



Historical Trauma: Definition, Impact, and Hope for Healing

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Three Elements of Historical Trauma

1. A trauma or wounding
2. The trauma is shared by a group of people, rather than individually experienced
3. The trauma spans multiple generations, such that contemporary members of the affected group may experience trauma-related symptoms without having been present for the past traumatizing event(s)

What is Historical Trauma?

- Cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences
- Term was originally used to describe the experience of children of Holocaust survivors
- Has since been used to describe the experience of colonized groups across the world and communities with a history of oppression, victimization, and massive group trauma exposure

Native American Historical Trauma

- Estimated as much as 95% of Native American population wiped out through federal policies of removal, termination, relocation, and assimilation and diseases unfamiliar to the people
- Resulted in generations of traumatic losses of land, language, culture, community bonds
- Traditional spiritual and ceremonial ways of healing were outlawed until 1978
- Left generations of Native people with no mechanism for healing from the historical traumas

Historical Trauma

“These events don’t just target an individual, they target a whole collective community...the trauma is held personally, and can be transmitted over generations. Even family members who do not have a direct experience of the trauma itself can feel the effects generations later”

— Karina Walters, Ph.D.

Impact of Historical Trauma

- Health disparities, substance abuse, and mental illness are all commonly linked to experiences of historical trauma (Michaels, Rousseau, and Yang, 2010)
- “Historical Trauma Response” includes high levels of substance abuse, suicide, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions and unresolved historical grief (Brave Heart, 1998)
- “American Indian holocaust” meets the United Nations definition of genocide

1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

Adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948

Article II: “In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed”

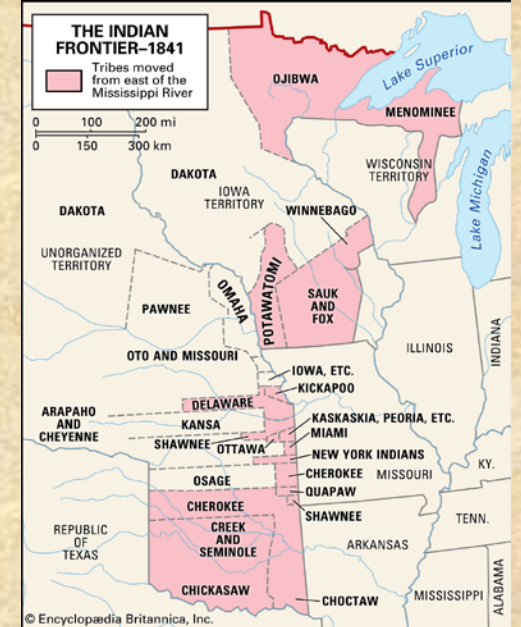
- A mental element – *“with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:”*
- A physical element which includes the following 5 acts:
 1. *Killing members of the group*
 2. *Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*
 3. *Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part*
 4. *Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group*
 5. *Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group*

“Killing members of the group”

Community massacres
(Wounded Knee, 1890)



Forced removals



Deliberate disease exposure

“Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group”

- Indian Relocation Program of 1956
- Boarding School Programs
- Adoption Projects
- Prohibition of cultural and spiritual practices



“Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”

- Native American Boarding Schools
 - By 1887, 200 boarding schools were established with 14,000 Indian children forcibly enrolled
- *“It is this nature in our red brother that is better dead than alive, and when we agree with the oft-repeated sentiment that the only good Indian is a dead one, we mean this characteristic of the Indian. Carlisle's mission is to kill THIS Indian, as we build up the better man.”* -- Richard Henry Pratt

Carlisle Indian School, PA



“Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group”

- Forced sterilization was a procedure done by the Indian Health Service (IHS) physicians on Native Americans in the 1960s and 1970s
- The IHS doctors sterilized Native American women through coercion or without consent using a variety of tactics

