

Strengths-Based Approaches in the HIV, HCV & Overdose Response



info
sheet

Many research projects at CAAN, including our project focused on alcohol use among Indigenous people living with HIV, and the *Beyond 'At Risk'* project with Indigenous youth, have included a strengths-based approach. The *Alcohol Use by Aboriginal Persons Living with HIV/AIDS and its Association with Access to Care and Treatment* project turned CAAN's attention to consider both the barriers and facilitators to care. The findings from this project emphasized the need for strengths-based approaches that acknowledge the expertise and knowledge of Indigenous people to navigate complex health care systems, as well as the need to move away from the presumption that the system would always fail Indigenous people leading to poor health outcomes. The *Beyond 'At Risk'* project led by the National Indigenous Youth Council on Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS also highlighted the importance of strengths-based approaches. The findings from this project emphasize the need to affirm the expertise and knowledge of Indigenous youth, as well as the need to move away from stereotypes and labels, such as 'at risk'. These projects, and the people who were part of them, have informed our strengths-based approaches to use in our research, programs, and communication.

In her 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche says when we “show a people as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”^[1] It can be easy to lose sight of the full humanity of a group of people when stereotypes try to erase it. Since first contact, stereotypes have been created about Indigenous Peoples, along with ill-informed assumptions, and stigmatizing, racist, or negative language. Strengths of Indigenous ways of being – communal living, vibrant cultures, and highly developed governance systems – were not understood by new arrivals in these lands. Even today, it can be difficult to see and hear all the strengths among Indigenous Peoples when – Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike – are so used to hearing about risk, violence, poverty, and poor health outcomes in Indigenous communities. The story of dis-ease, dysfunction, and disorganization focuses on problems, and ignores the strengths of Indigenous communities and affects the ways Indigenous Peoples are understood. Strengths-based approaches are used in many public health and research settings, and make the strengths of our communities visible.

What do we mean when we say “strengths-based approaches”?

In many Indigenous communities, strengths-based approaches have always been in use. While a lot of research, policy, public health reports, and programs start out focused on a problem, strengths-based approaches start off with something that is working well.

Strengths-based approaches:

- highlight what is going well for individuals and communities.
- identify supports and strengths that already exist in our communities.
- help us see the characteristics, wisdom, and experiences within individuals and communities.
- help to resist stigma and stereotypes.
- build trust within communities and individuals.
- recognize that structural inequities create barriers to health and wellness: as the Beyond ‘At Risk’ project says, “Indigenous youth are not inherently ‘at risk.’ Risk is created by colonialism”^[2].
- consider a person’s whole self and full humanity, rather than seeing someone only as a person who needs help, support, or a service.
- influence the words and images we use to communicate about people and projects, the research questions we ask, and the types of programs we offer to support our communities.

At its core, strengths-based approaches ask, “What can be celebrated, embraced, nurtured?”² about individuals and communities with whom we are working. Strengths-based approaches are a prerequisite for meaningful engagement of people with lived and living experience, and collaborations between people with and without lived and living experiences. Everyone involved will benefit from seeing the strengths of all people involved in the project.



Strengths-Based Approaches in Practice

We can use strength-based approaches when we are working one-on-one with community members, patients, or service users, and when we are working to support our whole communities. This is true both with individuals and groups, within and beyond healthcare.

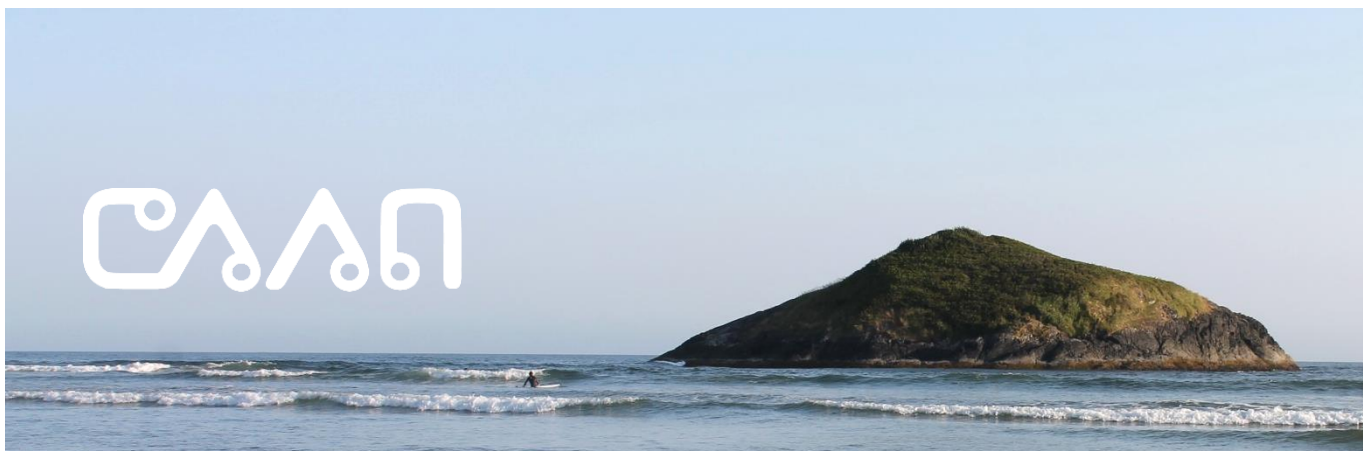
Language and Communications

We are often asked to talk about the work we do, whether to the media, during fundraisers, or when writing grants. We might also be asked to provide images to help tell the story of our organization. In many cases, we explain that a specific group of people needs help, and in doing so, we risk reinforcing stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples as victims.

