



# Connection is Prevention

Coping, Compassion, & Connection in Suicide  
Prevention: *An Indigenous Perspective*

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# My Journey to This Work

As an **Agaidikka-Lemhi Shoshone, Bahnite-Bannock, Tsoiguy-Interior Salish** Tribal Nations, my work as an **Indigenous Community-based Therapist** and **Cultural Educator** is rooted in traditional healing, suicide prevention, and holistic well-being.

I am also a **Jingle Dress Dancer, Practicing Ceremonial Lifeways, and NAC Water Woman.**



## Clinical Expertise

### Certified Clinical Trauma Professional (CCTP)

Specialized training in trauma resolution and culturally integrated, evidence-based practices.

### QPR Gatekeeper & Suicide Prevention Advocate

Adept at identifying risk factors and implementing immediate, supportive interventions.

### Accelerated Resolution Therapy & Plant-Based Medicines

Expertise in rapid recovery for PTSD, honoring Indigenous wisdom for holistic health.

### Cultural Competency & Community Engagement

Deep understanding of Indigenous healing modalities and empowering communities through workshops.





# Honoring Our Foundation

We respectfully acknowledge that we are gathering on the ancestral and unceded lands of Shoshone Bannock Tribes. We honor the profound and enduring connection to this land, rooted in thousands of years of stewardship, relationship wisdom, and cultural heritage of the Newaneh.

This acknowledgment is not merely a formality but a commitment to understanding historical context, acknowledging injustices, and fostering genuine relationships built on mutual respect and shared responsibility.

*This land acknowledgment is informed by Indigenous sovereignty and land stewardship and principles of reconciliation and decolonization.*

# Presentation Overview: Connection is Prevention

This presentation outlines a holistic Indigenous approach to mental health and suicide prevention, emphasizing connection as a foundational principle. It integrates traditional wisdom with modern understanding to foster community well-being.

## Foundation

Understanding the impact of historical trauma, epigenetics, and health disparities as a basis for **trauma-informed care**.

## Understanding

Exploring theoretical frameworks alongside rich **Indigenous healing wisdom** and perspectives to strengthen **cultural identity as protection**.

## Solutions

Highlighting effective cultural healing practices, **community resilience** building, and **community-led approaches**, drawing on **Elder knowledge** and **land-based healing**.

## Implementation

Strategies for creating **culturally safe care** and effectively bridging traditional and contemporary worlds in practice.

## Action

Providing resources and a clear call to action for collective efforts in **suicide prevention through connection**.





Isolation and disconnection are significant risk factors for mental health challenges and suicidal ideation. Conversely, strong, meaningful connections serve as vital protective factors, offering support, belonging, and purpose.

***Where psychology identifies the wound of disconnection, Indigenous knowledge holds the medicine of belonging.***

# The Power of Connection

(Chu et al., 2017; Way et al., 2018)



# Theoretical Foundation

## Joiner's Interpersonal Theory (Joiner, 2005)

- **Thwarted Belongingness:**  
Feeling alienated and disconnected from others
- **Perceived Burdensomeness:**  
Believing one is a burden to loved ones
- **Acquired Capability:**  
Psychological adaptation to pain and fear through repeated exposure

## The Sweetgrass Method (Standing Eagle Baez & Baez, 2025)

- **Introspection:** Self-reflection and understanding one's identity through traditional practices
- **Collaboration:** Community, family, and elder support fostering collective healing
- **Continuity:** Strength from cultural connections and ancestral knowledge

(Joiner, 2005; Standing Eagle Baez et al., 2016; Standing Eagle Baez et al., 2022)



# The Crisis & The Calling

**2x**

## Suicide Rates

More than twice the general U.S. population (Gone, 2013), reflecting intergenerational trauma & systemic disparities (Whitbeck et al., 2004)

**1/3**

## Youth at Risk

Young AI/AN adults face highest rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts (Gone, 2013)

**88%**

## Cultural Protection

Cultural connectedness is the single most protective factor against suicide (Garrett & Carroll, 2000)

Every statistic represents a unique story that hinges on one critical factor: the profound presence or devastating absence of genuine connection and belonging.

