

Culturally Competent Substance Abuse Treatment for Native Americans

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Many things differentiate Native American culture from other cultures. First off, approximately 500 nationally recognized tribes compose *Native American culture* and each of them are diverse in that they have tribe-specific beliefs, customs, and languages. There are also a large number of Natives that know nothing of their tribal culture. So, the level of the individual's acculturation has a direct effect on whether they know the tribal language and practice tribal customs (Cliff, 2005).

According to Clay (1992), there are some spiritual beliefs that are common to all tribes: "American Indians have a belief in a Supreme Creator; in this belief system there are lesser beings also; man is three-fold being made up of a body, mind, and spirit; plants and animals, like humans, are part of the spirit world; the spirit world exists side-by-side and intermingles with the physical world; the spirit existed before it came into a physical body and will exist after the body dies; illness affects the mind and spirit as well as the body; wellness is harmony in body, mind, or spirit; unwellness is disharmony in body, mind, or spirit; natural unwellness is caused by the violation of a sacred or tribal taboo; unnatural unwellness is caused by witchcraft; and each of us is responsible for our own

wellness."

Beyond this, Deloria & Lyrtle (1984) explained that Native Americans are "unique in the world and that they represent the only aboriginal peoples still practicing any form of self-government in the midst of a wholly new and modern civilization that has been transported to their lands." Although customs varied greatly from tribe to tribe, Native American women often held positions of authority and had a great deal of power over their lives.

Many Native American tribes have serious and widespread social problems. To exemplify this, the Lakota Sioux's rate of death because of alcoholism is seven times the national average, suicide rates are 3.2 times that of whites, coronary heart disease and hypertension rates are high, and unemployment rates range from 50 to 90%. Beyond this, about 50% of the tribe live below the poverty level (Diller 2007).

Brave Heart & DeBruyn (1998) concluded that these dismal statistics are caused by generations of "historical trauma" and "unresolved grief." This is partly the result of the indiscriminant loss of lives and land caused by the European conquest of America; although, Natives were also subjected to boarding schools that forced assimilation which resulted in most Natives losing touch with many aspects of their culture. Diller (2007) explained that, "The mid-1800s saw the loss of traditional hunting grounds; the spread of smallpox and cholera; the killing, imprisonment, and relocation of hundreds of innocent tribal members... ..and the death of hundreds by starvation and exposure."

The European immigrants often gained territory in underhanded ways. For

example, in 1871 President Grant decided that the United States government would no longer consider Native Americans to be nations with whom treaties would be negotiated. Instead the Native Americans were wards of the state. This set the stage for increased persecution and widespread invasion of the Native American territories (Diller 2007).

Over the last century, alcohol abuse has become a major crisis for Native Americans. Diller (2007), said that "the introduction of widespread alcohol use" was one of a series of recent experiences that have intensified the "cumulative effect" of the Native Americans' "historic past." According to Clay (1992) the Native Americans' high alcoholism rates were due to the federal government having "forced them into a dependency role." Frank (2000) concluded that, "Initially, Native Americans' responses to alcohol were heavily influenced by the example of White frontiersman, who drank immoderately and engaged in otherwise unacceptable behavior while drunk. Whites also deliberately pressed alcohol upon the natives because it was an immensely profitable trade good; in addition, alcohol was used as a tool of 'diplomacy' in official dealings between authorities and natives."

Specific Problems Native Americans Experience During Substance Abuse Treatment

Native Americans often experience problems with traditional substance abuse treatment. They have to overcome substance abuse counselors' cultural stereotypes and generalizations, such as believing that all Indians are the same

and that all Indians are drunks (Cliff, 2005). Native American alcoholism rates are high among all age groups, although many are polysubstance abusers as well (Garrity, 2000).

As previously discussed, there has been a long history of Euro-American abuse and mistreatment of Native Americans. This chronic, historical trauma has caused a buildup through generations of Native Americans with unresolved grief and the resultant self-destructive behaviors (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Because of their history and their own stereotypical beliefs, they may be reluctant to trust Euro-American counselors.

Native Americans also have to overcome institutional racism, in the sense that treatment facilities may have policies that do not coincide with their cultural needs. For instance, if they are members of the Native American Church, they use peyote during their religious ceremonies. Using *what the facility views as a controlled substance*, may go against their treatment plan and the advice of their counselors. This may put the client into a very difficult position; do they follow the recommendation of their substance abuse counselor or do they followed the customs within their tribe?

How to Improve Substance Abuse Treatment Services for Native Americans

According to Cliff (2005), "The first thing that social workers must do before delivery of substance abuse services to a Native American client is to cleanse themselves of any stereotypes that they may have developed from the

media and television." It is important to understand that Native Americans are culturally diverse; many tribes have different beliefs and customs.

