A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a colorful patterned poncho, stands with her back to the camera, looking out over a large body of water. In the background, there are forested mountains under a cloudy sky. The image is split vertically, with the left side having a teal overlay where the text is located.

Centering Cultural Practices in Shelter, Transitional Housing, and Supportive Housing Programs

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**What we do need, however, is what
we already have. What we do need
has been provided for us by the
Great Spirit...**

**We need to realize who we are and
what we stand for. We are the keepers
of that which the Great Spirit has
given to us, that is our language, our
culture, our drum societies, our
religion, and most important of all, our
traditional way of life.**

*Egiwaateshkang,
George Aubid, Sr.,
Past Chief of the Mississippi Band, Anishinaabe*



Cultural practices and activities build resilience, offer trauma healing, and strengthen identity and social cohesion.

Tribal domestic violence emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive housing programs can embed cultural design in the environment, program design, and programming and service provision for victim/survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence. Cultural practices and activities build resilience, offer trauma healing, and strengthen identity and social cohesion. Cultural practices and activities can be creatively and strategically embedded into emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive housing programs operations and programming to effectively respond to trauma and the aftermath of violence.

Cultural practices and activities are highly effective in trauma response and trauma healing and can be implemented in a number of creative and sustainable ways in program design, programming, and service provision. Culturally centered responses to victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence address recent trauma, generational, and historic trauma that impact Indigenous peoples. It is imperative to implement cultural strategies that pay attention to the full spectrum of trauma and build in practices and activities that attend to trauma recovery that are interconnected, from individual acute trauma to collective historic and racial trauma.



Roots of Generational and Historic Trauma

**“The past is more than a memory.”
-John Trudell**

It is incumbent to recognize the trauma impact experienced by Indigenous people through historic events and ongoing oppression. According to Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn and Walls, “Indigenous North Americans are embedded in a much different historical context than that of the dominant culture, one that includes relocation, starvation, isolation, removal of children, broken promises, and the denial of basic human rights. These experiences are not ancient history. The hard times of disease, hunger, and malnutrition associated with relocating tribes to reservations and reserves were going on less than 100 years ago and continue today in the form of persistent poverty and enormous health disparities” (p.3). Federal policies directly impacted Indigenous individuals, families, and communities with complex consequences. Tribal Nations experienced removal from homelands and dramatically reduced land bases, which altered food systems, cultural practices, and freedom. Removal was forced and violence was used as a tool to subjugate, exploit and eliminate Indigenous peoples. Sexual violence has been well documented as a long enduring tool and tactic to dehumanize and oppress Indigenous peoples (Deer).

Understanding the Indigenous experience in a historic context (Tribal Nation history, United States history, and individual history) is essential to gain insight into the origins of current complex social and economic conditions. Many times, effective solutions become evident, often in the form of cultural practices that have been intentionally discredited and disrupted.



Cultural Disruption: An Example of Culture Broken and Ways to Restore

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern summarize that “Indians were conquered by militarily and technologically superior European invaders who saw them as primitive peoples who had much to learn but little to offer to a modern society. In reality, Native peoples possessed profound child psychology wisdom that might well have been adopted by the immigrants to North America. Instead, missionaries and educators set out to ‘civilize’ their young ‘savages’ with an unquestioned belief in the superiority of Western approaches to child care.” This ultimately led to an education policy to forcibly send American Indian children to boarding schools. It is well documented that the intent was to assimilate the children into dominant culture and cut ties to Indigenous language, cultural practices, and worldview” (p.44). This “cultural intrusion” has carried deep impacts for ensuing generations. Yet, traditional Indigenous child rearing “represent what is perhaps the most effective system of positive discipline ever developed” and “the central purpose of life was the education and empowerment of children”. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern assert “modern child development research is only now reaching the point where this holistic approach can be understood, validated, and replicated” (p.44).

