathering activities, the respect, the respect for the equipment, and how you take care of your clothing can save your life. The young people today haven't had that experience. The meaning behind what is being used as a family has become removed. It becomes removed and modernized and it becomes Sears and Roebuck product and I don't know who made it. Maybe it was the Taiwanese made it. The clothing, put together someplace else and the value of working for what we have. These things are lost. They're going to be lost if we don't re-enact them. Because the art [of the Kivgiq] is the re-enactment of what happened. It is no longer a reality. But there should be ways in which we can at least show the young people. That is how I'm defining art." *James Malġun Nageak, respected Iñupiaq Culture and Language teacher, leader and North Slope Elder.*<sup>11</sup>

[to heal]: Uvlunuaq, a skilled poet who lived in Nestalik, Canada at the turn of the twentieth century recorded a song called "A Mother's Lament" in response to her son's impulsive murder of a hunting companion "in a fit of rage."<sup>12</sup>

Ungava, a shaman whose healing song was witnessed by a Hudson Bay employee and shared with the Reverend G.F. Le Gallais of the Colonial and Continental Church Society and then recorded as his "Healing Chant." We still use song today in healing ways after a person passes in Northern Alaska. "Singspirations" pop up in churches, homes and wherever song is needed to soothe the hurting soul.

An Iñuit survey respondent who works in traditional healing from the same Aboriginal Healing Foundation Survey referenced earlier in this document shared their perspective on creativity, pain, healing and engaging in the workforce:

"Iñuit have been very creative in print, drawing, and sewing, and it's really hard for the artistic gift to come out if a person is hurting too much. There is no question that creating is a part of healing, it brings the person out, their identity and self-expression, and it builds confidence in a person. I have seen young adults in the program who have never worked before and after the nine-month program, they have gained confidence in being creative with their hands and they went out and got work — office work, not creating with their hands, but their involvement in the program brought back encouragement, the will to do something." <sup>13</sup>

## STORYTELLING

"Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a more powerful tale, one so persuasive that is sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story..." Ivan Illich, a philosopher and Roman Catholic priest.

<sup>11</sup> Riccio, T. (2003). Reinventing traditional Alaska Native performance. Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press.

<sup>12</sup> Petrone, P. (1988). Northern voices: Inuit writing in English. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>13</sup> Archibald & Dewar (2010). Creative Arts, Culture, and Healing: Building an Evidence Base. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal Of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* 8(3).

We all have a “basic need for story” and to “organize our experience into important happenings” as cultural education researchers Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi point out in their important work on cultural diversity in the classroom.<sup>14</sup>

“Stories...are ‘lenses through which we view and review all of human experience...through stories we see ourselves...we see what it is to be alive, to be human.”<sup>15</sup>

Not only do we need story, the act of telling and listening has been shown to increase levels of dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins helping people relax, bond and learn to trust one another with the *gift of story*.<sup>16</sup>

“[Regarding storytelling a]t an individual level, the knowledge that others share one's feelings and concerns appears to be a crucial antidote to loneliness and alienation, or defensiveness and negativity in the face of challenge. As anxiety is reduced, the quality of thinking is enhanced. Alternative approaches come within the scope of possibility.”<sup>17</sup>

CDLLC employs the use of story and storytelling in a variety of ways; the most used form is through developing personal and community narratives. The study of narratives and narrative psychology has illuminated more ways storytelling supports cognitive, social and community wellness. “Narratives are powerful devices for effective communication. Some scholars have suggested that the narrative is the defining characteristic of a community (Goldberg, 1982, 1987; Hauerwas, 1983).”<sup>18</sup>

“At a cultural level, the sharing of stories promotes intimacy and group solidarity, providing the conditions under which deeply personal and critical reflection may take place. Empowerment and transformative practices in schools may result from such conditions.”<sup>19</sup>

CDLLC uses three different kinds of traditional stories from the North Slope of Alaska and other Iñuit communities in our work. Some of the stories we use are oral stories we know. Other stories come from seminal works in writing such as: The People of Kauwerak by William Okuilluk; The PUIGUITKAAT (the 1978 Elder’s Conference); Nunamiut Nipkaanjich: Nunamiut Stories (told by many); and the writings Knud

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<sup>14</sup> Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (1994). *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.

<sup>15</sup> Gay, G. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice.

<sup>16</sup> “The Art and Science of Storytelling in Suicide Prevention” presented by Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas. Webinar: United Suicide Survivors International. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_o-OIOANmFk&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o-OIOANmFk&feature=youtu.be)

<sup>17</sup> Pauline James (1996) The Transformative Power of Storytelling among Peers: an exploration from action research, Educational Action Research, 4:2, 197-221, DOI: 10.1080/0965079960040204

<sup>18</sup> Rappaport, J. (1993). Narrative Studies, Personal Stories, and Identity Transformation in the Mutual Help Context. THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE (29) June.