# Understanding Historical Trauma

For AI/AN Tribal Nations, historical trauma is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations from massive group trauma. It's a living force shaping communities, crucial for understanding health disparities and cultural resilience.

## 1 — Colonization & Displacement

Systematic removal from ancestral lands, disrupting spiritual/cultural connections, and destroying traditional economies/governance.

## 2 — Cultural Suppression

Outlawing Indigenous languages and ceremonies, leading to loss of oral histories and undermining community cohesion.

## 3 — Boarding School Era

Forced separation of children from families, with severe abuse and cultural indoctrination, causing profound psychological scarring.

## 4 — Today - Ongoing Impact & Resilience

Persistent health disparities and epigenetic effects continue, alongside strong community resilience and cultural reclamation efforts.





# Understanding Epigenetics

## Environmental Influence

Life experiences can "turn genes on or off" without altering DNA (Dunn & Sweetman, 2019)

## Trauma Impact

Stress and trauma modify gene expression, impacting cellular development (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009)

## Intergenerational Patterns

Epigenetic changes can be passed down, contributing to vulnerability (Gone, 2013)

## Foundation for Healing

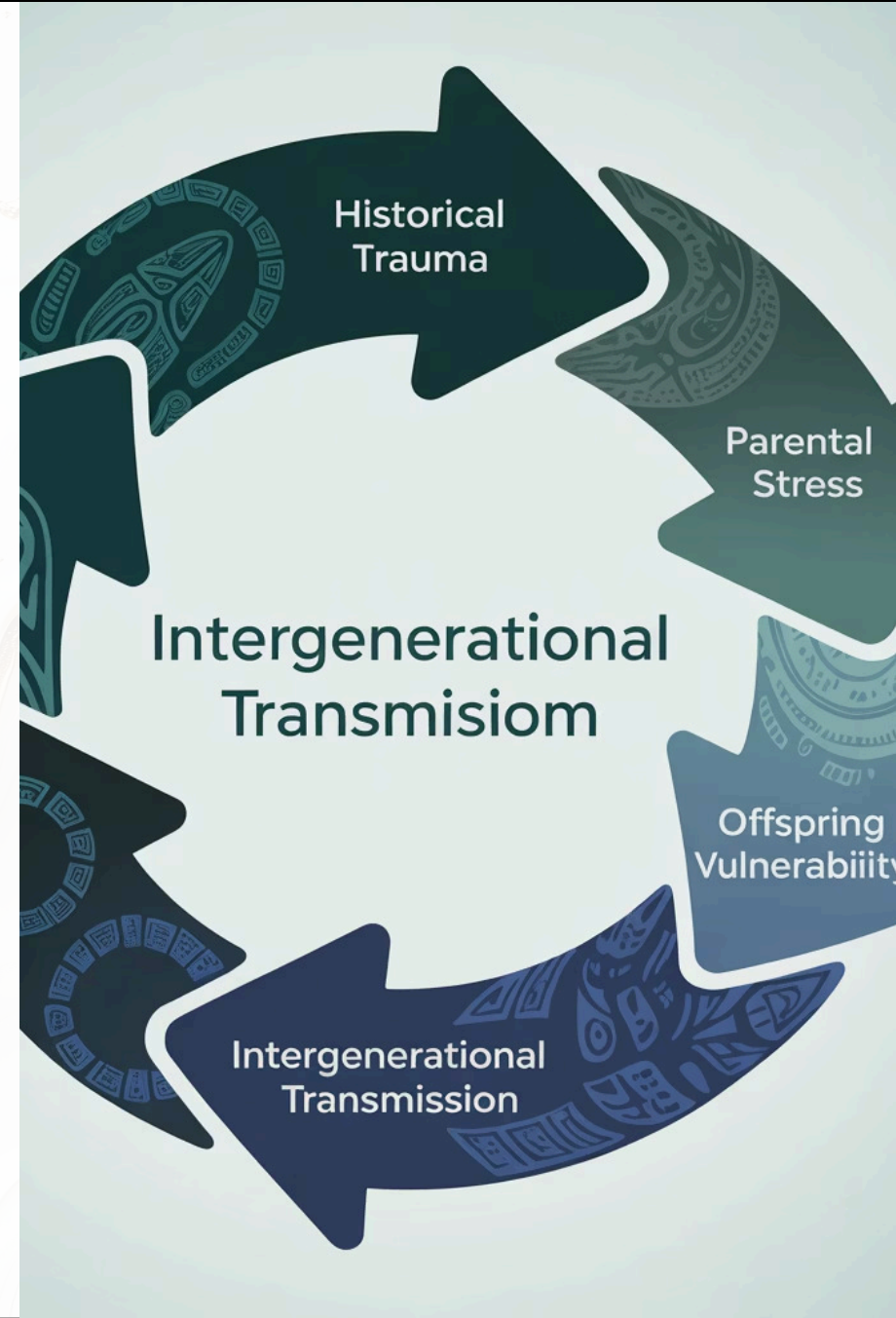
Understanding these mechanisms aids in developing effective interventions (Yehuda & Bierer, 2009)



