



Tips for Disaster Responders: CULTURAL AWARENESS WHEN WORKING IN INDIAN COUNTRY POST-DISASTER

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.¹ 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.

Responding to a disaster or traumatic event in Indian Country provides response workers with multifaceted challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to ensure tribal recovery and resilience. Every tribe has unique attributes, values, and resources available that can both heighten their vulnerability to the effects

of disasters and support the development of healthy coping and recovery skills. It is vital that disaster responders make an effort to respect cultural values, understand historical trauma, and emphasize community strengths while supporting response efforts in Indian Country.



It is important to pay attention to how members of the local tribal community refer to disasters and other traumatic events and use the same words and phrases they use. It is also important to remember that each Native American tribe is a sovereign nation with a unique history and political status. This tip sheet can help disaster behavioral health responders like you and your colleagues learn about working with Native Americans before, during, and after a disaster or traumatic event.

Cultural Values

While every tribe, reservation, pueblo, rancheria, and federally recognized Alaska Native village is unique, several general cultural values are shared by large numbers of Native American communities and can benefit both individual and community recovery and resilience:

- Importance is placed on harmony with the environment.²
- Each person is seen as part of a larger system.³
- Elders and other community leaders are respected for their knowledge and wisdom.⁴
- Children are the future and are to be protected and supported.
- Helping others is more important than helping yourself. A community approach to healing is emphasized in most cases.
- Prayer and traditions are important facets of life, are sacred, and must be protected.

Types of Traumatic Events in Indian Country

When responding to a traumatic event, such as a natural or human-caused disaster, in Indian Country, it is important not only to tailor the response efforts to address the event based on resources available to the tribe, but also to understand the impact of historical trauma experienced by Native Americans.⁵ Historical



trauma is the cumulative, multigenerational, collective experience of emotional and psychological injury in communities and their descendants.^{6,7} Among Native Americans, historical trauma may be due to forced relocation and assimilation, removal from homelands, massacres, and abduction and abuse of children at residential boarding schools.^{8,9} This type of trauma can complicate individual and community recovery. However, many tribes have developed historical resilience in response to trauma through the development of reinforced community ties and faith-based practices, which can be influential when supporting recovery from a traumatic event.

Again, keeping in mind that every tribe is different, there are certain types of traumatic events that are likely to occur in Indian Country, including the following:

- A single event (a disaster, vehicular accident, suicide of a loved one)



isolation.¹³ These common reactions can often be managed through local and tribal-specific community engagement efforts led by tribal leaders, elders, or elected tribal officials.

Response Efforts in Indian Country

When working in Indian Country after a traumatic event, it is important to remember that Native

American tribal nations have a long history of being told what they “should” do and that they need to change their ways.¹⁴ Such direction is unwelcome because of past history with some non-Native people who imposed their ways upon the tribe or even betrayed them in significant ways.¹⁵ In the spirit of preparedness, you can offer your best in disaster response and recovery by developing relationships, building partnerships, and getting to know trusted tribal liaisons such as a tribal emergency manager. Remember, you are a guest in a sovereign nation, so by showing respect and working with a tribal liaison, you will increase your professional credibility. Community members place more value on who you are and how you develop relationships than on your degrees or professional qualifications. Connecting as a person is critical to success. Get to know their history—both traumatic and otherwise—so that when a disaster occurs, you are more likely to be seen as a resource and can work effectively with disaster survivors. While you may not always agree with or understand the beliefs and customs of the tribe you are working with, it is critical to be respectful of their choices, culture, and values. You should also work to understand the tribal infrastructure so that during a time of crisis you know what is available and what might be needed.

- Cumulative effects of repeated events (high rates of and exposure to violence, such as domestic violence and community violence)¹⁰
- Youth suicides and multiple suicides¹¹
- Violent deaths (homicide, suicide, unintentional injuries) and accidents
- Multiple experiences of victimization

After a Traumatic Event

After surviving a disaster or traumatic event, people may feel dazed or even numb. They may also feel sad, helpless, or anxious. It is important to make people aware of common emotional reactions to trauma or disaster. It is not unusual for tribal members, or any people who have gone through trauma, to experience bad memories or dreams and trouble sleeping, eating, or paying attention. People may have complex feelings of relief about survival as well as guilt. They may use humor as a coping mechanism. Also, it is not unusual for people to withdraw socially or relapse into alcohol or drug misuse if that was an issue prior to the traumatic event. These are all common and expected reactions to stress among adults and adolescents alike.¹² Communities may also experience collective reactions to stress, such as feelings of hostility, disillusionment, or



Respecting Values and Language

It is important to respect and support the values of the tribe while emphasizing personal and community involvement in disaster recovery. Building a relationship and connection between you and members of the community is a good way to demonstrate respect for traditional values.