TABLE 1

Average Number of Children per Woman by Tribe for 1970 and 1980

TRIBE	1970	1980
Navajo	3.72	2.52
Apache	4.01	1.78
Zuni	3.35	1.90
Sioux (combined)	3.41	1.94
Cherokee (Oklahoma)	2.52	1.68
Ponca/Omaha	2.73	1.51 ¹
Average for all tribes	3.29	1.30

Jean Whitehorse
Film: *AMÁ*



“Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”



- The Indian Adoption Project was a federal program that removed Indian children from 1958 to 1967 with the help of the prestigious Child Welfare League of America
- As many as one third of Indian children were separated from their families between 1941 and 1967, according to a 1976 report by the Association on American Indian Affairs
- During the adoption era almost any issue—from minor to serious—could result in the loss of an Indian child

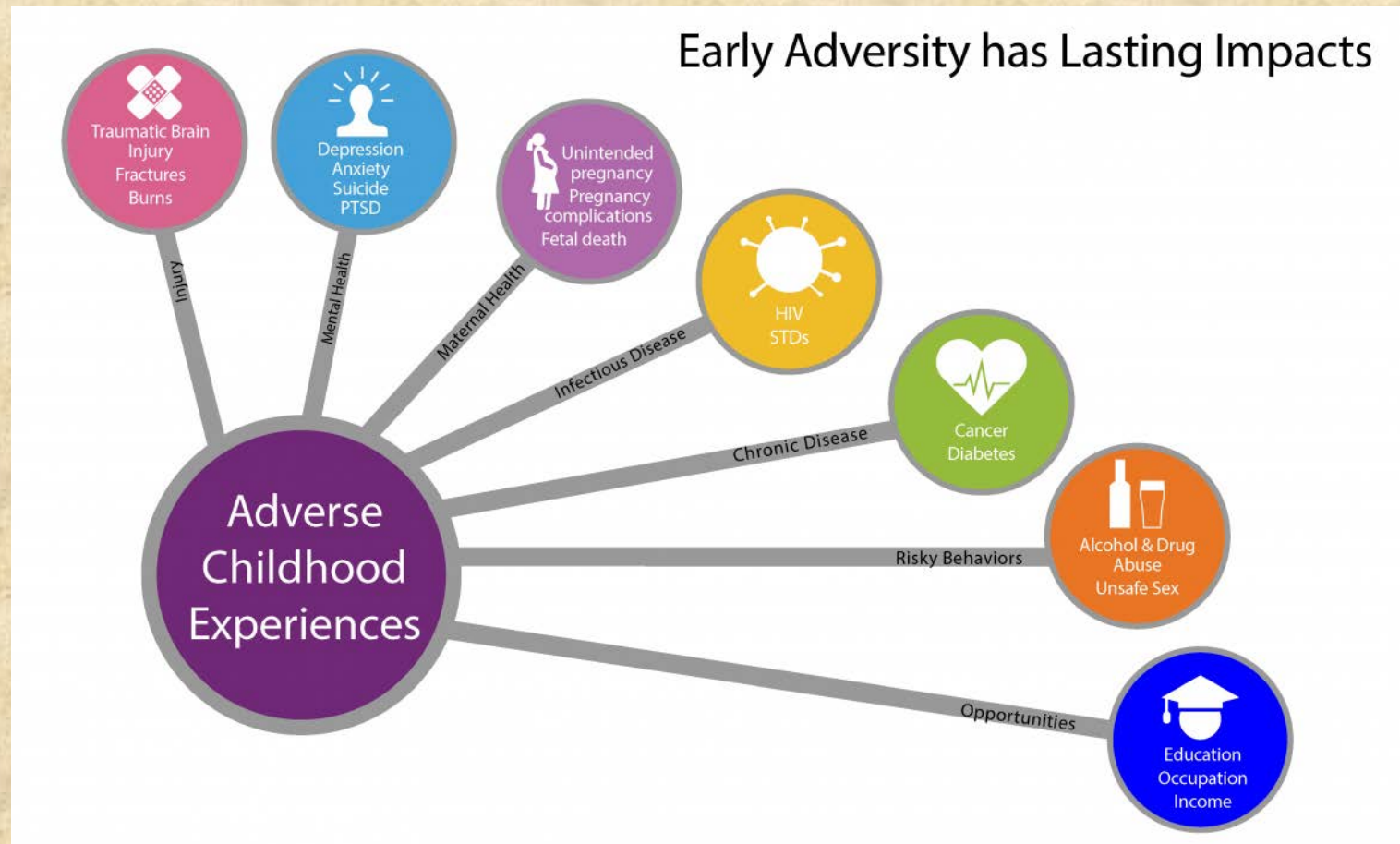
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