<sup>19</sup> James, P. (1996) The Transformative Power of Storytelling among Peers: an exploration from action research, Educational Action Research, 4:2, 197-221, DOI: 10.1080/0965079960040204

Rasmussen, Vilhamjur Steffansson and Franz Boaz, all of which contain recorded stories from Iñuit people between 1860 – 1920.

## INDIGENOUS SCIENCE

Place-based and culturally responsive Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education can root students in who they are and where they live in a way that is culturally meaningful; this kind of education can also provide a bridge for students to understand and communicate scientific understandings different than those they may have learned through cultural ways of knowing. STEM education in this context is one part of a whole that is rooted in culture, not science. Every culture has its own understanding of what science is and in many cases the universe; the parameters around what is known varies as does what is defined as truth or fact. Two of the philosophies we use in teaching and integrating science and research in a culturally responsive way are described well here:

1. “Native Science, which is also referred to as Aboriginal Science and Indigenous Science, includes the ‘wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting, and ‘coming to know’ that have evolved through human experience with the natural world’. It is one aspect of a broader body of Indigenous Knowledge and is characterized by the following traits:

*Holistic* - Native Scientific Knowledge includes knowledge of the metaphysical (spiritual) world and reflects a Native view of nature as interconnected and interdependent.

*Locally valid* - Native Science is rooted in local places and is often practiced to meet community needs for the long term survival of a people.

*Contextual* - Native Scientific Knowledge is derived through direct interaction with the natural world.

*Value-laden* - Native Science assumes responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationships among people, nature, all life, and the spiritual realm.”<sup>20</sup>

2. “We agree with Ogawa (1989) when he asserts that ‘Western science is only one form of science among the sciences of the world.’ Also, the people living in an indigenous culture itself may not recognize the existence of its own science, hence, it may be transferred from generation to generation merely by invisible or non-formal settings (Ogawa, 1989).”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Baker, J., Rayner, A., & Wolowic, J. (2011). Native Science: A Primer for Science Teachers.

<https://ctabobandung.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/ns-primer.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Snively, G., & Corsiglia, J. (1998). Discovering Indigenous Science: Implications for Science Education. Place of publication not identified: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.

CDLLC incorporates science and research from across academia, including Alaska Native cultural studies, social psychology, paleogenetics and more. We believe that learning, like the way we experience and make meaning in our lives, should not be compartmentalized by research focus or subject area. All of our projects to date have been multidisciplinary in nature.

## SUICIDE POSTVENTION

“Suicide in indigenous communities is frequently identified as the terminal outcome of historical oppression, current injustice, and ongoing social suffering.”<sup>22</sup>

It is well known that suicide rates in Iñuit communities are too high. We can share the most recent statistics on the heartbreaking numbers we face but instead focus this section of the paper on suicide risk factors, wellness practices and research for indigenous peoples to support healthy postvention efforts.

CDLLC is a strength-based, solution-facing organization. We are aware of the challenges, the trauma and pain many people have with their cultural histories and present-day experiences. In our work, challenge, trauma and pain are acknowledged and faced honestly. We are careful regarding how much time we spend exploring and acknowledging these experiences. More time is spent exploring and discussing useful research, healthy cultural perspectives, and culturally rooted creative wellness resources so that when we get to talking, writing and creating around trauma, students are prepared to face it.

“High suicide rates in tribal communities have been linked to a lack of cultural continuity, and low rates have been associated with efforts to revitalize indigenous cultures and institute political control over local tribal institutions.”<sup>23</sup>

“A strong sense of cultural identity and pride as well as social capital have been identified as being protective against suicide... In his article on the disparities and contradictions of indigenous and nonindigenous perspectives and the inherent power imbalance Cole points out: ‘we never had “rights” before contact, we had relationships we had community.’”<sup>24</sup>

Health researcher Lisa Wexler, PhD, and psychologist Joseph Gone, PhD, took an in-depth look at suicide research and assumptions in reference to indigenous and non-indigenous populations in 2012. They found that suicide prevention “is best undertaken

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<sup>22</sup> Wexler & Gone (2012). Culturally Responsive Suicide Prevention in Indigenous Communities: Unexamined Assumptions and New Possibilities. *Am J Public Health*. 2012 May; 102(5): 800–806. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300432

<sup>23</sup> Wexler & Gone (2012). Culturally Responsive Suicide Prevention in Indigenous Communities: Unexamined Assumptions and New Possibilities. *Am J Public Health*. 2012 May; 102(5): 800–806. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300432