Contemporary elders can recall being forced into boarding schools. Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn and Walls state: “In 1882 the Secretary of the Interior terminated the church-government approach to education and established a unified system of federally controlled schools. Children were taken from their families and involuntarily moved to boarding schools. Once there, their hair was cut, they were dressed in European clothes, and they were forbidden to speak their traditional language, even if it was their only means to communicate. Discipline could be harsh and arbitrary, and visits home were few. The effects on Indigenous families cannot be overstated. Generations of children were raised in harsh conditions and without parents or grandparents. When they returned to the reservations and reserves, they were ‘changed.’ Often the traditional language was lost to them, they had been Christianized, and they had no family experience to guide them as parents of their own children. The period spanned nearly 100 years, enough time for traditional family systems to erode, for traditional language use to diminish, and to replace traditional spiritual ceremonies and practices with European religions” (p. 6). As an Elder shared: “Now if you go back in our history, we had a building (residential school) here. A concentration camp, I call it. Here you were stripped of your identity and it still lingers” (p.7). Researchers have been aware of this “historical psychological distress” and define it as “historical trauma, historical grief, and historical cultural losses.” (p.8)



Traditional Indigenous child rearing “represent what is perhaps the most effective system of positive discipline ever developed”

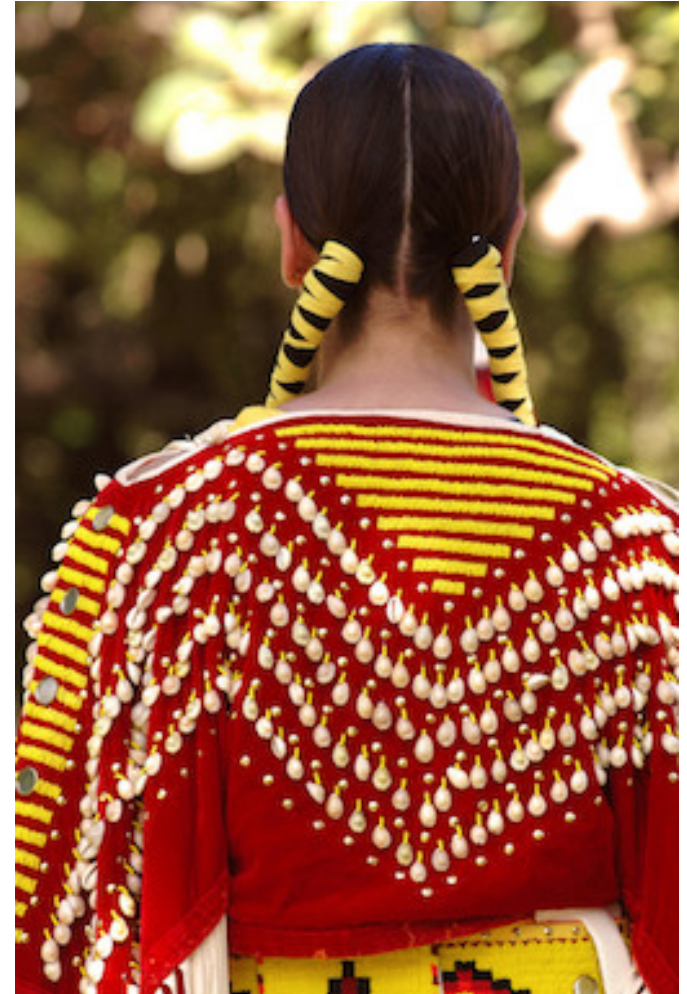
Cultural Identity and Return to Cultural Practices as a Solution

“We know it works because our culture has protected and provided for us for thousands of years but we’re waiting for modern methods to catch up.”

Anonymous Domestic Violence Advocate

“I think there’s a loss of their identity. From being Native, we lost a lot of that parents don’t teach their kids what we were taught. And once they’re [kids] growing up they wonder, “who am I?” They’re lost, you know. We need to get that back to help our people. That’s what I see, you know. They need Elder’s help. For us to teach, to teach us, then we can teach our kids. That’s what’s missing, that’s what we need.” -Indigenous Elder (Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn and Walls, p. 21)

Cultural and traditional practices, beliefs, and identity are “critical sources of strength and resilience for Indigenous people” (Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn and Walls, p.33). Early research has attempted to demonstrate the connections between cultural practices and well-being and a body of literature is growing, with some of the most affirmative research focused on alcohol and drug treatment programs who incorporate traditional practices and program content. Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn and Walls produced a ten-year wave study of Indigenous adolescent youth, in a focused study on “the degree to which individuals are embedded in their cultures as manifested by practicing the traditional culture and self-reported cultural identity” and positive correlation with “behaviors and self-esteem among adolescents, buffering depressive symptoms among adults, and reducing alcohol abuse among adults” (p. 33).



