

Developing an Understanding of American Indians/and Alaska Natives: Historical Trauma

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Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center

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What is Historical Trauma?

Trauma is anything that overwhelms our ability to respond, especially if we perceive (think or feel) that what supports us physically or emotionally is threatened or in danger. *Historical* trauma is distinct from other forms of trauma in that it includes individual experiences of violence and loss as well as distress connected to historical events, cultural destruction, and ongoing experiences of poverty and discrimination.

The term “historical trauma” was originally used to describe the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish people, but it has also been used to help describe why American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people have such high rates of depression, substance dependence, suicide, unemployment, dysfunctional parenting, low educational attainment, low life expectancy, diabetes, and other health and social concerns. The current issues facing AI/ANs may be the result of a legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief, sustained across generations beginning with the conquering of Natives by dominant European settlers. Historical trauma is trauma that has been transferred to subsequent generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means, resulting in inter-generational cycles of trauma stemming from historical and current loss of population, land, and culture.

Core Concepts of Historical Trauma

AI/AN history is dominated by federal policies that intentionally tried to destroy entire tribal populations through targeted and destructive practices such as: direct warfare; dispensing smallpox-infected blankets; providing diseased and spoiled trade goods; removing tribes from their homelands and placing them on poor barren reservation lands; taking generations of Native children hundreds of miles from their communities to boarding

At A Glance

In this brief, NAPTAC examines what historical trauma is and describes its monumental impact on Native people, culture, and health. Parent Centers can use this information to deepen their understanding of Native communities and to inform outreach and training activities.

schools; forbidding the use of tribal languages and traditional cultural practices; relocating tribal members to large urban centers to seek employment (Indian Removal Act of 1830); and terminating selected tribes outright (Termination Act 1963). As a result of these and other policies, subsequent generations have been subjugated, disoriented, isolated, and left with unresolved feelings of inferiority, grief, shame, and powerlessness.

Why Should Parent Centers Know About Historical Trauma?

Understanding historical trauma can affect how Parent Centers engage with tribal communities. As Parent Centers reach out to Native families and communities, they may experience resistance, suspicion, lack of trust, and even anger toward non-Natives. Some of these responses may be directly related to historical trauma.

Although research is scarce on programs addressing historical trauma and on mental and behavioral health of Native youth and adults, there are strategies that have been used with varying levels of success. These strategies are indicators of practices that Parent Centers could consider when working with Native parents and may also give parents strategies to use with their own children.

Most of the interventions for historical trauma attempt to reconnect or reinforce the importance of including tribal languages, cultural practices, and ceremonies as a way to



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emphasize healing and protective factors for Native adults and youth. There are numerous linguistic and cultural differences within indigenous populations, yet there are some **common cultural features** that might inform intervention strategies, including:

- focusing on common cultural practices;
- using indirect communication styles;
- focusing on harmony and balance;
- using shared traditional beliefs in the existence of animal spirits as guides, ancestor spirits, and feeding the spirits; and
- acknowledging the attachment to all creation.

It is important to remember the uniqueness of tribal communities, and to adapt appropriate interventions to be

compatible within a tribe's context. Additional ways Parent Centers and others can support family development of protective factors include:

- encouraging positive parent-child relationships and interactions;
- helping families develop consistent routines and appropriate limits;
- promoting social networks among families;
- offering information about parenting and child development;
- providing information about activities families can do at home or in the community;
- encouraging families to read to their children; and
- developing trusting, respectful relationships with each family.

What are Some Research-Based Intervention Strategies for Addressing Historical Trauma?

While the following strategies may not be things Parent Centers can do *directly* for Native parents, it is important to know the intensive work needed to help Native communities overcome the impact of historical trauma.

Establish Group-based Interventions/Programs

Group activities in which participants support each other (typical of how traditional cultures used to function) can help participants deconstruct the impact of substance abuse and dysfunctional behaviors. Group activities help break the isolation of adults and youth as well as foster the development of peer support networks.

Provide Natives with Healthy Mentors

Finding Native adult and youth mentors from within tribal communities helps to establish strong models of healthy behaviors and recognizes the historical

role of tribal elders, who are rich in tribal ecological knowledge, traditions, languages, wisdom, and stories.

Help Native Adults and Youth Develop Positive Coping Strategies and Skills

Coping strategies and skills help Native youth and adults deal with stress, boredom, and feelings of emptiness and powerlessness stemming from historical trauma. Learning social skills and problem-solving behaviors helps to replace harmful patterns, such as social withdrawal and substance abuse.

Encourage Adults and Youth to Talk about Experiences and Identify Feelings

Using approaches such as traditional talking circles gives Natives a place to talk about traumatic experiences. This, in turn, helps Natives identify related feelings and thoughts important to understanding the root causes for behaviors and explore alternatives that are more positive and healthy.

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