U.S. Center for Disease Control & Prevention

- Adverse Childhood Experiences is the term used to describe any abuse, neglect, or other traumatic experience that happens to a person under age 18
- ACEs have been linked to:
 - risky health behaviors,
 - chronic health conditions,
 - low life potential, and
 - early death

As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk of health and mental health issues later in life

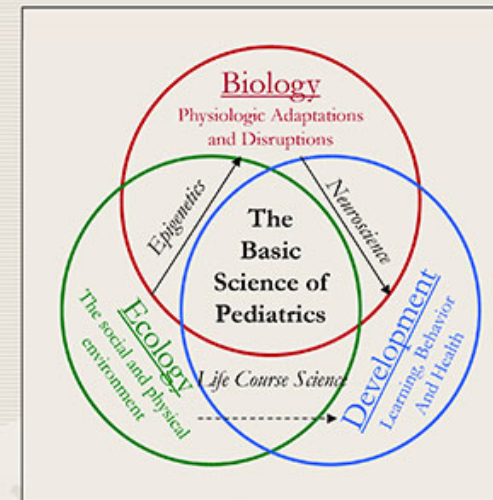
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The “Ecobiodevelopmental Model”

- The field of epigenetics suggests that clues from our physical, social and emotional environment literally alter the way the inherited genetic blueprint is read
- In this way, the early childhood ecology is biologically embedded – altering the way the blueprint is utilized in this generation as well as the next.

Eco-Bio-Developmental Model of Human Health and Disease



Ecology

Becomes **biology**,

And together they drive **development** across the lifespan

Historical Trauma at All Levels

- **Individual Level**

- Many negative health and mental health outcomes

- **Family Level**

- Children try not to trigger painful memories for parents
- Avoid bringing up their own problems
- Loss of traditional parental role models, child-rearing practices
- Internalized messages about appropriateness of raising children in homes

- **Community Level**

- Assaults on tribal sovereignty and traditional practices, weakened social structures
- Losses of language, traditional practices, vision for the future, “way of life”
- The community is “wounded”



Wounded Community

- When the whole community is wounded, it can't function in the ways it was intended
 - All that is felt is the loss
 - People try to fill that loss with other things
 - Traditions are not available to help keep relationships healthy
- The trauma continues to roll forward like a wave over generations
- To stop this forward momentum, some form of social healing is needed
 - where the losses are mourned and replaced by something new and healthy in the community

Resilience

- Historical traumas may have long-lasting effects on individual, family, and community health and mental health
- But we can also understand historical traumas as potential sources of both distress and resilience
- Individual, family and community histories of survival
- Native communities have survived a history of traumatic events, including disease, warfare, colonization, cultural genocide, poverty
 - But there is are equally powerful stories of resistance and resilience