<sup>24</sup> Anag, P., et al (2019). Building on strengths in Naujaat: the process of engaging Inuit youth in suicide prevention. *Int J Circumpolar Health*. 2019 Jan-Dec;78(2):1508321. doi: 10.1080/22423982.2018.1508321.

by community members, friends, and family who understand the social context of the suicidal person.”<sup>25</sup>

CDLLC uses cultural stories about disaster, resiliency and survival. We apply research about Earth’s large-scale environmental transitions and the origins of life, the universe, and space weather science to show people experiencing challenging emotions due to suicide loss and/or suicidality something bigger than themselves. This can encourage participants to put their challenges in the light of new, less self-focused perspectives that can support healing from suicide loss or suicidality.

## PRACTICES

Creativity is inherently spiritual and can be very healing, as indigenous healers in the Stuckey and Nobel findings shared.<sup>26</sup> CDLLC takes specific care in partnering, designing, developing and implementing projects in safe, respectful and compassionate ways. Some of the practices we employ to support this effort are: active listening, radical acceptance, recognizing and rethinking bias, radical compassion, mindfulness exercises, and meditation information and practices.

“Approximately 60% of the [Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s] survey responses described ways in which the creative arts contributed to, initiated, and supported therapeutic healing. Most often this took the form of releasing strong emotions or recounting painful memories. In the interviews, a number of people addressed the need to reach trauma where it lives in the body.”<sup>27</sup>

CDLLC uses writing and performance as creative processes in which participants can learn to identify, address and heal from trauma re-memory in the body. Trauma re-memories may and can surface in response to developing creative (and thus spiritual and healing) work. CDLLC facilitators employ trauma-informed teaching strategies while developing and implementing our creative projects. We also support Social Emotional Learning and teach using Positive Youth Development perspectives.

“The healing stages involved in addressing historic trauma are similar but more complicated because the trauma is imbued in losses experienced by one’s people in addition to whatever the individual has experienced. Thus, learning about, mourning the losses of, and reconnecting with family, community, culture, and traditions are significant parts of the healing process.”<sup>24</sup>

It is too hard to face the loss of entire communities by oneself. Community loss and cultural loss should be faced by communities of people learning, honoring, mourning and celebrating their history, present and future together. This is one of the many

<sup>25</sup> Wexler & Gone (2012). Culturally Responsive Suicide Prevention in Indigenous Communities: Unexamined Assumptions and New Possibilities. *Am J Public Health*. 2012 May; 102(5): 800–806. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300432

<sup>26</sup> Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health: a review of current literature. *American journal of public health*, 100(2), 254–263. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>

<sup>27</sup> Archibald & Dewar (2010). Creative Arts, Culture, and Healing: Building an Evidence Base. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal Of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* 8(3).

reasons BSCD adopts a collaborative model for project development that is inclusive of many voices and ideas, not just one.

Local, state and national resources are shared during CDLLC workshops, classes and events to support participants who have challenging reactions to the material or their experiences. We are also trained to support suicide loss bereavement groups through the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Here are some of the practices we employ from the “Current Understandings of Suicide Survivor Issues: Research, Practice, and Plans Report of the 1st International Suicide Postvention Seminar (September 8, 2006):

“Frame reexperiencing the event(s), hyperarousal, sleep disturbances, and other physical symptoms as physiological reactions to extreme stress.

Normalize trauma symptoms. For example, explain that their symptoms are not a sign of weakness, a character flaw, being damaged, or going crazy.

Support your [students] and provide a message of hope—that they are not alone, they are not at fault, and recovery is possible and anticipated.

Help the [student] focus on what is happening in the here and now; that is, use grounding techniques [like the meditation and mindfulness practices listed above] so that they can distinguish between what is happening now versus what had happened in the past.”<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, CDLLC does not deliver mental health services or clinical therapy.

### Tavra. That's it (for now).

Although CDLLC was formed in 2018 as a licensed business under the State of Alaska, the concepts, research, and individual and community discussions that have shaped CDLLC began in 2010. Quyanaqpak (big thanks) to all the people, families, organizations and communities who have contributed to the development of our organization.

If you have any questions regarding any of the material presented in this document, or would like to contact CDLLC, please contact Aaluk Edwardson at [Aaluk@CreativeCecolonization.org](mailto:Aaluk@CreativeCecolonization.org).

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<sup>28</sup> Adriessen, K., Beautrais, A., Tekavčič-Grad, O., Brockmann, E., & Simkin, S. (January 01, 2007). Current understandings of suicide survivor issues: Research, practice, and plans: report of the 1st International suicide postvention seminar, September 8, 2006, Portoroz, Slovenia. Crisis, 28, 211-213.

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<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>

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