



National American Indian & Alaska Native

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
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Mental Health

IN OUR NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES · VOL 3 ISSUE 2 WINTER 2022

**Resilience:
What it is and
how to foster it
in yourself and
others**

National American Indian & Alaska Native Mental Health Technology Transfer Center
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mhttcnetwork.org/native

DIRECTOR'S CORNER



Happy New Year to you all and welcome to the Winter Issue of our Newsletter Mental Health in our Native American communities. We continue to suffer from new outbreaks of COVID-19, with the new omicron variant hitting the country hard and Native communities specifically hard. Even though Native communities have the highest per capita vaccination rates, the continued spread of this virus is very serious and many of our Native colleagues and relatives have been ill themselves and/or have had relatives getting ill from the omicron variant. Native communities have shown an impressive resiliency in handling the pandemic through their incredibly strong and positive response to the vaccination initiative, but they are faced with yet more shutdowns of schools and communities. We are sending our Native relatives encouraging thoughts and hope that this latest uptick will be short lived.

Resiliency is the main theme for this newsletter. The lead article is focused on the strength of Native communities and the importance of including culture into mental health prevention and treatment services. Dr. Winters illustrates what resiliency means and how Native cultural ways enhances communities' abilities to be resilient. Finally, the author shares with us how we can learn to use a holistic approach to attain and enhance mental health in ourselves and our Native relatives. At the end of the article, Dr. Winters includes four select resources to build resiliency in Native communities.

Let me also introduce you to our new manager of the National AI/AN MHTTC, K-12 School Initiative, Allison Baez, PhD, member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation-Aquateca Paguame Clan. She writes about how you can build resiliency in children while being positive, supportive, and culturally informed when interacting with Native kids in school, whether they are in Tribally

run schools, or public schools in urban Indian areas.

We have also included in this newsletter an interview with Shatta Mejia, MEd, who is a long-time educator and has extensive experience in leveling the playing field in the K-12 educational system. He has extensive experience working with kids with special linguistic and cultural needs and he believes that relationship building will result in student-centered thinking and doing.

We always make sure we include a poem or a word of wisdom from our co-director, Sean A. Bear 1, and you will find his entry in this newsletter as well. At the end we like to share with you some of the upcoming exciting events we are organizing.

Take care of yourself and your relatives and let us do our best to end the serious consequences of this pandemic.

Anne Helene Skinstad, PsyD, PhD

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Resiliency and Mental Health Among American Indians and Alaska Natives

KEN C. WINTERS, PhD

Contributions from
MARY K. WINTERS, MEd



“Life is not about how fast you run or how high you climb, but how well you bounce.”

~ Vivian Komori, author

Introduction

Resiliency and its role in behavioral health is a salient topic in recent times given the challenges of coping with COVID-19. Our abilities to cope have been put to test while facing the stresses and strains associated with COVID-related lockdowns, suffering with health issues, and dealing with the loss of a loved one due to COVID. For American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs), resiliency has been crucial given centuries of injustices and disrespect. AI/ANs have demonstrated their resilience by responding to the self-determination mandate with the taking of control of tribal governments, by initiating and supporting economic development of reservations, and by advocating for changes that affect their environmental, healthcare, and other social and economic issues.

Prior newsletters from the Center have addressed resiliency with respect to dealing with secondary trauma and recovery from addiction. This column will delve in more detail about the important role of resiliency to the mental health of AI/AN communities.

The Ingredients of Resiliency

A resilient person is one who carries a set of attitudes that support the capacity to withstand and manage challenges and adversity. People who are resilient are often described as viewing life with a realistic hopefulness and, in the face of difficulties, demonstrating courage and inspiration. They show the ability to bounce back and adapt from hardship and trauma. Consider a metaphor of life experiences as a balance scale whereby negative experiences tip the scale toward bad outcomes or negative feelings and positive experiences tip the scale toward positive feelings.¹ A resilient person, when faced with hardship, tips the scale toward the positive end by



showing the ability to bounce back and adapt from such negative experiences. As the American Psychological Association puts it: “Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of threat.” A metaphor for a resilient person is a “tough rubber band.” The person has the hardiness and strength to withstand adversity yet is flexible enough to adjust and adapt going forward.

