Community Action Team (CAT) Knowledge Exchange
Leading Community Dialogues Skill Sheet

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HQBC HEALTH QUALITY BC

CAI Community Action Initiative

A. Leading a Community Dialogue

The following uses the online Community Toolbox (Section 17). Explore this toolbox for additional details and links to resources.

1. What is a "dialogue" and why should your CAT host one?

- A community dialogue hosted by CATs is a conversation which includes a local audience who is external to the present CAT.
- A community dialogue can help:
    - Reach common ground – integrate the workings of health authorities and harm reduction services with the leadership from neighborhoods and grassroots groups.
    - Common issues and the resources to address them – help identify barriers to positive change and uncover innovative ideas.
    - Sustained ongoing community discussion between the many groups and partnerships in a community.
    - Build the capacity of your CAT to act on its ideas.
    - Launch new initiatives and strengthen the impact of existing community improvement partnerships.
    - Break through community "turf wars" and connect fragmented resources -- build the public consensus and commitment necessary to generate action for better outcomes.
    - Stimulate action and track progress for accountability.
    - Generate local media attention.
- CAT community dialogue topics may include:
    - Supporting the opening of a new harm reduction service, like an overdose prevention site.
    - Increasing new safer supply prescribers (targeting regional health providers).
    - De-stigmatize the CAT in the community with a public dialogue. Greater preparation may be required for public conversations, to support safety and respect.

2. Who can participate or host the dialogue?

- Seek diversity! Reach across lines of race, culture, class, and locale to gather participants.
- The target audience may be the citizens from your region, or it may be for a specific community group, such as local health providers (and not the wider public).
- Anyone could co-host the dialogue with the CAT, for example a local Indigenous organization.
- The CAT could be the co-host supporting another organization's dialogue (such as a housing group).

3. How do you host a dialogue?

- There is no one best way to host a dialogue. It depends upon what you want to accomplish. Tailor an approach that works best for your objectives, setting, participants, time, and capacity.
- Preparation will assist you in making your dialogue count.
- It can take from two to five weeks to prepare for and complete a dialogue. A dialogue can last from one to three hours with anywhere from five to 500 people.

Prepare for your dialogue:

- **Build a Dialogue Team to host the event.** A team approach spreads the tasks and can help you to define goals.
- Determine your own goals for the dialogue. Your community members may have some specific goals for the dialogue itself and the information received from it.
- **Determine the group of participants**. Who would you like to bring together to share ideas and opinions? To minimize the effort required for recruitment, you may find it easiest to partner with an existing group. This will allow you to use their network. You may also wish to bring in new voices to your group. Most groups will include from 12 to 30 participants and last an hour and a half.
- **Select and prepare your facilitator.** You should enlist an experienced facilitator or someone who is a good listener and can inspire conversation while remaining neutral. Use the CAT Meeting Facilitation Skill Sheet for guidance.
- **Set a place, date, and time for your dialogue.** Choose a spot that is comfortable and accessible. Determine the time period (from 1-3 hours). Be sure to give a minimum of two weeks' notice of your dialogue meeting. A reminder call 2 days before the event will help to increase attendance.
- **Create an inviting environment**. To ensure strong interaction, place seats in a circle or in a "U" formation. Refreshments (or food for a breakfast or lunch meeting) are a sign of appreciation but are not absolutely necessary. Local businesses may be willing to donate refreshments for community meetings.
    - *If the public or police are invited, ensure that peers are aware and are supported. Uninformed people may make stigmatizing remarks. A dialogue with the voices of peers could support education and create common ground.*

Invite participants:

- People want to talk about what's possible in their communities. Determine how to access your desired participants. Contact friends, co-workers, or specific community groups. Personal contact makes the difference! A telephone call with a follow-up letter or flier with the details is usually very effective. Don't worry if someone says no.
- Remember, if you wish to have a specific number of people in your group, you may need to recruit 1 1/2 to 2 times as many.

Plan to record your dialogue:

- Designate a person in the Dialogue Team to take notes and summarize important points. It's just as important to note areas of disagreement as consensus. Obtaining quotations and stories from participants is essential. The facilitator should plan to sit down with the recorder immediately after the dialogue to review the notes and prepare a summary.

