

CULTURE FORWARD



## VI. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE HOLDS THE KEYS TO HEALTH AND HEALING

## SECTION OVERVIEW

- ▶ **Adolescence is a key time to develop positive cultural identities that can protect against suicide.**
- ▶ **Our traditional knowledge, cultural practices and values strengthen resilience.**
- ▶ **Tribal communities successfully incorporating culture-based learning and activities support increased resiliency.**
- ▶ **Programs that promote these factors through emphasizing traditional wisdom in connection to lands and communities are successful at preventing suicide and promoting resilience.**

***“Being grounded in our cultural traditions and who we are as Indigenous people is the key to our wellness and survival. We know this through the resiliency of our ancestors, it’s our obligation to carry this on to the next seven generations.”***

—Native Youth Leader

## INTRODUCTION

What makes our communities so unique is that our ancestral knowledge provides the pathways to health and healing. We carry a sacred understanding of the way our ceremonies, medicines and traditions provide the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of our peoples.

From creation stories, to stories linked to rites of passage, to stories about the lands to stories that teach us about our morals and values, our ancestors handed down blueprints for healthy living from time immemorial to all future generations on Mother Earth. As Western science evolves, scientific evidence is confirming what we always knew—our medicines, ceremonies and traditions are essential to our health and healing as Indigenous peoples. They provide us the knowledge and methods to protect and heal our minds, bodies and spirits in the aftermath of the historical and contemporary traumas that have hurt our communities.

It is worth reviewing in this context that the recent phenomenon of suicide disparity among some of our communities coincides with losses of culture, language and traditional knowledge over the past few generations. Reclaiming, reviving and continuing our traditional practices and cultures actively works against historical trauma and its lasting impacts, including suicide.

## HOW DOES CULTURE HELP PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE?

First, let’s consider again how our Native populations are affected by suicide. Our most severe problem is among youth during the time period when they transition through puberty to young adulthood. Latent in our cultures are ceremonies and teachings that

guide our development through stages of transition from childhood to adulthood. In many communities, both girls and boys experience puberty rite of passage ceremonies that extend their knowledge of sacred practices, connect them to concepts of personal and communal responsibility and demonstrate unique personal, familial and communal relationships—bonds that guide and support them for a lifetime. In every culture, the transition through adolescence is a time for defining one’s identity and value system. For our communities, the accumulated historical traumas, resulting family dysfunction, mental health and substance use struggles and cultural losses compounded by modern day stress and discrimination may leave young people vulnerable. These multiple, complex and sometimes overlapping factors can lead youth down a path of self-harm. We need to help youth feel they have a purpose and an important future ahead of them.

Second, let’s consider our two-spirit relatives who are disproportionately affected by suicide. Two-spirit is a term being reclaimed by many Indigenous peoples to link the appreciation for diverse gender identities to Indigenous cultural value systems that celebrate and honor these community members. Pre-contact, two-spirit peoples were held in high regard for possessing both female and male spirits.

Due to colonization and the punitive worldviews asserted by Christians and other Euro-Americans toward non-heteronormative and non-cisgender individuals, communities’ traditional beliefs about our two-spirit relatives were pushed underground. Today, within some of our own communities, the legacy and enduring beliefs rooted from Christian and colonial views unfortunately include rejection of two-spirit identity, as well as homophobia and transphobia, without conscious recognition about where those views come from. There is a growing movement to nurture and

support cultural protections and safety for two-spirit Native peoples (see special section for resources at the end of this chapter).

Promoting positive youth identity through cultural and other social activities, such as pow wows, sports games, academic groups and youth councils may help prevent suicide. The next piece of this section provides stories from three different communities where engaging culture is the centerpiece of individual, family and community-based suicide prevention and healing.

## STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE HOLDS THE KEYS TO HEALTH AND HEALING

### **Culture Camps are Helping Alaska Native Youth**

In Northwest Alaska, tribal leaders have been running culture camps for youth as a keystone of their suicide prevention efforts since 2010. Approximately 12 to 25 Alaska Native youth at a time attend five-day camps across rural, remote regional sites away from their villages. Youth who are experiencing challenges (e.g., foster care, recent violence in the community or grieving a death by suicide) are given top priority. At the camps, Elders and other presenters teach youth their Indigenous languages and guide them through cultural practices and wellness activities. They also share traditional stories and lead team-building exercises. Youth have free time to swim, canoe, play basketball or pick berries. In the evening, youth may participate in group saunas, beadwork or skin sewing. Camps close with a talking circle. As camps increase in popularity, results from a pilot evaluation are promising. Youth participants experienced improved mood, felt a greater sense of belongingness and endorsed greater capacity to handle life stressors. All of these outcomes have been linked to lower risk for suicide.

## PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF BLUE BAY MENTAL HEALING CENTER CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES

1. The heart of the problem lies within the reservation communities. The solution therefore must come from within our communities. Others may assist, but we, as Native people, must be subjects of the healing process and must direct that process ourselves and in our own way.
2. The future is inseparably linked to the past. We must rediscover the life-preserving, life-enhancing values of our traditional culture. We also must come to understand the debilitating historical process we have undergone as a people. We then must unite in a common vision of what human beings can become and build a new future for our children that is based solidly on the foundational values of our own culture.
3. In order for our people to become competent directors of our own healing and development, an ongoing learning process is required. This learning process systematically will educate our children from the time they are in their mother's womb until they pass out of this world.
4. The well-being of the individual is inseparable from the well-being of the community. Individual healing and the healing of the entire community must go hand in hand.
5. The spiritual and moral dimension must be central to development and come from within our own culture.

## Creating a Community Vision for Protection

In the 1980s, the Confederated Tribes of Salish and Kootenai who reside on the Flathead Reservation in Northwest Montana took a bold step in self-determination: they abolished their Western alcohol program and restructured their mental health programs to reflect local cultural values and principles. What resulted was the founding of the Blue Bay Healing Center—which featured a family counseling and cultural center to guide families through healing via cultural supports. Prior to forming the Blue Bay Healing Center, tribal thought leaders produced cultural principles to form the basis of their operating philosophy. We share these principles as food for thought for developing your own community's vision for a CULTURE FORWARD approach to healing.

## Working Upstream: Protection for Head Start Children and Their Parents

The Fort Peck community is designing an upstream, two-generation solution for suicide prevention called Wa' Kan ye' zah or "Little Holy One." Parents with children between ages 3 to 5 who are entering Head Start are invited to participate. Parents will receive four lessons to address their experiences of stress and trauma and four lessons focused on developing parenting skills. Parents and children will also receive four cultural components designed to increase tribal identity and communal mastery.

## WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- ▶ Form a council of Elders and traditional leaders to plan and participate in cultural activities with youth.
- ▶ Support your youth council to lead a “CULTURE FORWARD” media campaign with powerful messages to promote cultural values that prevent suicide.
- ▶ Rekindle and promote cultural values that embrace the special roles that your two-spirit community members hold within the tribe.
- ▶ Create safe places for our two-spirit relatives to express themselves and include them as valued community members in all aspects of community life.
- ▶ Work with your mental and behavioral health directors and tribal stakeholders to develop principles for your healing efforts that can be widely disseminated through your tribal media outlets.
- ▶ Create culture camps for youth groups, giving priority to those facing current hardships.

## LEARN MORE HERE:

National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). (2009). Ensuring The Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit For Tribal Child Welfare Programs. Retrieved from: <https://vawnet.org/material/ensuring-seventh-generation-youth-suicide-prevention-toolkit-tribal-child-welfare-programs>

National Indian Health Board. (2009). Healthy Indian Country Initiative Promising Prevention Practices Resource Guide. Retrieved from: <https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/healthy-indian-country-initiative-promising-prevention-practices-resource-guide>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Indian Health Service, & National Indian Health Board. (2016). The National

Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/The-National-Tribal-Behavioral-Health-Agenda/PEP16-NTBH-AGENDA>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019). Behavioral Health Services for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Retrieved from: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/tip-61-behavioral-health-services-for-american-indians-and-alaska-natives/sma18-5070>

## SPECIFIC RESOURCES FOR PROTECTING AND SUPPORTING OUR TWO-SPIRIT COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

Hunt, S. (2016). An Introduction To The Health Of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary And Emergent Issues. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Retrieved from: [https://www.familleslgbt.org/documents/pdf/HealthTwoSpirit\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.familleslgbt.org/documents/pdf/HealthTwoSpirit_ENG.pdf)

National Aboriginal Health Organization. (2012). Suicide Prevention And Two-Spirit People. Retrieved from: [ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30544/1/Suicide\\_Prevention\\_2Spirited\\_People\\_Guide\\_2012.pdf](http://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30544/1/Suicide_Prevention_2Spirited_People_Guide_2012.pdf)

NCAI Policy Research Center. (2015). A Spotlight On Two Spirit (Native LGBT) Communities. Retrieved from: [http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/A\\_Spotlight\\_on\\_Native\\_LGBT.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/A_Spotlight_on_Native_LGBT.pdf)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017, September 19). Two Spirit webinars. Retrieved from: <https://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac/webinars/two-spirit>

Western States Center. (2019). Indigenizing Love: A Toolkit For Native Youth Building Inclusion. <http://bit.ly/324mGnG>