Strengths-based language is not just stating statistics in the positive, such as reporting the percentage of people who have received HIV care in the past year, instead of the percentage of people who have not. Strengths-based language includes identifying shortcomings of policies and structures, rather than individual needs or behaviours. Here are some examples:



	Deficits-based	Strengths-based
Access to medications	People in our communities are too poor to pay for their own medications. They need your help.	The medications our community needs are much too expensive, and they are not included in government programs or private benefits. We are raising money today to cover this gap.
Government services	People who use drugs are not coming to the supervised consumption site, and are not taking overdoses seriously.	Due to funding constraints, our supervised consumption site isn't open at the times when people need it. Over 20 people in our community have training to reverse an overdose and carry naloxone.



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Programs and Research

Strengths-based approaches can be used in planning and implementation phases of programs and research. In program settings, strength-based approaches can be incorporated by creating opportunities for individuals to reflect on their own strengths, share their strengths with the group, and notice the strengths of other people. There are lots of ways to include this approach, whether in a group setting or one on one interactions. Strengths-based approaches can take many forms, including ceremony.

To explore other options for strengths-based approaches, here's a sample scenario where public health data shows increasing numbers of HCV diagnosis in a community. When they notice the trend, public health staff decide to bring together a group of service providers and organizations to come up with a response. In many cases, the planning starts with a discussion about all the factors that contribute to HCV transmission – sharing injection equipment and other drug works, intergenerational trauma that influences in substance use, and beliefs about drug use that are grounded in stigma. A strengths-based approach in the same scenario might start with the positive – that people are getting HCV tests – and understand why that is the case. Maybe HCV testing is happening when community members encourage others in their networks to get tested. Or, there might have been a community event about HCV, or a change to the ways HCV tests are offered that resonated really well with community. These factors offer some strengths-based ways to increase HCV supports that build on what is already working.

In a case where community members are sharing information and supporting each other to access testing, a strengths-based approach may be working with those same people to share information and supports about HCV treatment and prevention options. This example builds on the strengths of community networks to share information and supports.

In a case where an awareness event was successful in encouraging testing, or a change in HCV testing made it more accessible, it may be helpful to adapt these strategies for other aspects of HCV prevention and treatment. For example, if HCV tests were offered via a mobile health service, it may be helpful to consider how to offer harm reduction supplies or HCV treatment that way too.



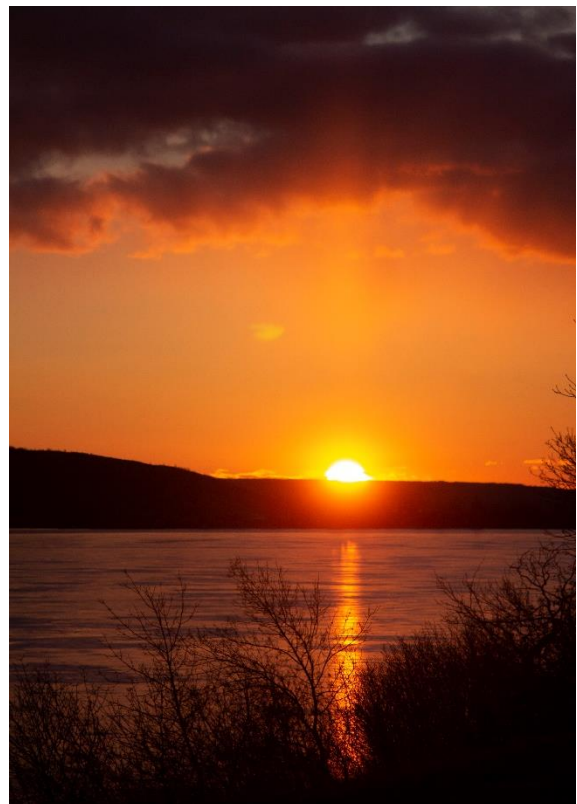
One-to-One Care and Support

Programs that work one-on-one with individuals often start from the premise that a person needs help with one or more aspect of their wellness or life. It can be easy to focus on the aspects where a person needs help, and overlook the areas where things may be going well. A strengths-based approach means getting to know the full person, beyond where they are looking for support. It also means supporting that individual to identify their strengths, and being intentional in identifying new strengths. In some cases, it may include applying a person's strengths to provide the support they are looking for. This strength-based approach can also be applied in any notes or records we keep about clients: include as many strengths as possible in any documentation.

Strengths-Based Approaches

Strengths-based approaches are an important opportunity for community organizations, health care centres, clinics, researchers, and funders to see the strengths of Indigenous ways of being that have been passed on for centuries. For many people, strengths-based approaches represent a mindset shift that takes practice.

Connect with CAAN to learn more about taking a strengths-based approach in your community!



CAAN RESOURCES:

- [Perceptions of Alcohol Use](#)
- [Beyond 'At Risk': Indigenous youth speak to service providers](#)
- [Weaving Our Wisdoms](#)
- [Indigenous Leadership in HIV/AIDS - GIPA](#)

Resources outside of CAAN:

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, “The Danger of a Single Story”; 2009 TED Talk
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/up-next?language=en
- Closing the gap between rhetoric and strengths-based approaches to Indigenous public health: a qualitative study (Askew, Brady, Mukandi, Singh, Sinha, Brough & Bond, 2020)
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1753-6405.12953>

¹Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, **The Danger of a Single Story**.

Available online at

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

²National Indigenous Youth Council on Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS, **Beyond 'At Risk': Indigenous youth speak to service providers**. Available online at

<https://www.nccih.ca/docs/emerging/WEBINAR-TwoSpiritHealth-BeyondAtRisk.pdf>