Conducting the dialogue:

- **Greet participants.** It is important for the facilitator to greet participants as they arrive to develop rapport prior to the dialogue. This will help put guests at ease and encourage them to speak up.
- **Introduction.** The facilitator should introduce herself or himself and thank the participants for attending. A brief introduction, stating the purpose of the dialogue and the importance of asking the community for their opinions should follow. If the group is small, the facilitator may ask each participant to introduce herself or himself.

- Initiate the dialogue. Use open-ended questions about the topic. You should tailor the dialogue to your community's needs.
- Engage the media and document the event. Some groups will want to have local media present to report on the dialogue and its findings. You may also want to take a few photos or video clips of the event.

Concluding the dialogue and next steps:

- At the end of the dialogue, the facilitator can remind the group that simply taking the time to share ideas and personal values with fellow citizens is important. The group recorder may verbally summarize the dialogue and should then plan to send the notes to the participants.
- For groups that want to do something more, develop a plan for the next steps, such as agreeing to meet again for a particular idea.

4. How do you make your dialogue count?

- Ensure that the results of your conversations advance local action by getting the results out to participants and relevant organizations within ten days of the dialogue. Follow up with the group on its interests. Ask each participant to share what has been learned and to keep the conversation going.

This checklist provides an outline of the specific steps to lead a dialogue.

B. Wise Practices for Culturally Safe Community Dialogues

The following summarizes and quotes the Courageous Conversations Toolkit, designed by the BCCSU and the FNHA, Elders, people with lived experience, and their family members. This toolkit prepares community members to hold sacred spaces for conversations that relate to substance use. Read the full toolkit to enhance your knowledge and build the appropriate skills.

- See Appendix A for an overview the toolkit principles, including Indigenous Harm Reduction.
- For additional support and training on facilitating, CATs with BC First Nation communities can connect to the Healing Indigenous Hearts grief and loss, community facilitation program. Contact your regional FNHA team to explore training options.
- See the CAT Recruitment & Retention Skill Sheet for guidance on reaching out to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

1. Learning Objectives for the Courageous Conversations Toolkit

- Recognize and address blaming and shaming as tools of settler colonialism and Indigenous-specific racism.
- Use self-reflection and communication skills to create safety and compassion when dealing with conflict.
- Develop an appreciation for diverse perspectives and values.
- Foster resilience and self-determination in individuals, families, and communities to deal with conflict and support one another through healing conversations.
- Have courageous and meaningful conversations in Sharing Circles.

2. Getting Ready for Difficult Conversations

- Check in with yourself, how am I feeling right now about having the conversation?
- Practice with someone you trust.
- Tips: breathe; plan a conversation in note form; acknowledge other perspectives; be respectful; considerate & compassionate (do not say, "I feel so bad about saying this," or "This is really hard for me to do.", do not play the victim, this is not about you); slow down and listen.

Preparing the environment:

- Find a good time for all, not rushed, or tired after work.
- Feels comfortable, like a community building, or perhaps outside, surrounded by trees or next to water.
- Share a meal together: For Indigenous Peoples, food is typically connected with comfort, safety, community, culture, and traditions. If you are in a community setting, you might consider having a communal feast prior to the conversation.
- Prepare medicines: To support the healing sought by having Courageous Conversations, prepare traditional medicines such as a smudge—or stories. If available to you, prepare family and community stories to share, or invite a storyteller. Songs and music are also healing, so bring your drums and sing your songs. Gathering and preparing traditional foods is also a way of connecting as we work together to enjoy the nutrition we give our bodies.
- Seek support from Elders, Healers, Aunties, and Uncles. Enlisting help!
- More funding options may be available to host these types of dialogues.

Culture and conversation:

- Using Cultural Symbols and Stories in Communication - as in all communities, there are vast cultural differences among people within Indigenous communities. Ask local communities,
    - "What stories do you know that have to do with____?"
    - "What teachings in your tradition speak to the issue of _____?"
    - "What did your grandmother/grandfather/aunties/uncles have to say about _____?"