Renowned depression researcher Dennis Charney and his colleagues have studied and identified the “secret sauce” of being resilient.^{2,3} Ten key ingredients are summarized below.

1. **Realistic optimism:** Limit exposure to negative news, which can aggravate anxiety and contribute to an overly pessimistic view of life.
2. **Support system:** Access to loving caretakers who really care about you and form your social safety net; this includes maintaining a strong connection to your Native culture and traditions.
3. **Sturdy role models:** Connection to role models in your personal life; it may be a close relative or a person who has overcome similar adversities and provides examples for how to deal with challenges.
4. **Mastering challenges:** Embrace change and challenges by reframing adversity into a more positive light, regulating emotions (e.g., staying calm during intense situations), and employing skills to recover from stress.
5. **Express emotions:** Suppressing emotions, even negative ones such as sadness and anxiety, can be counterproductive to one’s mental health.

6. **Strong sense of self-efficacy or self-accomplishment:** Engage in tasks and seek goals which support your self-view that you can accomplish what you set out to do; spend time on developing skills.

7. **Altruism:** Be charitable and show compassion for others; maintain an attitude of hope when assisting others.

8. **Moral compass:** Find guidance from core beliefs; sources include Native values, religion, and personal values.

9. **Attention to health:** Follow common-sense habits related to physical and mental health, including sufficient sleep, good nutrition, exercise, active social life, and avoiding indulgences in unhealthy habits.

10. **Gratitude:** Embrace what you are thankful for and express that gratitude to others.

Learning to be Resilient

Everyone can strengthen their resiliency. As noted by Charney, “While everybody is born with a certain level of resilience, you can make yourself more resilient. You can, essentially, train to become a more resilient person.”²

A spiritual base is vital to building resiliency among AI/AN people. Having a strong commitment to traditional spirituality can be vital to mental health. For many, spirituality is a primary therapeutic path for those receiving treatment.⁵ Despite historical prohibitions and Christianizing efforts by Westerners, indigenous spirituality has survived and is widely practiced. Even in areas where Christianity is practiced, traditional cultural views still influence daily life and health decisions.



Positive psychology, a relatively new branch of behavioral science, puts resiliency at its conceptual core. Positive psychology takes the “glass half full” approach to personal and societal well-being. Research supports the notion that personal resiliency traits, coupled with institutions and communities that promote a positive view of life, can improve the quality of life and well-being.

As discussed by Schick and colleagues⁴, positive psychology-based interventions that are culturally adapted hold great promise to address behavioral health issues for AI/AN people. Cultural adaptations emphasized by Schick are use of traditional health practices (e.g., the medicine wheel) based on a perspective that individual, community and societal needs be considered.



Four Select Resources to Build Resilience

Indigenous Resilience Center, University of Arizona

The Indigenous Resilience Center (IRC) is a renowned leader in Indigenous resilience research. The Center is a hub for tribal resilience solutions, with its goal to build and support a team of collaborators who will work within the Center to support resilience by creating a robust community of Native and Indigenous scholars and students that respectfully honor traditional knowledge and tribal sovereignty in all their endeavors. The IRC research supports on-the-ground tribal resilience projects that focus on food, energy, and water securities and sovereignty, climate adaptation, and health with respect for tribal sovereignty and Indigenous knowledges.

South Dakota Urban Indian Health (Treatment Improvement Protocol #61):

Referred to as Beyond Trauma, this program provides a culturally specific recovery group that recognizes and addresses the many behavioral health problems in the AI/AN community stemming from historical, childhood, and ongoing trauma. The program holds that addressing trauma is crucial to support health and well-being and for ongoing recovery from addiction and other mental health issues. Its group therapy format opens with a prayer and smudging, followed by a sharing by participants of their challenges and success in dealing with these challenges. As with all support groups, there is the opportunity for group members to develop lasting social relationships with others in the community. As resiliency skills and perspectives are encouraged and supported, the Beyond Trauma program provides the opportunity for participants to see resilience in their peers and then, through self-reflection, begin to recognize it in themselves.