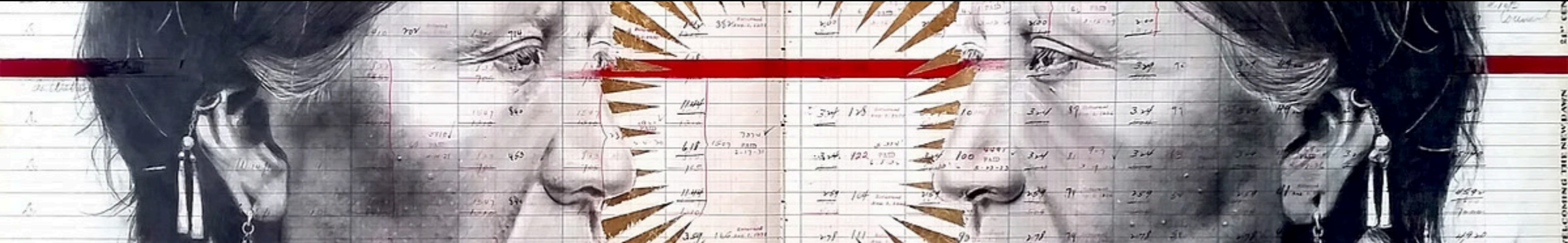
# Historical Trauma & Epigenetic Legacy

Historical trauma within Indigenous communities' manifests across generations, influencing health and well-being (Brave Heart, 2003). Epigenetics offers a scientific lens to understand how these experiences can be biologically transmitted (Keaney et al., 2024; Yehuda et al., 2015).

This understanding underscores the importance of culturally sensitive healing practices and community resilience in mitigating these effects (Gone, 2013).







# Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women

**10x**

## Murder Rate

Native women face murder rates 10 times higher than other ethnicities  
(Center for Disease Control, 2025; National Institute of Justice, 2008)

**84%**

## Lifetime Violence

Over 4 in 5 Indigenous women experience violence in their lifetime  
(Rosay, 2016; Office of Justice Services, 2024)

**96%**

## Non-Native Perpetrators

Vast majority of violence against Native women is committed by non-Native men  
(FBI: Criminal Justice Information Services Division, 2021; National Institute of Justice, 2008)

This ongoing crisis underscores the need for comprehensive, culturally-grounded approaches including trauma-informed care, strengthening tribal jurisdiction, and supporting Indigenous-led community initiatives.

# Indigenous Health Disparities



## Mental Health

Increased vulnerability to stress, depression, anxiety, and higher suicide rates due to altered neurobiological pathways (Nagata et al., 2024; de Schweinitz et al., 2017; Wexler & Gone, 2012).



## Type 2 Diabetes

Epigenetic modifications influence metabolic regulation, increasing predisposition to insulin resistance (Munns et al., 2025).



## Cardiovascular Disease

Changes in gene expression related to inflammation contribute to heart disease disparities (Reading & Wien, 2013).

These examples illustrate that non-Indigenous providers must integrate trauma-informed, culturally sensitive care, recognizing historical trauma's biological impact on health.





