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Speaking the Unspoken
Cultural Trauma

One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity.

We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity. ~ Desmond Tutu

Helpful Definitions

Complex Post Traumatic Disorder

is a psychological injury that results from protracted exposure to prolonged social and/or interpersonal trauma with lack or loss of control, disempowerment, and in the context of either captivity or entrapment, i.e. the lack of a viable escape route for the victim. C-PTSD is distinct from but similar to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Cultural Trauma

- Historical trauma is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma. Historical unresolved grief is the grief that accompanies the trauma (Brave Heart, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000).
- When members of a collectivity share same skin color, sex, gender, orientation feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. A collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounds a person in identity formation
- Loss of identity-tear in the social fabric among a group that has achieved some cohesion

Disenfranchised Grief

- Grief that a person or persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned.
- Results in an intensification of normative emotional reactions such as anger, guilt, sadness, and helplessness.
- Result from unresolved grief, a historical legacy

Cultural Oppression

Domination or oppression of one culture by another in a way that prohibits or restricts the first culture from practicing its customs or traditions.

When one looks at the history of oppression of People of Color in this country, we find that oppression uses recurring methods. Though we are talking historically, all of these methods are still being used in the continuing process of oppression.

- Violence and the Threat of Violence
- Change in Behavior
- Destruction of Culture Division
- Separation, Isolation

Internalized Racial Oppression

Internalized Racist Oppression (IRO) is the internalization by People of Color (POC) of the images, stereotypes, prejudices, and myths promoted by the racist system about POC in this country. Our thoughts and feelings about ourselves, people of our own racial group, or other POC are based on the racist messages we receive from the broader system. For many People of Color in our communities, internalized racist oppression manifests itself as:

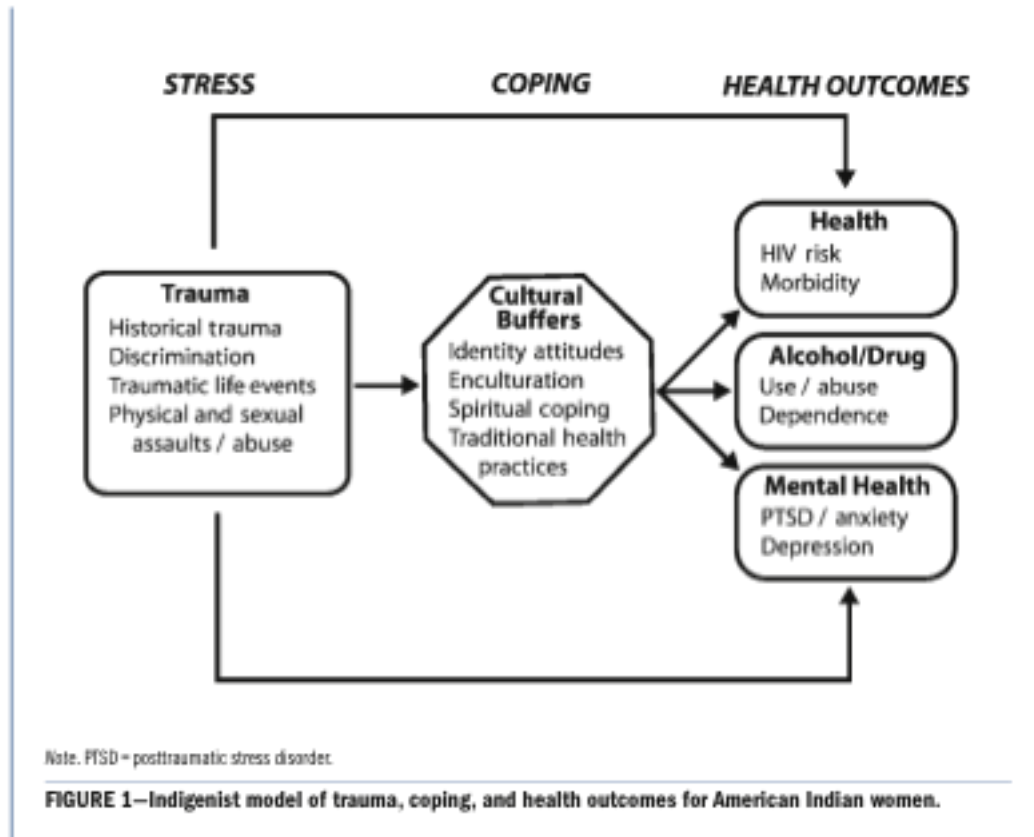
- **Self-Doubt**
- **Inferiority Complex**
- **Self-Hate**