Hardiness training program⁹

The hardiness training program involves three main stages administered in a group format across three sessions: (1) participants describe their current stressful or difficult circumstances; (2) the trainer presents a resiliency model that highlights three coping techniques (situational reconstruction, focusing, and self-improvement plan); and (3) supported by homework assignments, participants practice the three techniques and identify and rehearse action plans to address the stressful circumstances.

The Penn Resiliency Program¹⁰

This program is a group, school-based prevention project for elementary and middle school students. The curriculum, based on cognitive-behavioral and social problem-solving strategies, teaches students to (1) detect inaccurate thoughts, (2) evaluate the accuracy of those thoughts, and (3) challenge negative beliefs by considering alternative interpretations. Skill building includes teaching problem solving and coping strategies (e.g., assertiveness, negotiation, decision-making, social problem-solving, and relaxation) to address challenging situations and emotions.

A related initiative to the Indigenous Resilience Center is the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Climate Resilience Program (TCRP). This program's focus is to enable climate preparedness and resilience in all Indian Affairs programs and for all Federally-recognized Tribal Nations and Alaska Native Villages. TCRP seeks to empower and support tribal planning, travel, and capacity building for climate adaptation and ocean & coastal management. Technical and financial assistance is provided by supporting access to appropriate science, providing educational and informational opportunities, including intergenerational opportunities for internships and youth engagement.

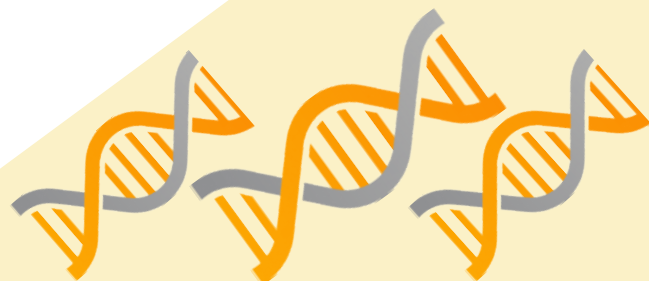
TCRP's cornerstone Annual Awards Program provides financial support for federally recognized Tribal Nations through a competitive funding opportunity to build Tribal climate resilience capacity.

Some indigenous communities incorporate both Christianity and traditional religious practices in the same ceremony. Practicing mindfulness meditation is a skill often cited as a way to build a person's resilience. Mindfulness is the state of being present, in the moment, with nonjudgmental awareness of what's going on within and around you. This skill can create a strength and mental resilience that can help a person deal with negative emotions and adversity.⁶

A successful path to building resiliency is best started during childhood. The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.¹ Also, there is the notion that limited exposure to non-severe and non-chronic challenges early in life may promote future resilience.⁸ Experiencing a moderate number of serious (but non-extreme) life events as a young person may contribute to developing a propensity for managing well in the face of stressors, including abilities to generalize these skills to unique challenges later in life. Parents can play a role in this learning process. Putting a child in moderate challenging situations that are outside a young person's comfort zone may prove helpful later in life in several ways: coping skills are learned; the child's sense of self-accomplishment is supported; and sensitivity to future stressors may be lessened.

Capitalizing on Tribal Community Strengths

A resiliency-based approach builds on the strengths and assets of AI/AN individuals and tribal communities to identify problems and create solutions. The inherent nature of AI/AN communities offer many sources of resilience, including strong family ties, community networks, physical resources, intergenerational knowledge and wisdom. Other examples of community resilience are local leadership, the role of elders, strong emphasis on culture, influence of storytelling and language, partnerships with tribal colleges, tribal departments, or partner agencies, and IHS clinics that provide tribal wraparound health services. A partner agency that provides a resiliency resource for Indigenous communities is The National American Indian and Alaska Native Technology Transfer Center. The Center provides health-related resources with a wide variety of mediums – newsletters, webinars, virtual storytelling, learning opportunities, and consultation.




