

RATIONALE FOR SOURCES OF STRENGTH

History

Sources of Strength is a mental health wellness program that utilizes the power of peer social networks to change unhealthy norms and culture to ultimately prevent suicide, bullying, violence, and substance abuse. It is one of the nation's most rigorously researched peer leader programs and is presently on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices – the nation's highest level of prevention programs.

Sources of Strength was developed in North Dakota in 1998 by founder Mark LoMurray, in partnership with rural communities and several Northern Plains tribes. From 2000 to 2004, through a statewide collaborative effort involving the North Dakota Adolescent Suicide Prevention Task Force, Mental Health America of North Dakota, and the North Dakota Department of Health, the program trained approximately 7,500 teens and young adults. While not statistically significant the project showed very encouraging reductions of teen fatalities and reductions in three of four suicide markers in North Dakota Trusted Adults Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

In 2005, the American Association of Public Health, epidemiology section, awarded the project their national Public Health Practice Award. In 2006, Sources of Strength partnered with Peter Wyman, Ph. D, University of Rochester in New York and C. Hendricks Brown, Ph.D., University of Miami to begin a community research partnership and conduct a randomized trial with 18 high schools in Georgia, New York, and North Dakota. This research project showed results demonstrating that adult supported Peer Leaders could have a significant impact across an entire student population; increasing positive perceptions of adult support for suicidal youth and the acceptability of seeking help. This study was published in the fall of 2010 in The American Journal of Public Health. In 2010, the partnership began a 6-year randomized trial using Sources of Strength with more than 40 high schools to measure the impact of 1,500 peer leaders on approximately 15,000 adolescents; this ongoing study is being funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) as part of the National Peer Leadership Study.

In 2009 Sources of Strength was listed on the National Best Practices Registry by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) and The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). In 2011 Sources of Strength was listed on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP), the gold standard of prevention programs in the United States.

Scale and Scope

Since 2006, Sources of Strength has been implemented in urban, rural, and tribal settings. Programs are currently running across the USA. The program has also been implemented with the Salmon River Tribe, Spirit Lake Nation, Tanana Chiefs Conference, Three Affiliated Tribes, Tohono O'odham Nation, Turtle Mountain Nation, and White Mountain Apache Nation, along with several Canadian First Nations.

In addition, Sources of Strength has begun a comprehensive partnership to bring the program to schools and communities throughout Canada, Australia, the UK and continues to discuss opportunities to bring Sources of Strength to countries around the globe, including Uganda and New Zealand. Sources of Strength is presently partnering with hundreds of middle and high schools across the country, Universities large and small, numerous LGBTQ centers and organizations, multiple cultural community centers, The YMCA, faith-based groups, detention centers, the military and much more. It has truly been an exciting time of growth and development as Sources of Strength has transitioned from a grassroots organization to an international best practice program.

Research and Evidence Base

From 2003-2007 Peter Wyman, Ph.D. (University of Rochester, NY) and Hendricks Brown, Ph.D. (University of South Florida) conducted the nation's largest randomized trial on the effect of adult gatekeeper training in 32 middle and high schools (48,000 students) on adult staff in an extensive study on a gatekeeper-training program in Cobb County, Georgia. Also included was a survey of 2,000 students in these schools indicating that suicidal students were much less willing to seek help from adults than their non-suicidal peers. Implications of findings for this trial were threefold:

- Adult training alone was unlikely to significantly increase detection and response to suicidal youth.
- Suicidal peers were the least likely to seek adult help, and

- Developmentally, adolescents seek help through their peer friendships.

As a result of these outcomes Dr. Wyman and Dr. Brown conducted a national search for a promising peer program and began a rigorous randomized trial using the Sources of Strength program in 18 diverse high schools in Georgia, New York, and North Dakota – six metropolitan and 12 rural. The published results in the American Journal of Public Health (2010) were one of the first to demonstrate that peer leaders in partnership with supportive adults could...

Improve peer leaders adaptive norms regarding suicide.

