



Cultural Elements of Native Mental Health with a Focus on Rural Issues

Highlights & Key Concepts

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Summary Ideas:

Alaska Natives/American Indians living in rural areas often face significant challenges to accessing mental health services. These often include:

- **Accessibility:** Rural residents often travel long distances to receive services and providers are less likely to recognize a mental illness.
- **Availability:** Chronic shortages of mental health professionals exist, and mental health providers are more likely to practice in urban centers.
- **Affordability:** Some rural residents may not be able to afford the cost of health insurance or the cost of out-of-pocket care if they lack health insurance.
- **Acceptability:** Rural residents may be more susceptible to the stigma of needing or receiving mental healthcare in small communities where everyone knows each other, and fewer choices of trained professionals can lead to a lack of faith in confidentiality

The COVID-19 pandemic added more challenges to rural Native communities:

- × increased isolation and difficulty accessing services
- × limited access to the internet and telehealth
- × provider shortages
- × suspension of community rituals, ceremonies, and other key collective activities
- × reference to traumatic memories of previous plagues.

Providers need to understand the history of, and trauma inflicted upon Native communities:

- The history of health disparities has complicated the patient-provider relationship, sometimes leading to distrust. Re-traumatization is a key concern.
- Unresolved intergenerational trauma and grief are significant contributors to social and health disparities.

Dolores Bigfoot, PhD, of the University of Oklahoma, defines trauma in these four ways:

- **Cultural trauma:** is an attack on the fabric of a society, affecting the essence of the community members.
- **Historical trauma:** cumulative exposure of traumatic events that affect an individual and continue to affect subsequent generations.
- **Intergenerational trauma:** occurs when trauma is not resolved, is subsequently internalized and passed from one generation to the next.
- **Present Trauma:** the vulnerability Native peoples experience daily.

Providers can inform their approach with Native communities in the following ways:

- **Use a healing model:** Providers can help eliminate the biases and oppression that Native clients face by using the healing model, rather than a recovery or treatment model. The term “decolonization” is complex: it can come across as abrasive, even disrespectful. But if we discuss decolonization in the context of healing, it becomes a tool to build healthy relationships with everybody and anybody.
- **Use a strength-based approach:** Often when working with folks who are from Native communities, providers focus on the trauma and the disparities that these folks face. This approach overlooks or dismisses the strengths of Native communities and individuals. A strength-based approach more accurately reflects community values and principles and ensures that you won’t be overly focused on the trauma. It is also more likely to support positive change than standard pathogenic models.

Q1 *What assumptions do people make about rural Native communities?*

A1

One significant misconception about Native tribal communities in rural areas is the assumption that life on rural reservations is desperate. In reality, a significant degree of hopefulness exists in all Native American communities. Thirty years ago, if you went to a Native event, you would invariably see alcohol on the premises or in the crowd. Today that is not the case—Native events today are typically sober.

Q2 *How do we define rural Native communities?*

A2

Today, about 30% of the American Indian/Alaska Native population lives in rural areas. However, defining what is rural versus urban is not always clear-cut and obvious. Often it depends on an individual’s perspective. For example, for a New Yorker, a town with a population of 21,000, such as Gallup, New Mexico, seems rural. However, from the perspective of Native Americans living on Navajo lands in New Mexico, Gallup is considered one of the state’s bigger cities. A rural area in their eyes would be a place where families live 2 to 3 miles apart with stretches of land 20 miles wide where no one lives.

Q3

What have you learned through the work you have done with Native communities within HHS Region 10 (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Alaska)?

A3

One lesson learned was the vast diversity between and within each state and how, in the lower 48, we often take for granted the liberty to be mobile. In Oregon, Idaho, and Washington, it is relatively easy to travel from place to place, reservation to reservation, by car. However, in Alaska, many reservations are only accessible by plane or boat.

Q4

What are some of the kinds of elements of Native culture and ways of being that are protective and healing?

A4

These protective practices begin in the home and include our relatives and our family members. You know, I come from a society with a very extensive family base. There are Indigenous or Native therapeutic practices such as our naming ceremonies, our listening, our watching, our voicing, our speaking, our drumming, our walks, our rites and ceremonies and teachings and vision seeking, and tobacco smudging, prayers, and offerings. We do have stories, teachings, beliefs and practices geared around fending off or keeping away those beings that exist for us like the Skinwalker or Shapeshifter that have a strong presence and that we respect. It's also important to know that some behaviors that can be labeled as symptoms of mental illness may be seen among Native people as the expression of special gifts.

Resources:

[Decolonizing Mental Health](#)

This series examines the transformative work of therapists & people of color, calling for a redefining of how we define psychiatric illness and health. Through 20 profiles, the digital series discusses what a more responsive mental health care system should look like.

Historical Trauma

- [Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart: Historical Trauma in Native American Populations](#) (video)
- [Indian Health Service webinar archives](#); topics include historical trauma

Prevention

- [Culture-Based Prevention Resources Good Medicine Bundle](#), from Operation Prevention. Use the wisdom of Native practices of wellness combined with the insights of modern science to help Native and non-Native students avoid the dangers of substance misuse.
- [Tribal Opioid Response Resources](#), from the National American Indian & Alaska Native Prevention Technology Transfer Center.

Suicide Prevention

- Native and Strong. Native and Strong is designed to inform and educate tribal communities about suicide prevention. This campaign is funded by the Washington State Department of Health. For 24/7 support, call 988 or (800) 273-8255 or text NATIVE to 741741.
- Transforming Tribal Communities: Indigenous Perspectives on Suicide Prevention, from Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC).

Organizations

- The Native Center for Behavioral Health is a research center at the University of Iowa College of Public Health committed to developing programs to support the behavioral health workforce in Native American and Alaska Native communities across the country.
- The National American Indian and Alaska Native MHTTC works with organizations and treatment practitioners involved in the delivery of mental health services to American Indian and Alaska Native individuals, families, and tribal and urban Indian communities to strengthen their capacity to deliver effective evidence-based and experience-based practices. This includes the full continuum of services spanning mental illness, prevention, treatment, and recovery support.
- The National American Indian and Alaska Native ATTC provides education and training opportunities for individuals and groups involved in providing substance abuse treatment and counseling, including health professionals in primary prevention and treatment for substance abuse. The center offers services nationwide for consulting, technical assistance, and continuing education seminars.
- The National American Indian & Alaska Native Prevention Technology Transfer Center provides training and technical assistance services to the substance abuse prevention field including professionals, paraprofessionals, organizations and others in the prevention community focused on American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

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