Healing: Connection to Culture to Heal Wounds

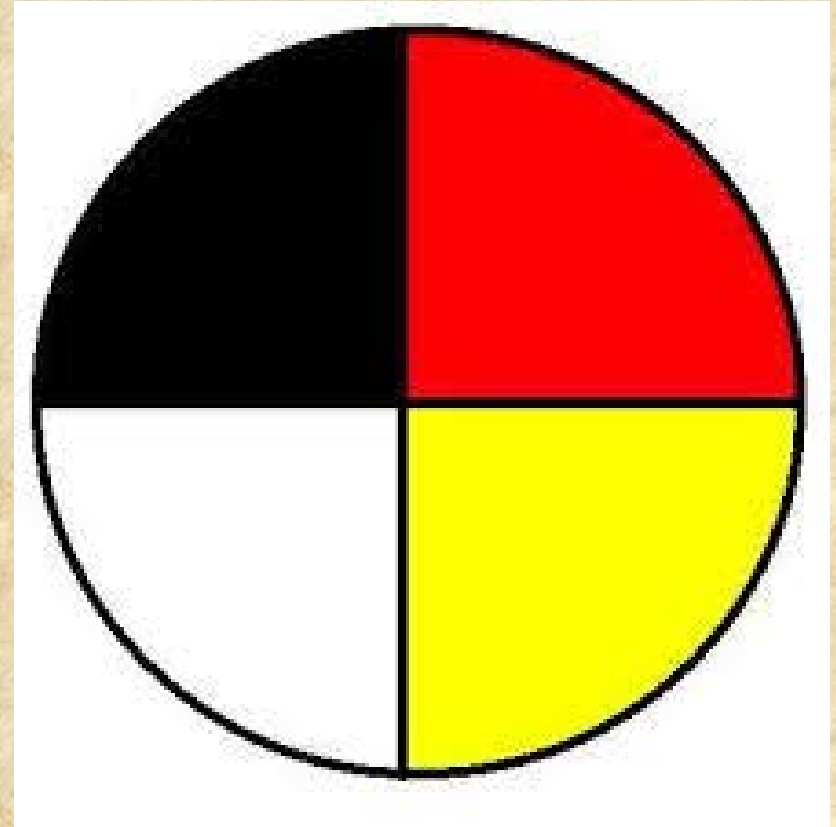


Hope and Healing

- The painful and traumatic experiences that many of us have had and which we have inherited from past generations might mean that we would never have a chance in this life
- But the spirit yearns for growth and connection
 - Can find that connection even when we think we cannot
- Leads us to have the courage to walk through our fears
- Resilience: *culturally learned* values and practices that promote coping mechanisms and adaptive reactions to trauma

Wellness is About Balance

- Wellness involves a balance between the Creator, the natural world, and the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of the self
 - Imbalances in any of these areas may result in individual or communal “disease” or illness
- Healing is a communal process of (re)discovering balance within self and the harmony between self, Creator, and the natural world



Personal Responsibility for Wellness

- Whether we participate in traditional cultural forms of healing or visit a Western provider
- The process of identifying those things we need or seek to change, deciding to ask for help, and humbling oneself to receive healing
- Recognizing we are no more – and no less – than anyone else; we are the people
 - Recognizing the spark of the Creator in ourselves and others
- Giving thanks and giving back for what we receive



Community is at the Center of Wellness

- Individual health cannot be separated from community wellness
 - Emphasis on extended family and community rather than individual
 - Group/community identity
 - Strong cultural identity linked to resilience
 - Healing is a community process
- Value is on community welfare (past and future)
- Responsibility to generations before and after us
- Current relationships with the ancestors guide the present
- Historical continuity provides expanded demonstration of resilience



Connection to the Earth

- Not just a connection to Nature
- Realization that healing is connected to the land and the water as sources of our healing
 - Also why the loss is so devastating
- Knowing that our medicines come from the earth
 - From the same spark of the Creator
 - Our bodies recognizes it
- Our wellness is connected to the wellness of our relatives -- land and water and air



Healing is a Process of Re-connection



The Culture Is the Medicine

- Within the context of any of our indigenous ceremonies, there are multiple lessons which:
 - Might be the focus of Western mental health prevention or intervention activities
 - Provide important teachings about community and for community members of all stages of life
 - Teach us how to deal with loss, conflict, leadership, giving encouragement, and giving thanks
 - Help us to remember who we are ...

“We can call back our spirit to this day and not be stuck in what happened in the past – or what we wish for the future.” - Gene Thin Elk

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