- Increase their connectedness to adults and to school engagement, with the largest gain in those peers entering with the lowest level of adaptive norms or connectedness.
- Trained peer leaders in larger schools were four times as likely as untrained peer leaders to refer a suicidal friend to adults.
- Among the whole student population, the intervention increased perceptions of adult support for suicidal youth and the acceptability of seeking help.
- Perceptions of adult support increased most in students with a history of suicide ideation.
- The total number of “trusted adults” named by students increased in the student population, a significant protective factor for connectedness related to reduced risk for suicide, violence, and substance abuse.

As a follow up to this study, Sources of Strength is presently being rigorously evaluated in the National Institute of Mental Health: National Peer Leadership Study. This is one of the nation’s largest randomized trials of peer leader programs and is presently in the sixth year of a six-year trial involving over 32 schools. Sources of Strength is also engaged in research with the University of Rochester and Stanford University in several schools that have experienced suicide contagion, and with the University of Manitoba on using Sources of Strength in remote first nation villages in northern Manitoba.

Upstream Prevention

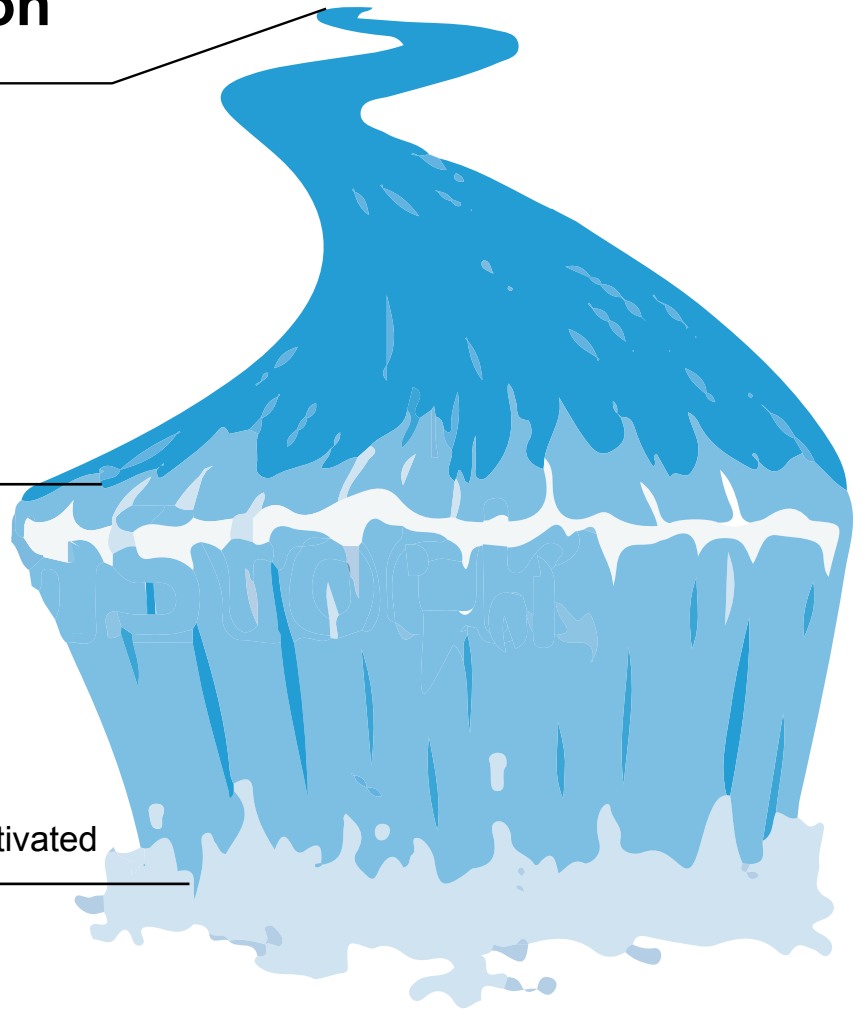
Primary Mission

Intervention

Secondary Benefit

Postvention

Sources of Strength Teams can be Activated



UPSTREAM MODEL

Sources of Strength takes an upstream approach to prevention. Most suicide prevention programs are truly intervention, where the goal is to identify or intervene in a crisis situation of a suicidal individual and make the appropriate mental health referral. While this is an important aspect of the prevention continuum, we believe that we can do much more to move upstream and prevent the very onset of suicidal thinking and suicidal behavior.