3. Talking Circles and Sharing Circles

- Everyone's voice is equal and uninterrupted.
- Circle Keeper: The Circle Keeper is a caretaker of the process. They are in a position of responsibility, but not authority. They are responsible for helping participants maintain the values of the circle, and for introducing the talking piece and circle prompts (see below). The Circle Keeper can also be a participant in the circle, as long as their sharing does not conflict with their role as the Circle Keeper.
- Opening and Closing: Talking circles and sharing circles are traditionally held in a safe and sacred space, and open and close through prayer and medicines. The circle is a safe and sacred space.
- Talking Piece: Circles typically use a symbolic object that lends power, insight or reflection to the person holding it. The talking piece is passed from one person to the next around (not across) the circle. Whoever has the talking piece is invited to share from the heart. Whoever is not holding the talking piece is invited to listen from the heart.

- Values/Guidelines: Having guidelines and shared values about how participants agree to be together can be an important component to the creation of a circle. Guidelines are not meant to be rigid rules, but shared expectations and norms of being together in right relationships. Some examples of guidelines that are often used in circles include:
    - *Honour the talking piece:* The holder of the talking piece is the only person speaking.
    - *Listen from the heart:* Give your full attention to the speaker. Let go of stories, judgements, and ideas that make it hard to hear one another. Practise deep listening. Be continuously curious.
    - *Speak from the heart:* Share your truth, your perspectives, your experience and not those of others.
    - Say just enough: Without feeling rushed, share what you would like to share while keeping it short enough so everyone can have a turn. Maintain an awareness of time, sharing responsibility with group and being considerate of the time of others.
    - *Trust you'll know what to say:* Release the need to rehearse and prepare as you wait for your turn.
    - It is always okay to pass: There is never an obligation to speak in a circle. If someone receives the talking piece and does not wish to speak, they can simply let the group know they are choosing to pass, and hand the talking piece to the next person in the circle.
    - *What is said in the circle stays in the circle:* Never repeat anything that is said within the circle unless you have the permission.
- Circle Prompts: Circles often use guiding questions or themes at the beginning of each round to initiate thinking and authentic sharing. Sometimes circles have multiple rounds requiring different prompts, for example:
    - A lighter introductory prompt that helps break the ice and build relationships,
    - A deeper prompt that gets at the heart of the issue at hand, and
    - A closing prompt that helps people walk away feeling connected to one another.

Appendix A – Courageous Conversations Toolkit Principles

Shaming and Blaming

- When we shame or blame people for turning to substances like alcohol and drugs to cope, we are blaming the person who is in pain instead of blaming the ongoing systems of settler colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism that continue to perpetuate trauma and harm.
- In response, individuals internalize their pain or inadvertently unleash it on others to relieve the anger. This is called lateral violence.

Affirmations for Decolonizing Our Minds, Bodies, Spirits and Hearts

- I am in a relationship with the land and other living things.
- I am in a relationship with myself. I am in a relationship with others.
- I acknowledge that I am enough. I am a worthy, deserving, loving, beautiful, and kind human being.

Courageous Conversations Framework

- The moral model about drugs is the idea that using is morally wrong. It is outdated and can result in harm. A harm reduction approach helps people on their pathways to wellness.

Engaging in courageous conversations:

- Shame can overwhelm and push people into silence—it often feels easier to avoid talking about something that feels difficult, overwhelming, and shameful, like substance use.
- When convening people, include peer panellists' stories helps people to feel they are not alone in their struggles. It also gives voice to the tremendous wisdom, teachings, and knowledge of our Elders and Knowledge Keepers, as well as individual community members who are modelling health and wellness and living each day with purpose and resilience.

Strengths-based approach:

- Every human being is on their own unique and self-determined wellness journey, and we uphold and honour their strengths and courage as they walk this path.
- Looking from a positive perspective and identifying the strengths of a person or community and building on that foundation to develop sustainable solutions.