Internalized White Supremacy

- My world view is the universal world view; our standards and norms are universal
- My achievements have to do with me, not with my membership in the white group
- I have a right to be comfortable and if I am not, then someone else is to blame
- I can feel that I personally earned, through work and merit, any/all of my success
- Equate acts of unfairness experienced by white people with systemic racism experienced by people of color
- I have many choices, as I should; everyone else has those same choices
- I am not responsible for what happened before, nor do I have to know anything about it; I have a right to be ignorant I see work on racism as the responsibility of POC and only in interests of POC

Treatment

Indigenist Model for Trauma, Coping, and Health Outcomes in Native American Women



Trauma

- Repeated Exposure to microaggressions - daily ticking away at a person based on an identity characteristic
- Carrying the historical trauma and weight of oppression that the person, their family, and their people experienced.
- Discrimination, Racism, Sexism, Homophobia, Ageism...
- Physical Assaults, Abuse, Soul Wounds

Cultural Buffers

- Identity Characteristics
 - Identity Attitudes - pride in cultural background, being in social groups that reflect a person's cultural background
- Self-Esteem - self-pride, support, mentors
- Coping Skills
 - In indigenous women, coping skills that include spiritual practices - immersion in traditional healing methods
- Enculturation - learning about your own culture, identity - this may mitigate negative effects of stressors or enhance the buffers
- Skills to respond to depression, anxiety, stress
- Adjustment skills to stressful events

Health Outcomes

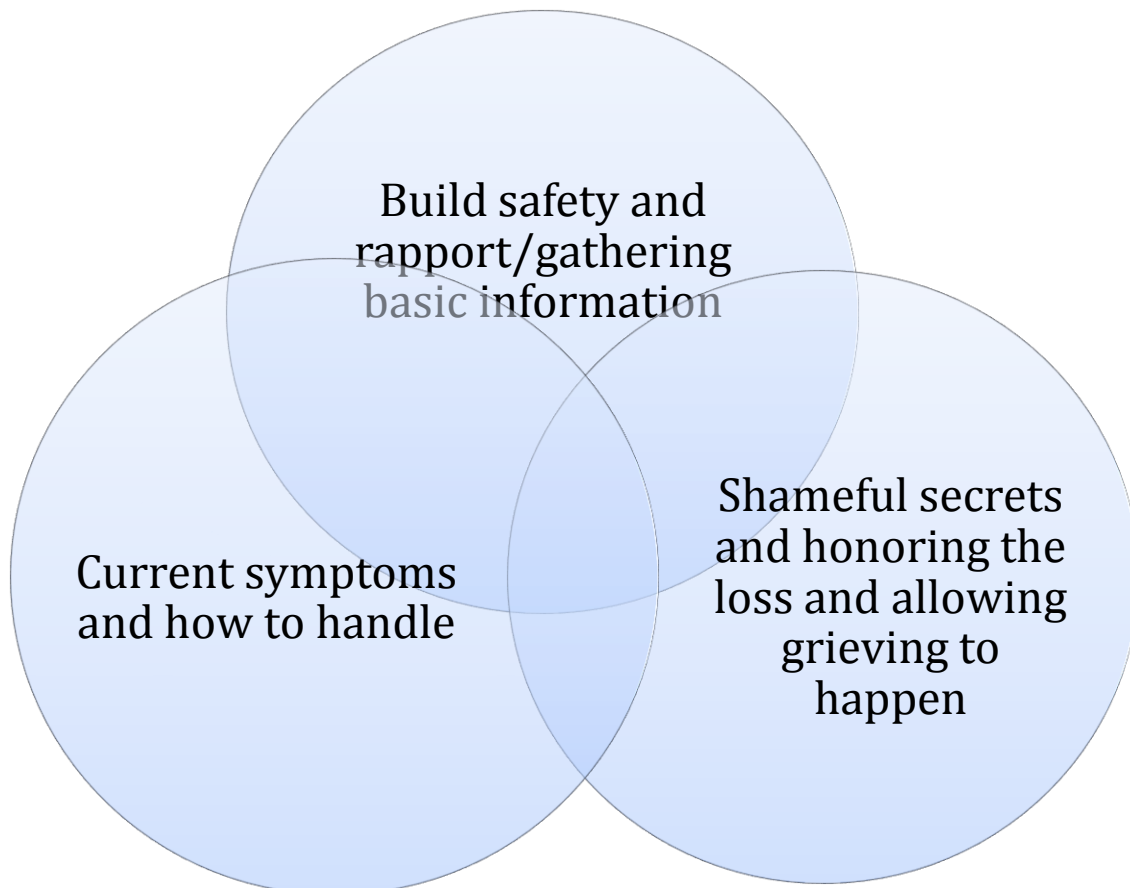
- Mental Health
- PTSD
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Substance Abuse Issues

