



Tips for Disaster Responders:

UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL TRAUMA WHEN RESPONDING TO AN EVENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY

In this tip sheet, we respectfully use the term “Native Americans” to describe the hundreds of tribes, reservations, pueblos, and villages throughout the United States. Know that all tribes are unique, with highly individual cultures, governance, and belief systems. Find out the best way to offer response assistance for the tribe with which you are working.

WHAT IS HISTORICAL TRAUMA?

Historical trauma is the cumulative, multigenerational, collective experience of emotional and psychological injury in communities and in descendants.^{1,2} One of the most familiar examples of historical trauma is that experienced by Native Americans. SAMHSA’s GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation writes, “This population has been exposed to generations of violent colonization, assimilation policies, and general loss.”³ As a result, many Native American people, cultures, and traditions suffered over time.

The effects of historical trauma among Native Americans include changes in the traditional ways of child rearing, family structure, and relationships. Some observed responses to historical trauma may include signs of overall poor physical and

emotional health, such as low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and high rates of suicide. In many cases, historical trauma has also disrupted the sense of community within the tribe itself. There is a well-founded mistrust of outsiders and government providers based on long-term negative experiences with non-Native Americans. This tip sheet can help disaster behavioral health responders like you and your colleagues better understand historical trauma in the Native American culture and how it may affect disaster preparedness and response efforts.

EFFECTS OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA ON NATIVE AMERICANS

The effects of historical trauma can be manifested in many ways. Among Native Americans, it has included the following:

- A breakdown of traditional Native family values
- Alcohol and other substance abuse⁴
- Depression, anxiety, and suicidality⁵
- Child abuse and neglect and domestic violence
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- General loss of meaning and sense of hope
- Internalized oppression, self-hatred



TIPS FOR PREPARING TO RESPOND TO A DISASTER OR OTHER TRAUMATIC EVENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY

When responding to a traumatic event such as a disaster in Indian Country, it is important to tailor the response efforts to the experiences of the community. Remember that because of the survivors' past experiences of violence and cultural degradation, there is likely increased fear and mistrust of responders outside of the tribal community. Also, remember that you are a guest in a sovereign nation with a unique form of government and should work with a tribal liaison, such as an emergency management liaison or a spiritual leader, to both show respect for the culture and increase your credibility as a responder. Know that it will take time for the tribe to open doors to outsiders and trust that your intentions are helpful. Make an effort to help re-establish traditional responses and protective factors that were in place prior to the traumatic event. It is important to build trusting relationships and consider the following before a traumatic event occurs:

- Know that all tribes are unique, with highly individual cultures and belief systems. Find out the best way to offer response assistance for the tribe with which you are working.⁶
- Identify and engage tribal liaisons to help you gain entry into the community.
- Learn who the traditional and elected tribal leaders are and how to appropriately request to speak with them.
- Develop a culturally appropriate response effort by working with leaders and liaisons from within the tribe to inform the language and activities of the program.
- Emphasize traditional values, beliefs, and expressions of culture (especially related to health and illness, emotional well-being, and resilience) for that tribe during all phases of emergency management.
- Always check in with the tribal community and leaders to see if they agree with the response before moving forward.

While you may not always agree with the beliefs and customs of the tribe you are working with, it is critical to be respectful of their choices, culture, and values.



Historical trauma can be expressed in three ways:³

- Historical unresolved grief is the result of historical trauma that has not been sufficiently acknowledged, expressed, or otherwise addressed.
- Disenfranchised grief is the product of historical trauma when loss cannot be voiced publicly or is not publicly acknowledged. Here, the authors list “the lack of recognition of the generations of loss of American Indians from colonialism, disease and other factors, and the corresponding lack of recognition of their right to grieve these collective experiences” as an example of this type of grief.
- Internalized oppression occurs when “traumatized people . . . internalize the views of the oppressor and perpetuate a cycle of self-hatred that manifests itself in negative behaviors.”

Please see the following resources, listed alphabetically, for more information on topics specific to how historical trauma (e.g., forced relocation, boarding schools, and incarceration) affects Native Americans:

Brave Heart, M.Y.H. (1999). “Oyate Ptayela: Rebuilding the Lakota nation through addressing historical trauma among Lakota parents.” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2(1-2), 109-126.

Duran, E., Duran, B., Brave Heart, M. Y. H., & Horse-Davis, S. Y. (1998). “Healing the American Indian soul wound.” In: Danieli, Y., (Ed.) *International Handbook of Multi-generational Legacies of Trauma*. New York, NY: Plenum.

Evans-Campbell, T. (2008). “Historical trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska communities: A multilevel framework for exploring impacts on individuals, families, and communities.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23(3), 316-338.

Manson, S. M., Beals, J., Klein, S. A., Croy, C. D., & AI-SUPERPPF Team. (2005). “Social epidemiology of trauma among two American Indian reservation populations.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(5), 851-859.

Strickland, Q., Walsh, E., Cooper, M. (2006). “Healing fractured families: Parents’ and elders’ perspectives on the impact of colonization and youth suicide prevention in a Pacific Northwest American Indian tribe.” *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 17(1), 5-12.

Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full report on the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d.). *Fact sheet: Historical trauma*. Retrieved on February 28, 2014, from <http://gainscenter.samhsa.gov/cms-assets/documents/93078-842830.historical-trauma.pdf>.



Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App
Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1>

American Indian and Alaska Native Culture Card
Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native-Culture-Card/SMA08-4354>

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746
Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>
This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Indian Health Service*
Responsible for providing health services to members of federally recognized tribes.
Website: www.ihs.gov

U.S. Department of the Interior*
Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Leaders Directory
Website: <http://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/public/documents/text/idc002652.pdf>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management*
Online course: Working Effectively with Tribal Governments (available only to federal employees)
Website: <http://www.tribal.golearnportal.org/>

**Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

- 1 Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). "Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian males." *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), 177-183.
- 2 Brave Heart, M. Y. H. (2003). "The historical trauma response among Natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 35(1), 7-13.
- 3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d.). *Fact sheet: Historical trauma*. Retrieved on February 28, 2014, from <http://gainscenter.samhsa.gov/cms-assets/documents/93078-842830.historical-trauma.pdf>.
- 4 Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). "Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian males." *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), 177-183.
- 5 Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). "Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian males." *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), 177-183.
- 6 Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). "Historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 43 (4), 282-290.



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