Connecting and reconnecting:

- We want to change the narratives in our communities from surviving to self-determining and thriving.
- Transformative dialogue is about changing how we think and talk about the conflict that exists so that we can come together in our differences to a better understanding of one another and honour each other's perspectives and experiences.
- Committing to work through our differences.
- Culture has a way of grounding us and connecting us to one another. It helps us to make choices that draw on our inherent emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual strengths. By reclaiming our culture and ways of being, we are reclaiming our identity.

Sharing circles/talking circles principles:

- These include sharing circles, healing circles, and talking circles. (It is important to consider different terms for ways to gather in a circle, in relation to the diversity in beliefs and spiritual practices amongst Indigenous Peoples.)
- Some use a talking stick or a talking feather, while others use a peace pipe, a sacred shell, or another selected object that has meaning for them. The main point of using a sacred object is that the person holding the object has the right to speak.
- Concept of the circle is used in communication; it provides a means of communicating in supportive ways that ensure everyone is included and given a voice.
- FNHA Perspectives on Health & Wellness, Third Circle – Values that allow conversations and conflict to unfold in healthy and supportive ways: respect, honesty, courage, humility, self-awareness, reciprocity, rhythm, self-determination, interconnectedness, resilience, teachings, medicines, ceremony, language, and food sovereignty.

Learning and Reframing

- It takes courage to leave behind old patterns. We must talk about our collective and personal pain. We need to let it out in the open so that we no longer hold the pain and shame as secrets.

Confronting stigma and harm reduction:

- In fact, before the arrival of colonial settlers, Indigenous Peoples did not have the concept of "bad substances" or "bad drugs". Everything was considered medicine. It wasn't until the arrival of colonial settlers that alcohol entered Indigenous communities – and with it, prejudice and judgement about certain substances and their use.
- The moral model is applied to harm reduction as well. Instead of being seen to save lives, harm reduction is often portrayed as enabling substance use. There is structural stigma, social stigma, and self-stigma.
- Indigenous Harm reduction is compassion, empathy, and courage in action. It is about meeting people where they are and may take any of the following forms:
    - Offering therapies such as Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT), which helps a person replace more harmful drugs with substances that are known to be less harmful but still allow the person to numb their pain.
    - Driving/accompanying someone to a safe-consumption site or finding someone else who can help.
    - Checking in on a person after they have used substances to ensure they are okay.
    - Making naloxone (a medication known to save lives which a bystander can administer to a person who is experiencing an overdose) widely available.
    - Learning how to use naloxone and carrying it with you so that you are prepared to provide help if someone is in distress.
    - Providing people who are using with housing, food, and enough money to live on. Poverty, homelessness, housing, and food insecurity only add to a person's pain.
- Feeling shame can lead a person to take risks that put them in harm's way, even in dangerous situations. Shame also creates distance so that when help is needed, there is no one there to assist.

Myths and truths about harm reduction:

- "Harm reduction is wrong. Abstinence is the only right way."
  This is a belief that many people hold in Indigenous communities and in society.
- FNHA's description of the Not Just Naloxone: Talking about Substance Use in Indigenous Communities training workshop reflects the core of what Indigenous harm reduction does, i.e., it "uncovers and addresses the roots of addiction, acknowledges the roots of community connection, and empowers First Nations communities to design their own response to the issue—all while celebrating community and individual resilience."

Indigenous harm reduction:

- Focused on creating a foundation of care and support with the goal of creating understanding about why people use substances.
- Raven's Eye Cedar Sites, include the medicines and teachings of First Nations peoples.
- FNHA also developed Indigenous Harm Reduction Principles and Practices.

Self-reflection and communication:

- Our communication styles and how we respond:
  - Speqmíc, Swan (Cooperating, work to find solution by consensus). Humble ourselves and be brave, collaborate.
  - Sku7pecen, Porcupine (Compromising, split the difference) "Knows what needs to be done" but isn't win at all costs, will risk themselves, meet in the middle.

The Leading Community Dialogues Skill Sheet was co-developed with CAT members as a supportive tool. It is not meant as CAT policy guidance or to set any standards. ***Questions? Contact us at substanceuse@healthqualitybc.ca***