# Self-Determination in Healthcare

## Sovereignty in Governance

Indigenous nations assert authority over healthcare policies and delivery

## Control of Resources

Indigenous communities manage their own health funding and resources



## Cultural Integration

Health systems respect and integrate traditional healing practices alongside Western medicine

## Community-Led Solutions

Local communities design and evaluate health programs addressing their unique needs







# Social Justice in Healthcare



## Decolonizing Health Systems

Dismantling colonial structures that perpetuate disparities and undermine Indigenous health



## Cultural Safety & Competency

Integrating Indigenous healing practices, languages, and worldviews into all aspects of care

(Carroll et al., 2022; Horrill et al., 2018; Oré et al., 2025)



## Equitable Resource Allocation

Ensuring fair funding, infrastructure, and service distribution to meet community needs



## Indigenous Self-Governance

Empowering communities to lead and manage their own health and wellness systems



# Ethics of Care

## Beyond "Do No Harm"

1

### Reckoning with Historical Trauma

Acknowledge enduring impacts of historical trauma on Indigenous health (Walters et al., 2011)

2

### Preventing Re-traumatization

Implement trauma-informed practices to avoid inflicting further harm (SAMHSA, 2024)

3

### Active Healing & Justice

Work towards healing & well-being by honoring Indigenous wisdom (Duran & Duran, 1999; Gone, 2014)





# Trauma-Informed Care: Indigenous Principles

## **Cultural Safety & Humility**

Acknowledge systemic biases, historical trauma, and create safe spaces through continuous learning and self-reflection (Papps & Ramsden, 1996).

## **Integrating Indigenous Wisdom**

Value and incorporate traditional healing practices, ceremonies, and knowledge systems as core components of care (Gone, 2014).

## **Community Empowerment**

Support Indigenous communities in leading and having full agency in designing their own healing services (Reading & Wien, 2013).

## **Strengths-Based Approach**

Focus on inherent resilience, cultural strengths, and capacity for healing within Indigenous communities (Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, 2021).





# Bridging Worlds: Integrating Healing



Combining Western mental health approaches with Indigenous healing practices creates a holistic and culturally resonant pathway to well-being, addressing all components of suicide risk while embodying the Sweetgrass Method principles. Further research on integrating Indigenous healing practices and Western mental health approaches supports culturally relevant suicide prevention strategies.

# Implementing Culturally Safe Care

1

## Cultural Competency & Training

Clinicians must learn Indigenous histories and cultures. Use culturally sensitive assessment tools and active listening.

2

## Strengthening Community Partnerships

Engage Indigenous leaders to co-create services. Conduct community-led needs assessments with transparency.

3

## Empowering Indigenous Workforce

Recruit and support Indigenous healthcare professionals. Utilize Indigenous liaisons to bridge cultural gaps.





# Resilience & Growth

## Inherent Resilience

Deep-rooted strength and adaptability enabling communities to persist and thrive

## Traditional Healing

Ceremonies, storytelling, and elder wisdom guide healing and reinforce cultural identity

## Community & Kinship

Strong social bonds and collective support systems vital for well-being

## Post-Traumatic Growth

Moving beyond survival to foster revitalized cultural practices and renewed purpose

(Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, 2021)





# Cultural Identity: A Protective Shield

## Cultural Continuity

Preservation of language & traditions strengthens well-being.

## Sense of Belonging

Strong community ties foster robust support systems.

## Spiritual Connection

Ties to land & spiritual practices provide grounding and purpose.

## Self-Esteem & Purpose

Pride in heritage empowers individuals, affirming worth.

**Cultural identity serves as a crucial protective factor, enhancing individual and community resilience and overall well-being.**





# Community-Led Healing

## Local Ownership & Leadership

Community-led initiatives foster self-determination, creating valued roles and purpose, reducing perceived burdensomeness.

## Peer-Led Support Networks

Individuals with lived experience offer invaluable mentorship and connection, countering thwarted belongingness.

## Cultural & Spiritual Integration

Incorporating traditional practices strengthens community bonds and enhances self-determination.

## Holistic Well-being Focus

Addressing mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health through comprehensive approaches.

(Gone, 2013; Grayshield et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2022; Indigenous Determinants of Health, 2025)

# Coping Skills: A Holistic Approach



## Emotional Coping

Manages feelings through cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and traditional prayer. Addresses thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2005).



## Physiological Coping

Addresses body's stress response via movement, sleep hygiene, and traditional foods. Manages acquired capability (Joiner, 2005).



