I am dealing with people who have been disenfranchised & their mental illness originates in the system around them, the environment, the surrounding historical trauma. They are not crazy, they are people responding to trauma in their life.

Native American Community Leader

Historical Trauma; Healing centuries of suffering

Have you ever heard of Historical Trauma? Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding of an individual or generation caused by traumatic experiences or events. Historical trauma can be incurred by any group of people that experience a trauma- for example genocide, enslavement, or ethnic cleansing. Historical trauma is something we need to learn more about because it can affect entire groups of people for generations and it

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needs to be given a proper place at the table when talking about mental health and healing.

Imagine an entire group of people experienced a traumatic event—like a mass genocide for example—and everyone left alive connected to that culture, were traumatized. Adults and children alike could suffer from an array of mental health issues including PTSD. This suffering can be transmitted through generations, and has a lasting impact on the mental health of those communities. Healing wounds on this scale is no small matter.

Native Americans, for example, have for hundreds of years, endured physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide. Historical trauma is real and a part of what is happening with native people today, they are suffering from intergenerational trauma. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a Native American social worker, associate professor and mental health expert says

“A significant proportion of Native people are struggling with health disparities that stem from intergenerational trauma.”

Transgenerational trauma is trauma transferred from the first generation of trauma survivors to the next and future generations of offspring of the survivors via complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms.

Dr. Cornelia Wieman, M.D. FRCPC, Six Nations of Canada says,

“I think you’re dealing with generations of people who have been damaged by colonialism, and the way that we have been treated by the dominant culture makes you feel dispirited. You feel...
Many Native Americans suffer from historical and transgenerational trauma. The horror they suffered, that they still suffer, has left entire communities scarred. We can see the results of this trauma when we look at mental health statistics for Native people:

- Native Americans experience serious psychological distress 1.5 times more than the general population.
- Native Americans experience PTSD more than twice as often as the general population.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Native Americans 10-34 years old.
- Native Americans use and abuse alcohol and other drugs at younger ages, and at higher rates, than all other ethnic groups.

It is because of deep seated historical trauma that cultural variables need to be considered when making a mental health treatment plan. One of the barriers for some seeking treatment for mental health issues is a lack of culturally competent providers. Natives, and other marginalized groups of people who have suffered historical trauma, need to speak up about their experiences. Mental health care providers should learn more about historical and intergenerational trauma and give those who are suffering from it a safe space to talk about their struggles.

So we are left with the question, **how do we heal centuries of suffering?** How do you repair trauma that spans generations? Where do we begin such a monumental task? The first step is recognizing historical/intergenerational trauma is real, that entire
communities can be (and have been) traumatized and that trauma can be passed from one generation to the next.

The next step is to have more discussions with communities who suffer from historical trauma and listen to how they feel their mental health needs can be better met. A great example of this is the UC Davis project called “BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS: CONVERSATIONS WITH NATIVE AMERICANS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND COMMUNITY STRENGTHS”. The purpose of which was to build relationships with communities, conduct research, and work with policy makers to improve the health of underserved groups.

We should welcome greater involvement of diverse communities in mental health conversations, and encourage feedback and ideas. These are the first steps to understanding historical trauma and beginning the journey of healing.
services that transform the lives of children, adults, and families in the communities of SW Washington.

Lives Change Here!