Cliff (2005) explained that during assessment, these questions should be asked to assess the identity and acculturation level of each Native American client: "1.) What is your tribal(s) affiliation? 2.) Were you raised on or off the reservation? 3.) Were you raised by your parents, grandparents, extended family member, or someone other than a relative? 4.) Do you speak your tribal language? 5.) Did you, your parents, or grandparents attend a government boarding school? 6.) Were you raised in a traditional way? Assessing a Native client's degree of traditionalism and acculturation will help treatment providers determine the appropriate treatment modality for use during intervention."

Cliff (2005) continued to explain that clients who are highly acculturated can be treated similarly to traditional clients. She said that, "In contrast, Native clients who have a strong connection with their Native identity and culture are more likely to respond better to Nativized substance abuse treatment programs. A Nativized substance abuse treatment program is a standard substance abuse treatment program that has been culturally modified. Treatment typically includes social and coping skills training, cognitive behavioral modification, AA (that has been culturally sensitized), relapse education/prevention, and so forth as well as the use of traditional ceremonies during intervention. Traditional ceremonies include the sweat lodge, talking circles, medicine wheels, and so on..."

Brave Heart & DeBruyn (1998) have outlined a model that will facilitate the resolution of unresolved grief through "an integration of both clinical and

traditional American Indian interventions... ..Our underlying premise in this healing model rests on the importance of extended kin networks which support identity formation, a sense of belonging, recognition of a shared history, and survival of the group. Clinicians must be trained specifically in the concept of historical unresolved grief as well as address their own unresolved grief issues... ..Although the groups are short-term in duration, a mourning process is stimulated."

Brave Heart & DeBruyn (1998) continue to explain that, "The group process involves heightening awareness of historical trauma and stimulates the experience of associated grief through the use of audiovisual materials depicting traumas such as the Wounded Knee Massacre and early boarding school ordeals. The emotional expression of pain is encouraged through small and large group processing and cathartic exercises. In one exercise, participants diagram a lifeline of their traumatic experiences and share these with partners and in small groups. Facilitators trained in historical trauma work with the small groups. The entire four day process involves daily prayer, an *inipi* (Lakota purification ceremony), and concludes with *wasiglaki istamniyanpi wicakcepakintapi* - wiping the tears of the mourners... ..a traditional Lakota grief resolution ceremony. Through this ceremony participants become, in essence, part of an extended family to facilitate continued contact and support. Further, our model stimulates a re-attachment to traditional Native values."

Integrating traditional Native ceremonial and healing customs into a Native client's substance abuse treatment plan is an important aspect of their treatment

and, for clients with a low level of acculturation, it is even more important. A client's membership in the Native American Church can be beneficial in that it can help a client connect with his/her culture and be a part of a group that abstains from alcohol use and promotes family unity. The use of peyote, during the Native American Church meeting has been reported to be an effective treatment for alcoholism. It is not cognitively damaging and it does not cause members to develop flashbacks or Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder (Halpern et. al, 2005).

According to McClusky (1997), "Peyote's use can be traced from central Mexico to the Southern areas of Texas in the 1800s. By the end of the 1800s the ritual use of this cactus had spread to the central parts of the United States and started to be used widely as a pan-Native American religion. Today the Native American Church of North America is the largest pan-Native American religion in North America. Its ceremony is rooted in the native concept of holistic health and harmony with nature. The use of peyote in a structured religious setting, with the guidance of a socially sanctioned healer, has been reported by some authors to be a powerful treatment for alcoholism among Native Americans and a way of bringing balance back into the lives of its participants... The Native American Church, on the other hand, offers a combination of elements that used in conjunction with one another, form the basis of a holistic treatment model that takes the entire individual into account. Peyote is seen as a medicine by the native peoples who use it. They believe that the controlled religious use of this medicine will allow them to see the truth about their lives and that the peyote

spirit is able to give them guidance and direction. If you sit quietly and still the mind the voice of the spirit will come through and give you guidance. If the insights that you receive are not immediately apparent there are elders and spiritual leaders who can interpret such matters... The main elements of the ceremony have been variously described as the master or guide, the ritual group session and the psychotropic drug. Through the use of these elements, heightened susceptibility to suggestion, cathartic expression and managed states of consciousness can be achieved. This in turn leads to the lowering of defense mechanisms and the breaking down of denial systems, which is a major component of any treatment for substance abuse."

Conclusion

Substance abuse counselors should avoid stereotyping Native American clients by educating themselves on the specific tribal customs of their clients. The process of creating a culturally competent treatment plan for a native American client should first assess the client's level of acculturation. If there is a low level of acculturation it is very important to integrate traditional methods of counseling with tribal methods of healing. Some examples of this are talking circles, sweat lodges, and peyote ceremonies within the Native American church. Group therapy meetings may be needed to heal historical trauma and address unresolved grief issues that have resulted from the Native Americans abused past.

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