Biology has a role in a person's resiliency.

For example, one's ability to respond to stress is affected by genes that direct how our sympathetic nervous system (involuntary response to danger and stress) reacts. Also relevant to stress response is the complex interaction of genes and environment. One well-researched gene-environment interaction is that people with a certain gene variation related to an important brain chemical, serotonin, who are exposed to childhood maltreatment are more likely to develop depression than those who are exposed to childhood maltreatment but do not have this serotonin gene variation.

The complexity of gene-environment interactions is a focus of the emerging field of epigenetics. This is the study of how exposure to positive or negative environmental events can change gene expression, and if gene changes are passed onto offspring.





The importance of the parent–child relationship in AI/AN families for supporting resilience in the child was the focus of a recent study.⁷ The researchers found that the parent–child relationship moderated the association between parent internalizing distress (i.e., depressive and anxious symptoms) and child internalizing distress. When the parent–child relationship was strong, it buffered the effects of parent distress on child internalizing symptoms.

Summary

It's the human condition to face adversity at different times in our lives, and unfortunately for some, there is exposure to serious trauma. Resilience can be either a key to recovery if a serious mental disorder results from the trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or it can be a buffer that prevents such disorders from occurring if a person has been traumatized.

Personal experiences that made their way into journals, diaries and case studies, as well as behavioral research, have shed light on the elements of resiliency.

Whereas resilience may come easier for some than others, everyone can increase their “resilience quotient” by embracing attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors that help to reverse the emotional pain resulting from adversity. There is no reason a person cannot make oneself more resilient. And having confidence in that principle means you are already on your way.

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Journeys

*What are these whispering waters I hear?
They speak of time passed, trickling through the
steps of time
Its travel from deeper depths, from a distance only it
knows the journey*

How long have you been traveling I ask

From whence do you come or is it a secret?

*I reach out to this new friend as this is the first time
we have met*

I feel the cold from its travels

The smell of the purity it possesses

The taste of its maker.

Oh! You who were made from the purest of hands

Will we ever meet again I wonder?

*I think not, as you are a traveler who does not sleep
or rest. Take care and I will dream of you again.*

~ Sean A. Bear I, Meskwaki

Culturally Sensitive Programs & Services



A conversation with Shatta Mejia, founder of Shatta-I Consulting, which collaborates with companies, non-profits, and school systems to create new understandings for teachers and students in the areas of educational, racial, and linguistic justice.

Tell us about your organization and the services you provide.

I have been an independent educational consultant for more than a year after leaving the textbook publishing industry. I have been in K-12 education for more than 26 years as a teacher, coach, principal, district assistant director, lobbyist, and now consultant.

At [Shatta-I Consulting](#), we provide advocacy for multilingual learners and Indigenous children. It's important to be able to advocate for these groups together because there are so many intersections in their lack of representation in K-12 education. Many times, products are created with "these kids in mind" and the products don't meet the bar and don't meet the satisfaction of our parent groups or families. There is still a disconnect between providers of content and the students/families that use them, although some smaller, more agile companies are getting better. I partner with nonprofits, corporations, and educational research companies in order to accelerate the learning of multilingual learners and indigenous children. I want a day to come when parents of Indigenous children are comfortable advocating for their children and comfortable being in a school.

What role does culture play in the development and implementation of your program's initiatives?

Culture is a major force in all the initiatives that I become a part of. It is important to make sure that the next generation has a very clear idea that they have a strong and beautiful culture; that their ancestors were the ones that were here in the before times and knew how to live without all the things we have today. History drives much of how I feel and what I think when I interact with my collaborators. I need to know that whatever project I'm working on has a strong cultural aspect or that this project will result in a better education for Indigenous children

and multilingual learners, now and for years to come.

What are some of your past and current behavioral health initiatives, success stories/outcomes from these initiatives?

One of the current initiatives that I am working on with a consortium of partners is a series of children's books focused on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), but from an Indigenous perspective using Indigenous characters, situations, and culture to give another perspective of SEL. The concept of grit that users of SEL in the K-12 education field use is very different from an Indigenous perspective of grit because there's a different historical understanding that results in different feelings about a concept like grit.