Three Levels of Healing

Remembrance and mourning involves grieving both actualities and potentials that were lost; reconnection is a time of "I know I have myself" -- a time for seeing the positive changes wrought by the traumas, celebrating the survivor self, and reconnecting/deepening intimacy with others in ways that were not possible before.

Miller sees recovery in three stages, too:

- The outer, middle, and inner circles. The outer circle is a time for building safety and rapport and gathering basic information.
- Middle circle work involves focusing on current symptoms and how to handle them.
- Inner circle work, when trust is deepest, involves the sharing of shameful secrets and resolving the issues behind the trauma.



Building Rapport and Safety/Information Gathering

- In our assessment, ask about family history
- Ask about cultural background; and after building trust, explore how they feel about where they come from
- Ask about rituals and traditions in their family
- Understand the impact of a genogram to gather information

Current symptoms and how to handle

- Use lens of cultural background to understand how clients experience their symptoms, duration, length, and family history
- Ask about their understanding of symptoms that have been present in their family for a long time
 - E.g., Depression - Ask how has it manifested, who has had it, and how do they feel about this?
- Consider how their symptoms relate to oppression, internalized oppression

Shameful secrets, honoring the loss, and allowing grieving to happen

- Allowing for grief to be expressed about how they have been treated as a person of an oppressed group
- Normalize that our culture doesn't support talking about oppression and privilege and its impact on all of us
- Connect the client with resources to discuss their experience, such as a caucus, or peer group that is experiencing similar concerns and symptoms.
 - For survivors of sexual violence, we refer to groups to break the silence and shame about the trauma. Why not create group opportunities to discuss historical trauma?

Resource List

Alexander, Jeffrey; Eyerman, Ron; Giesen, Bernhard; Smelser, Neil & Sztompka, Piotr. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Allan, Paula Gunn. (1990). *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. Ballantine Books

Brave Heart, Maria Yellow Horse, & DeBruyn, Lemyra M. (1998) *The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief, American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research, 8*, pp. 60-82. Journal online at Web site:
<http://www.uchsc.edu/sm/ncaianmhr/jover2.htm>

Evans-Campbell, Teresa. (2008). Historical Trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities: A Multilevel Framework for Exploring Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities *Interpersonal Violence, 23*, pp. 316-338.

Eyerman, Ron. (2002). *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Dismantling Racism Works workbook – please contact Michelle Johnson at michelle.socialworker@gmail.com to use the workbook or visit dismantlingracismworks.org

Jensen, Derrick. (2002). *The Culture of Make Believe*. Context Books.

Thompson, Becky & Harriford, Diane. (2008). *When the Center Is on Fire: Passionate Social Theory for Our Times*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.