The primary mission of Sources of Strength is to move upstream in our prevention efforts. Through building resilience, increasing connections and trust towards adults, increasing helpseeking, developing and enhancing protective factors (8 strengths), and breaking down codes of silence; we are able to reduce the number of people who fall in the stream and increase their ability to get out of the stream before a crisis moment at the waterfall.

Research has shown that Sources of Strength also has the secondary benefit of a fourfold increase of peer leaders referring friends who are suicidal. While not their primary mission, Sources of Strength peer leaders make a difference at the waterfall edge by creating social norm change around help seeking behavior and codes of silence. Sources of Strength is helping create a culture where students are willing to speak up for a friend they see in distress and refer them to their trusted adults.

Lastly, in the event of a traumatic event or fatality, Sources of Strength peer teams can be mobilized as peer voice that reminds others to use multiple strengths during hard and traumatic times, as eyes and ears that can identify those struggling in isolation, and as connectors to caring adults, as well as other strengths and supports. They can spread a simple but powerful message of helpseeking and the importance of breaking silence in ways that do not traumatize, spread shame, and increase risk, but rather spread Hope, highlight Help, and focus on multiple Strengths that make a real life difference. They can be important members of a community team reducing contagion and risk after traumatic events.

Program Overview

Mission

Our mission is to provide the highest quality evidence-based prevention for suicide, violence, bullying and substance abuse by training, supporting, and empowering both Peer Leaders and caring adults to impact their school, college/university, or community through the power of promoting youth-adult connectedness, and spreading hope, help and strength.

Vision

Our vision is to lead in upstream prevention by offering evidence-based programs that empower local leaders to create a contagion of Hope, Help, & Strength throughout their schools and communities.

Core Philosophy

- ❖ **Strength-based** - We are radically strength-based with a strong belief that resiliency and strengths are available in every community and individual. We are a leading voice in Upstream Prevention.
- ❖ **Positivity** - In training we maintain a spirit and tone of positivity despite many challenges. Our focus is on empowering groups and individuals and encouraging the discouraged.
- ❖ **Fun** - Games are not just games to us, but powerful tools that make laughter, playfulness, and humor an essential element in Sources of Strength. Our fun should be infectious.
- ❖ **Empowering** - At every opportunity we want to shine the light on our local leaders and teams, not on ourselves.
- ❖ **Authentic** - We want to practice wellness, grow strengths in our personal lives, and engage in help seeking for ourselves.

- ❖ **Culturally Open** - We want to first listen and learn from each culture then be flexible and adaptable as we apply Sources of Strength in diverse settings.
- ❖ **Research** - We commit ourselves to ongoing community-participatory research, listening and learning from both community partners and research evidence. Our focus is on changing our program as evidence suggests to impact real world situations.
- ❖ **Humility** - We practice organizational humility by being willing to face hard facts and make changes as needed, by lifting up and encouraging other programs that demonstrate excellence in prevention, and by showing thankfulness to those that have helped us.

Program Goals

Sources of Strength is a community and campus-wide suicide prevention and health promotion program designed to:

- ❖ Prepare groups of diverse students, with ongoing staff mentoring, to be capable Peer Leaders for focused suicide prevention activities.
- ❖ Raise awareness and use of eight protective factors (sources of strength) that help all students and staff to be resilient.
- ❖ Promote positive school-wide attitudes about seeking help for problems, breaking down codes of silence, and involving supportive resources and individuals with students in emotional crisis.
- ❖ Focus throughout on positive strengths and resources that help students to overcome problems in their lives.
- ❖ Evaluate the program through ongoing research to inform schools about how they are meeting prevention goals.