That's just one example that we'll be tackling in this series of children's books. These books are intended for all children, of course, but for our Indigenous children especially. We want them to feel good about themselves, to see characters on the page that look like them and they can relate to, and situations they can relate to. This will help them to understand themselves better in the context of the world and in the context of their school. We want our children and our parents to feel more comfortable in a school setting; this may be a step in that direction.

What challenges or barriers have you encountered in your field, and what recommendations do you have for overcoming these barriers?

I have no shortage of collaborators. I have no shortage of folks whom I can ask opinions of and get stories from. I can be creative all day and collaborate with others for free. More of my barriers come from the financial side in trying to fund these great projects. I know that I can't do it all and it's difficult to be able to procure funding and be creative at the same time. I remember learning this lesson as a musician!



Culture as a Source of Positivity and Resilience

C. Allison Baez, PhD

Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation -
Aguateca Paguame Clan
MHTTC K-12 School Supplement
Program Manager

During the height of the pandemic, for almost 18 months, I spent many of my days homeschooling my grandchildren. The youngest one, pre-school age, often would ask me, “Mamaw, are you happy?” My immediate response was initially a resounding, “Yes, I’m happy!” But after hearing it on repeat for several weeks, I began to think, “Am I happy?” And is my happiness relative or absolute? I can think back to my own childhood and recall stories that bring me happiness and joy. The memories reflect my family and me engaging in healthy activities that produced my feeling of happiness. Looking back, would my life be drastically different if I had not learned from an early age what happiness is and feels like? Now I understand that as an adult I am responsible for my own happiness and that when it comes from within, it exudes from every pore of my being.

Too often, children are faced with adversity in life because of one’s history, culture and identity. Our American Indian/Alaska Native children have a higher predisposition to adverse childhood experiences that directly impacts their thoughts, behaviors, health and wellness, self-esteem, choices in life, and emotions. Our role as educators, support staff, mental health providers, administrators, and parents is to help our children learn positive behaviors and positive emotions.

The feeling of happiness can be compared to the concept of positive psychology. Many attribute the



term positive psychology to well-known psychologist Abraham Maslow. However, Martin Seligman used the term positive psychology in his publication “Authentic Happiness.” Seligman defined the study of positive emotions and the “strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive.”¹ So how do we find out what makes people happy? Positive psychology studies demonstrate that how one acts and thinks has an impact on one’s sense of happiness. The evidence-based model founded by Seligman for this includes positive emotions and relationships, engagement, meaning, and accomplishments.² When these elements are present in our lives, we are subject to improved health and wellness, longevity, and a greater quality of life.

For American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, there is minimal research about culture and its connection to positive psychology. Some researchers suggest there are oral histories and traditional stories in AI/AN culture that suggest a positive approach to living, which is consistent with positive psychology theory.³ Less than 25 years ago, the concept of evidence-based positive psychology was introduced. Prior literature did include optimism and positive affect in the psychology field. When positive psychology was presented, it combined with its predecessors and launched a new perspective. However, our Native stories have always been woven into our daily lives to create our resiliency and lead us to be a culture rich in history and tradition for hundreds of years. The passing down of our stories through our cultural lens is beneficial to our community, especially our children.

Culture as Prevention

Culture is noted to have an impact on resilience, individually and as a community. Research by Brockmeier and Carbaugh with AI/ANs reveals that protective factors

for positive outcomes include culture, family, and their community.⁴ Additional cultural factors that address resiliency include spirituality, family, respect for elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, and traditional healing practices,⁵ many of which are rooted in positivity.

Cultural resilience can be defined as the ability for a cultural community to be able to face adversity and change yet continue to progress. In the case of AI/ANs, it helps to find an inner strength based on cultural grounding and system of belief. Sharing and teaching about resilience with our youth is paramount for their health and well-being as well as the sustainability of our culture.

