



## Tips for Disaster Responders: UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE WHEN RESPONDING TO AN EVENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY

*In this tip sheet, we respectfully use the term “Native Americans” to describe the hundreds of federally recognized tribes, tribal reservations, pueblos, and federally recognized Alaska Native villages throughout the United States. It is important to note that Native American tribes are sovereign nations—they have the right to self-govern—and have a unique political status based on the nation-to-nation relationship of tribes to the U.S. government.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2,3</sup> One of the most familiar examples of historical trauma is that experienced by Native Americans. Traumatic events, such as forced relocation, genocide, or the abduction of youth to more than 350 government-funded boarding schools, caused lasting impacts on Native American

communities.<sup>4</sup> Resurfacing of these events, such as investigations into the abuse and deaths suffered by thousands of Native American children at residential boarding schools in the United States and Canada, can cause retraumatization. As a result, many Native American people, cultures, and traditions have suffered over time. Some observed responses to historical trauma may include signs of overall poor physical and emotional health, such as low self-esteem, depression, substance misuse, and high rates of suicide.



The effects of historical trauma among Native Americans include changes in the traditional ways of child rearing, family structure, and community cohesiveness. However, many Native American communities have developed stronger spiritual and faith-based and social ties to cope with historical trauma and promote cultural resilience, and these strengths can be valuable elements of disaster response and recovery plans. This tip sheet can help disaster behavioral health responders like you and your colleagues better understand historical trauma in Native American cultures 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, these effects have included the following:

- A breakdown of traditional Native family values
- Alcohol and other substance misuse<sup>5</sup>
- Depression, anxiety, and suicidality<sup>6</sup>
- Child abuse and neglect and domestic violence
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- General loss of meaning and sense of hope
- Internalized oppression and self-hatred

## Responding 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. You should work with a tribal liaison, such as an emergency management liaison or a spiritual leader, to show respect for the culture and increase your credibility as a responder. Make an effort to help reestablish traditional responses, cultural practices, and protective factors that were in place prior to the traumatic event. It is important to build trusting relationships and recognize the many strengths of the community while responding to a traumatic event. 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.<sup>7</sup>

- Identify and collaborate with tribal liaisons to ensure program efforts demonstrate an understanding of the unique needs of the community and are focused on strength and resilience.
- Learn who the traditional, elected, and community tribal leaders are and how to appropriately request to speak with them.
- Work with leaders and liaisons from within the tribe to develop a culturally appropriate response effort 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.

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:

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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260507312290>

Goodkind, J. R., Hess, J. M., Gorman, B., & Parker, D. P. (2012). “We’re still in a struggle”: Diné resilience, survival, historical trauma, and healing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(8), 1019–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312450324>

Manson, S. M., Beals, J., Klein, S. A., Croy, C. D., & AI-SUPERPFP Team. (2005). Social epidemiology of trauma among two American Indian reservation populations. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(5), 851–859. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2004.054171>

National Institute on Drug Abuse Clinical Trials Network Dissemination Library. (2008). *Healing the historical trauma response* [Video recording of a presentation at the Historical Trauma in Native American Communities Conference, July 1, 2008, University of California San Francisco]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycQJ8ckwYaU>

National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. (2020). *Healing voices: A primer on American Indian and Alaska Native boarding schools in the U.S.* (2nd ed., Vol. 1). <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history>

Smith College School for Social Work. (n.d.). Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart speaks on historical trauma. <https://ssw.smith.edu/about/news-events/dr-maria-yellow-horse-brave-heart-returns-smith-give-rapoport-lecture>

Strickland, C. J., 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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659605281982>

Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full report of the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey* (NCJ 183781). National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/full-report-prevalence-incidence-and-consequences-violence-against-women>

- <sup>1</sup> National Congress of American Indians. (n.d.). *Tribal governance*. <https://ncai.org/policy-issues/tribal-governance>
- <sup>2</sup> Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian boys and men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(Supplement 2), S177–S183. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300511>
- <sup>3</sup> 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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2003.10399988>
- <sup>4</sup> The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. (n.d.). *Education*. Retrieved February 15, 2022, from <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education>
- <sup>5</sup> Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian boys and men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(Supplement 2), S177–S183. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300511>
- <sup>6</sup> Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian boys and men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(Supplement 2), S177–S183. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300511>
- <sup>7</sup> 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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913>

Photos are for illustrative purposes only. Any person depicted in a photo is a model.

## Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)

Toll-free: 1–800–308–3515

Email: [dtac@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:dtac@samhsa.hhs.gov)

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA Disaster Mobile App

Website: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/samhsa-disaster>

SAMHSA Tribal Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Center

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac>

American Indian and Alaska Native Culture Card

Website: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native-Culture-Card/sma08-4354>

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll-free talk or text: 1–800–985–5990

Español: Llama o envía un mensaje de texto 1–800–985–5990 presiona “2”.

American Sign Language (ASL): Click on the “ASL Now” button on the website or call 1–800–985–5990 from your videophone.

Website: <https://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text: 988

Chat: [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)

Línea de Prevención del Suicidio y Crisis (español): 988

For TTY users: Use your preferred relay service or dial 711 and then 988.

Website: <https://988lifeline.org>

Website (español): <https://988lifeline.org/help-yourself/en-espanol>

Indian Health Service

Responsible for providing federal health services to members of federally recognized tribes.

Website: <https://www.ihs.gov>

U.S. Department of the Interior

Indian Affairs Tribal Leaders Directory

Website: <https://www.bia.gov/bia/ois/tribal-leaders-directory>

*\*Note: The views, opinions, and content expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).*

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