Before an event occurs, you may consider developing relationships with community leaders. You may also work on building relationships with individuals whose work focuses on supporting the community with emergency response and preparedness. These individuals may not be elected officials or traditional knowledge keepers. Elected officials and community leaders might be busy with official responses during disasters or crises. Emergency response staff may be more readily available. These departments and positions vary across tribes.

The words and phrases used to describe mental and emotional health differ in tribal communities. It is important to know how your local community refers to these concepts before you meet with the leaders. Keeping in mind that every tribe is different and knowing your community's disaster risks, you may choose to ask leaders some of these questions to help you build a relationship and connection:

- What is the leaders' sense of their community's physical and emotional well-being?¹⁶
- What strengths do community members have that can help them cope with and overcome their problems?
- How have leaders helped community members overcome past trauma?¹⁷
- How are children in the community taught coping and problem-solving skills?

Just after an event occurs, you may wish to ask community leaders if they can talk to residents about the event in a way that shows how it relates to their tribe's traditional teaching stories.

Storytelling can be used as a way to explain why things happen and emphasize the community's capability to respond and recover. It is important to have a respected leader support the community through this process and encourage collective well-being.

Community Healing

Community-based healing programs that emphasize cultural values and unity and are based on a community's available resources can provide participants with feelings of belonging and interdependence. Tribal communities often have experience with community activities, social gatherings, and events that include spirituality and processing of historical significance that could be strength-based and supportive for processing the impact of the current crisis. Also, it is important to note that the community may include the local area or multiple tribes, who should all be part of healing programs.

For instance, talking circles may be one effective way of bringing people together in a quiet, respectful, and safe place where they can share their experiences and learn positive coping skills from each other. If the tribal community engages in an activity, event, or practice that is familiar and engaging to their members, request that a disaster behavioral health responder be allowed to participate or be present. The local leader and disaster behavioral health responder can discuss the issues to bring to the group and how these will be presented to meet community needs and build resilience.

These tips, in combination with getting to know the Native American emergency management and tribal liaisons you plan to work with before a disaster occurs, will help ensure that you help provide a coordinated and effective response to any disaster or traumatic event.



- ¹ National Congress of American Indians. (n.d.). *Tribal governance*. <https://ncai.org/policy-issues/tribal-governance>
- ² Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, S. D. (2008). Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1–2), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926790801982410>
- ³ Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, S. D. (2008). Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1–2), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926790801982410>
- ⁴ Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, S. D. (2008). Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1–2), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926790801982410>
- ⁵ BigFoot, D. S., & Schmidt, S. R. (2010). Honoring children, mending the circle: Cultural adaptation of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for American Indian and Alaska Native children. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(8), 847–856. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20707>
- ⁶ 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>

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- ⁸ The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. (n.d.). *Education*. Retrieved February 15, 2022, from <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education>
- ⁹ 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>
- ¹⁰ Rogers, M., & Giroux, J. (2012). Domestic violence in American Indian communities: Background, culture, and legal issues. In J. R. Joe and F. C. Gachupin (Eds.), *Health and social issues of Native American women* (pp. 53–168). ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- ¹¹ BigFoot, D. (n.d.). Suicide and other trauma within Native American communities. *The Dialogue*, 15–18.
- ¹² Deters, P. B., Novins, D. K., Fickenscher, A., & Beals, J. (2006). Trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder symptomatology: Patterns among American Indian adolescents in substance abuse treatment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(3), 335–345. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.76.3.335>
- ¹³ National Center for PTSD. (n.d.). *Reactions following disaster and mass violence*. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/disaster_reaction_phases.asp
- ¹⁴ Gone, J. P. (2004). Mental health services for Native Americans in the 21st century United States. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1), 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.35.1.10>
- ¹⁵ BigFoot, D. S., & Schmidt, S. R. (2010). Honoring children, mending the circle: Cultural adaptation of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for American Indian and Alaska Native children. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(8), 847–856. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20707>
- ¹⁶ Novins, D. K., King, M., & Stone, L. S. (2004). Developing a plan for measuring outcomes in model systems of care for American Indian and Alaska Native children and youth. *American Indian & Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 11(2), 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.1102.2004.88>
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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

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

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>

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