“I never understood that my grandparents went to boarding school because they never talked about it.

If a car pulled in our driveway, my Grandma would tell me to hide. I never understood why but I ran and hid until she said it was safe to come out.

I asked her about this, she simply said, ‘I was told the same thing and one time I didn’t hide good enough and they got me.’ She said, ‘I was taken away to school and it wasn’t good.’

For me, I never forget the fear I felt while hiding. This is only one example of how my traumas are tied together. I couldn’t make sense of this until I learned about boarding schools and what happened.

The sexual assaults that happened in my family changed my family’s ability to care for me. When I was assaulted, I was changed too but I found my way back.

My culture saved my life.”

Anonymous Victim/Survivor



Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by a person as harmful or life-threatening and has lasting impact on functioning and well-being. A person experiences, witnesses or is confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury or threat to the personal integrity of oneself or others. Examples include violence, sexual assault, fire or natural disaster, crime, or serious accident or injury. Trauma impact is affected by type of event and intensity, frequency of trauma, age point, natural protective response, and access to support and resources (Kerr, A., Sullivan, G., and Robertson, J.).

Historic trauma is a form of trauma that impacts entire communities through cumulative emotional and psychological impact, as a result of group traumatic experiences, transmitted across generations within a community. Racial trauma involves traumatic events that occur as a result of witnessing or experiencing racism, discrimination, or structural prejudice/institutional racism and can have a profound impact on the health of individuals exposed to these events (National Child Traumatic Stress Network). When historic trauma has not been acknowledged or addressed, unresolved historic grief can result (United National Indian Tribal Youth, p.9).



Each individual has survived due to inherent strengths, support networks, and environmental assets

Upon traumatic experience, the brain shifts functioning to maximize protective actions. Higher order thinking processes are suspended and basic core survival functions are heightened. Stress response pathways are stimulated. The individual may not fully return to baseline and may continue to function in a state of hyper (anger, agitation, high alert) or hypo (lethargy, apathy, lack of emotional response) arousal. Individual might return to baseline but continue to have sensation and associative triggers that revive the trauma experience. Trauma-informed care is a framework used to understand and recognize trauma, in order to respond to trauma effects. The emphasis is on safety and works to create a sense of control, choice, support and self-agency (Kerr, A., Sullivan, G., and Robertson, J.).

In trauma response, it is important to recognize the duress and circumstances a person has experienced and understand the multiple impacts trauma has on a person. It is highly possible that traumas experienced have been minimized, ignored, or not acknowledged. Much of the trauma experience is outside of a person's control, including the way the brain begins protective mechanisms, the interpretation and encoding of the event, and post-trauma reactions. Each individual has survived due to inherent strengths, support networks, and environmental assets. It is important to recognize the strength present in the face of experiencing a single trauma, multiple trauma experiences, or generational and historic trauma.

Keys factors to strengthening resilience involve supportive relationships and the use of faith and cultural traditions

*Harvard University Center
on the Developing Child*



Another effective strategy of trauma-informed care is to strengthen resilience, an adaptive response to serious hardship. Keys factors to strengthening resilience involve supportive relationships and the use of faith and cultural traditions (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child). Housing programs that respond to Indigenous victim/survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence can incorporate cultural practices and activities as a means to strengthen identity, resiliency, social cohesion, and other protective factors. United National Indian Tribal Youth held town halls with Native youth and asked “What helps you feel safe in your community?” Youth answered: “elders make me feel safe; belonging & connectedness to my community; traditional plants and medicines; being on my ancestral homelands or reservation; Native humor and other Natives; and Talking Circles, ceremonies, pow wows, or youth council meetings” (p. 4). Cultural practices help build individual and community resilience and sense of safety.



WE HAVE
INDIGENOUS
SOLUTIONS
TO OUR PROBLEMS



Strategies to Implement Cultural Practices and Activities and Suggested Practices

1. Recognizing and acknowledging Indigenous history & culture

Indigenous history has largely been erased from public education. The absence of Indigenous history in mainstream education impacts the access Indigenous community members have to the historical context, broadly and Tribal Nation-specific. At the same time, large gaps exist in the current education experience to engage Indigenous students. As a result, large disconnects exist for community members in knowledge access about specific events that continue to carry significant impacts on the individual, family, and community.