Learned Behaviors

As with any sport or academic subject, children can learn both positive and negative behaviors in life. Many Native children have learned helplessness in their lives due to their family history and intergenerational trauma. But this can be changed through reframing the behavior positively. When educators and parents foster an attitude of gratitude and resilience, it can change a young person’s perspective on life. Often our Native children are lacking tangible resources, yet cultivating a positive attitude only costs time and effort put forth by all involved. Modeling a positive mindset can be done at home and in a classroom setting.

Seligman’s research revealed that through resilience training, people can learn to develop a more optimistic perspective; this was observed in children, teachers, members of the military, and more.⁶ The topic of

learned behaviors is prevalent in the education field. Areas such as academic failure or low self-esteem and their impact on later success are viewed as influencing factors to a child's future. AI/AN children who feel that they are unable to succeed demonstrate little effort into their schoolwork. This lack of effort decreases their chances of success, leading to even less motivation and effort.⁷ The feelings of helplessness impact a child's motivation to learn. In many cases students begin to blame factors out of their control.

Educators and parents can employ strategies that can help prevent students from learning negative behaviors and a sense of helplessness. When a child is praised and encouraged, it helps them believe they are good with certain tasks and class subjects. This also helps children believe their efforts make a difference. Creating attainable goals with students also helps them learn they can achieve them and change their learned behavior to a positive one.

Addressing Life with Positive Psychology

As adults, often we can understand what it feels like to have a day when life is not what we expect. What can help is how we address it, learn from it, and move forward. We can work on it from the evidence-based theory of positive psychology. With this method, we can look at what is good or right as we improve our happiness instead of trying to fix what is bad or wrong. Our youth are inherently happy in life. When we start to inundate them with outside circumstances over which they have no control, it can change their mood, their happiness, their positivity. As educators and parents, it is our responsibility to educate them and model what a life filled with positive thoughts and actions can impart to them. Moreover, we can listen to them about what makes them happy. We can encourage our AI/AN children to learn from a positive outlook on life, so they are in control of their thoughts, behaviors, health and wellness, self-esteem, choices in life, and emotions positively. We can teach that happiness is both relative and absolute. It is through our Indigenous knowledge that we will continue to pass the model of positive psychology on for future generations in our own cultural traditions.



Suggestions for using positive psychology within a school community (using PERMA)

Positive emotions

Talk about things that you are thankful for at school and home. This daily practice fosters a positive attitude.

Engagement

Work on recognizing your best qualities. Use them to help your community at home and school.

Relationships

Build positive relationships with others. This helps with our happiness and our community's.

Meaning

Share about a time when someone thanked you for helping them. It feels good to know we are appreciated.

Achievement

Celebrate successes big and small! When we celebrate, we feel happy.

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ACTIVITIES & EVENTS

For all of our upcoming events, publications, and announcements, [please visit our website.](#)

Date	Event
Friday, Feb. 4	<p><i>Telemental-health Group Service Delivery</i> In collaboration with NFARTEc Presenter: Sandnes Boulanger, LCSW, MCAP, CET; Vice President of Clinical Services-Operation PAR Register</p>
Wednesday, Feb. 9	<p><i>Understanding American Indian Perinatal Care and Cultural Considerations</i> Register</p>
Wednesday, March 9	<p><i>Understanding American Indian Post-Partum Care and Cultural Considerations</i> <i>Registration details to be announced</i></p>
March 31-April 28	<p><i>Digital Peer Support Enhanced Professional Learning Series (EPLs)</i> In collaboration with NFARTEc This EPLs is designed for mental health and substance use peer support specialists/recovery coaches to expand their skills in the use of digital technologies to provide peer support services. Participants will receive training regarding: 1) the history and role of digital peer support; 2) digital peer support competencies; 3) how to select digital support technologies including decision support tools to aid in selection; 4) specific keys to digital peer support with a focus on engagement; 5) privacy and ethical issues; and 6) how to develop a digital peer support platform. This EPLs will be taught by a digital health technology scientist and a peer certified as a digital peer support specialist. Finally, time will be built in to the learning sessions to practice text message-based support as well as discussions and other skill building activities as it relates to digital peer support.</p>



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