

Historical Trauma

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, PhD, conceptualized historical trauma in the 1980's, as a way to develop stronger understanding of why life for many Native Americans is not fulfilling "the American Dream". This site exists to begin a collaboration of community advocates, allies, teachers, and students of historical trauma towards a stronger understanding of unresolved historical grief.

What is historical trauma? Historical trauma is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma. Native Americans have, for over 500 years, endured physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide from European and American colonialist policy. Contemporary Native American life has adapted, such that, many are healthy and economically self-sufficient. Yet a significant proportion of Native people are not faring as well.

Our purpose is to heal from the historical unresolved grief that many indigenous individuals and communities are struggling with. Historical unresolved grief is the grief that accompanies the trauma. (Brave Heart, 1995,1998, 1999, 2000) The historical trauma response is a constellation of features in reaction to massive group trauma. This response is observed among Lakota and other Native populations, Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants, Japanese American internment camp survivors and descendants. (Brave Heart, 1998, 1999, 2000)

What is Historical Trauma? The collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from a cataclysmic history of genocide.

The effects of historical trauma include: unsettled emotional trauma, depression, high mortality rates, high rates of alcohol abuse, significant problems of child abuse and domestic violence. There are 583 federally recognized tribes, like the ones listed below, where the impact of historical trauma is often most pronounced.

Understanding the experiences of a community is important towards beginning the healing process. Genocide, imprisonment, forced assimilation, and misguided governance has resulted in loss of culture and identity, alcoholism, poverty, and despair. We offer the historical trauma intervention model, which includes four major community intervention components.

First is confronting the historical trauma.

Second is understanding the trauma.

Third is releasing the pain of historical trauma.

Fourth is transcending the trauma.

We offer 3 major hypotheses for the intervention model:

1. Education increases awareness of trauma,
2. Sharing effects of trauma provides relief,
3. Grief resolution through collective mourning/healing creates positive group identity and commitment to community,

Six Phases of Historical Unresolved Grief

1. 1st Contact: life shock, genocide, no time for grief. Colonization Period: introduction of disease and alcohol, traumatic events such as Wounded Knee Massacre.
2. Economic competition: sustenance loss (physical/spiritual).
3. Invasion/War Period: extermination, refugee symptoms.

4. Subjugation/Reservation Period: confined/translocated, forced dependency on oppressor, lack of security.

5. Boarding School Period: destroyed family system, beatings, rape, prohibition of Native language and religion; Lasting Effect: ill-prepared for parenting, identity confusion.

6. Forced Relocation and Termination Period: transfer to urban areas, prohibition of religious freedom, racism and being viewed as second class; loss of governmental system and community.