Knowledge is power. Implementing access to American Indian history, from pre-contact to contact and colonization, including the political history of the formation of the United States government and ongoing Nation to Nation relationships, is vital to understanding the crux of current contexts. Access to specific historical policies can help individuals identify how their own lives and family lines were and continue to be impacted. Building consciousness can help build recognition of resilience and strength inherent in Indigenous community.

Suggested practices and activities



Access to literature, video series, children’s books and hands-on materials onsiteic research



Staff training to learn & understand Indigenous history and cultural perspectives



Community events that highlight and honor Indigenous history and cultural perspectives



Specific education groups on historic trauma, historic grief, and historic cultural losses



Healing circles to address historic trauma



2. Cultural Consideration in Environmental Design (Organization and Program Physical Space, Digital Space)

Built environment (building/structures, external and internal physical spaces, digital spaces like websites or social media platforms) can represent and reflect Indigenous cultural values through intentional design. If new shelter or supportive housing are being developed, there are many opportunities to build Indigenous culture into the project design, weaving together built space with operations and services.

Suggested practices and activities



Traditional naming ceremonies for buildings, spaces, and programs



Incorporating cultural stories, symbols, and motifs/imagery in the physical design



Feature Indigenous art in highly visible locations (e.g., wall murals, original and print art, participant-created art, including visual, mixed media, and traditional forms)



Incorporate Indigenous content and resources on website and social media



Create specific locations and space for prayer/mediation and spiritual activities (indoors and outdoors)



Design space for Indigenous gardens and plant life



Build Indigenous music into design with internal sound systems and as a part of daily operations

3. Cultural Integration in Program Design

Emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive housing programs can integrate cultural practices and activities into the overall program design, through specific staffing positions, advisers, advisory councils, program materials, and program elements such as meals, annual events, and staff development.



Create Elder positions, through paid employment positions, volunteering, or older adult internships



Create direct access to Indigenous spiritual advisors and traditional healers as a cornerstone of program design



Establish advisory councils for ongoing direction, guidance, and assistance



Design intake, resource information, and program materials with Indigenous cultural content as appropriate to program, services, and Tribal/geographic context



Incorporate traditional foods and beverages in onsite meals and snacks, community feasts, and food access (onsite food pantry, other forms of food distribution)



Incorporate attendance to annual or monthly cultural events as a part of programming (e.g., powwows, sobriety feasts, language camps, traditional food harvesting events)



Establish Tribally-endorsed restorative or reconciliation methods



Establish ongoing staff development and training focused cultural knowledge & skill sets



Create a list of cultural knowledge holders and resource people to consult with consistently and ongoing; continue to build and deep these relationships



4. Programming and Service Provision

Emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive housing programs can offer cultural activities and practices as a central foundation in ongoing programming and service provision. Programming can incorporate Indigenous cultural methods of individual and group support, such as Talking Circles, ceremonies, traditional physical activities, Indigenous language, and cultural access through art, storytelling, community gatherings, traditional teachings, and community feasts. These cultural elements provide access to build cultural knowledge and identity, strengthen community and social cohesion, and offer healing from trauma experiences.

Suggested practices



Offer culturally-based support groups, like Talking Circles and Indigenous curriculums (e.g., White Bison Wellbriety) onsite or create direct access to established community cultural resources



Determine appropriate and accessible cultural ceremonies to be held onsite (e.g., pipe ceremony, drum ceremony, cedar/wiping the tears ceremony, full moon ceremony, sweat lodge, naming ceremony, returning home ceremony, honoring ceremony)



Feature traditional games and physical activities in group activities (e.g., hand games, lacrosse or other Tribally-specific sports, winter outdoor activities, hiking to sacred or Tribally-significant sites)



Provide traditional medicine, share knowledge on practices and uses of traditional medicines (e.g., smudging, traditional plants, mediation/prayer, purification)



Create Indigenous language learning, speaking, and teaching opportunities (e.g., language tables, language materials and content, featured speaker events)



Create Indigenous art opportunities for participants to learn and experience hands-on (e.g. pottery, sculpture, mixed media, visual, film/video, traditional forms, beading, basketry, collective projects like murals)



Use opportunities around sharing food to incorporate traditional practices and/or teachings (e.g., spirit dishes, food blessings, traditional stories regarding food items or cultural values associated with food practices)



Remembering we have Indigenous Solutions
to our problems

Wilma Mankiller, Cherokee

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