History of Implementation

The initial Sources of Strength pilot was developed by Mark LoMurray in North Dakota in 1998. The primary focus was to address tribal and rural suicide prevention needs:

- ❖ By developing a strength-based model that realistically addressed the scarcity of local mental health services – resulting in the development of the Sources of Strength “*wheel*.”
- ❖ By finding an effective and safe way to motivate Peer Leaders to leverage their power in spreading norm changing messages amongst their peers and the wider student population. The effectiveness of this model is based on the reality that Peer Leaders are often aware of friends, peers, or fellow students who might be suicidal much earlier than adults.
- ❖ By developing a population-based prevention and health promotion effort that helps students develop multiple strengths and supports prior to suicidality, while still retaining a secondary impact of surveillance and referral of suicidal adolescents and young adults.

The program was used in a statewide effort from 2000-2004 in collaboration with the North Dakota Adolescent Suicide Prevention Task Force, Mental Health America in North Dakota, and the North Dakota Department of Health with approximately 7,500 teens and young adults receiving training. While not statistically significant the project showed very encouraging reductions of teen fatalities and a reduction in 3 of 4 suicide markers in North Dakota's Youth Risk Behavior Survey. In 2005, the American Association of Public Health, epidemiology section, awarded the project their national Public Health Practice Award.

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Since 2006, Sources of Strength has been implemented in urban, rural, and tribal settings. Programs are currently running in a number of states including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming, as well as in Washington, DC. It also has been implemented with the Salmon River Tribe, Spirit Lake Nation, Tanana Chiefs Conference, Three Affiliated Tribes, Tohono O'odham Nation, Turtle Mountain Nation, and White Mountain Apache Nation, along with several Canadian First Nations.

In addition Sources of Strength has begun a comprehensive partnership to bring the program to schools and communities throughout Canada, and continues to discuss opportunities to bring Sources of Strength to countries around the globe, including Uganda, Australia and New Zealand. Sources of Strength is presently partnering with hundreds of middle and high schools across the country, Universities large and small, numerous LGBTQ centers and organizations, multiple cultural community centers, The YMCA, faith-based groups, detention centers, the military and much more. It has truly been an exciting time of growth and development as Sources of Strength has transitioned from a grassroots organization to an international best practice program.

Training School Staff

The Adult Advisor and school administration can collaborate on the school staff training. The training should cover the Sources of Strength Program, components of a suicide prevention gatekeeper training, as well as specific school protocol regarding identifying and referring youth who exhibit suicidal ideation or concerning behavior. A few key topics to consider when presenting to staff are outlined below:

- ❖ *Sources of Strength is a strength-based wellness program* - One of the reasons schools and community groups feel comfortable with *Sources of Strength* is its wellness tone and strength-based approach. Suicide issues are addressed, but much of the training helps with other risk issues, bullying, substance abuse, and violence.
- ❖ *The “normalization” of suicide is avoided* – Sources of Strength does not use data that normalizes, communicates, or appears to suggest that all or most teens are struggling with suicide (ex. second-leading cause of teen fatalities), but rather talks about suicide, depression, trauma, conflict, and addictions, as struggles that are real and that most individuals overcome by tapping into multiple supports and strengths. The program uses data to highlight that the majority of individuals that feel hopeless or suicidal find healing.
- ❖ *The program does not glorify or romanticize suicide, nor does it focus on specific details related to suicide deaths or attempts* – Messages are focused on hope, help, and strength and Peer Leaders are trained not to present traumatic stories, but stories of hope and resiliency as they move into their action steps.
- ❖ *Sources of Strength requires peer and adult participation* – While peers are the ones trained to implement the program, a primary goal of Sources of Strength is to increase connectedness between peers and caring trusted adults. It is therefore very important for school staff to be aware of and support the program.

The Sources of Strength General Handout or Peer Leader Guide can be useful in presenting the program to staff.