## Social & Spiritual Coping

Leverages community connection, storytelling, and ceremonies. Counters perceived burdensomeness (Joiner, 2005).



## Crisis Prevention

Proactive measures including safety planning, professional support, and Elder guidance (Gone, 2009). Supports overall resilience.



# Elders & Knowledge Keepers



(McKenzie, 2022 (Mohatt & Eagle Elk, 2002; Oré et al., 2025; Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, 2021)

## Cultural Wisdom

Transmit ancestral knowledge.

## Spiritual Guidance

Connect to spiritual pathways.

## Mentorship & Support

Offer counsel and connections.

## Community Harmony

Promote collective well-being.



# Storytelling & Oral Tradition

## Transmitting Wisdom

Elders impart ancient teachings, cultural values, and life lessons, guiding ethical living.

## Fostering Healing

Narratives offer comfort, spiritual guidance, and help process trauma.

## Affirming Identity

Stories connect individuals to heritage, language, and ancestral lands.

## Building Community

Shared narratives create collective memory and reinforce social bonds.

These living traditions reinforce cultural resilience and provide profound pathways for holistic healing, connecting past, present, and future.

(Indigenous Determinants of Health, 2025)



# Protective Factors: Foundation of Resilience

## Social Support

Strong community and kinship networks provide emotional support, facilitating collective healing and belonging.

## Biological Resilience

Neuroplasticity aids trauma recovery. Culturally relevant healing impacts brain chemistry positively.

## Environmental Safety

Access to comprehensive healthcare and culturally safe environments reduces chronic stress and enables healing.

## Cultural Identity

Strong connection to traditional practices, language, and spiritual teachings provides framework for understanding and resilience.

(Indigenous Determinants of Health, 2025; Hunter et al., 2022; McIvor et al., 2013)



# Cultural Practices as Interventions

## Mindfulness & Creative Expression

Beadwork, carving, and basket weaving act as active meditation, grounding individuals and providing safe channels for emotional processing.

## Community Connection

Communal ceremonies, round dances, and storytelling circles rebuild community bonds, countering thwarted belongingness.

## Trauma Recovery

Traditional practices provide meaningful roles and purpose, countering perceived burdensomeness while offering structured healing.





# Land-Based Healing

## Nature as Medicine

Recognizes profound connection between human wellbeing and natural environment. Healing through direct engagement with forests, rivers, mountains, and sacred sites (Gone, 2014; Schultz et al., 2016).

## Seasonal Practices

- **Spring:** Renewal and purification
- **Summer:** Community building and gathering
- **Fall:** Gratitude and preparation
- **Winter:** Reflection and inner strength



Land-based healing offers a profound path to restoring balance, addressing thwarted belongingness through connection to ancestral lands and countering perceived burdensomeness through traditional stewardship roles (Gone, 2013; Joiner, 2005)





# Language as Healing Medicine



## Identity Restoration

Reconnecting with ancestral languages reinforces cultural identity, strengthening self-worth and belonging within community (Hunter et al., 2022).



## Cognitive Benefits

Language learning strengthens neural pathways, providing valued roles as language keepers and instilling purpose (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020).



## Intergenerational Wisdom

Traditional languages carry ancestral wisdom and healing practices, bridging elders and youth (Chiblow & Meighan, 2021).

The revitalization of Indigenous languages has been shown to foster significant improvements in community well-being, cultural identity, and mental health outcomes, particularly in addressing historical trauma.



# The Power of Ceremony



## Sweat Lodge Healing

Purification and renewal ceremony, fostering spiritual cleansing and connection to ancestors and Earth.



## Talking Circles

Structured space for communication and healing, building safety, trust, and collective healing through shared experience.



## Smudging

Sacred purification ritual using smoke from sage, cedar, and sweetgrass, cleansing mind, body, spirit, and spaces.



Healing isn't about creating new connections, but remembering the inherent bonds of identity, land, and community that have always been there (Dumont (Elder) & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014; Duran & Ivey, 2019).

# Cultural Humility: Beyond Competence

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## LEARN: Foundations

Understand how historical trauma (Brave Heart, 2003; Gone, 2009) contributes to perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2005). Educate yourself on Indigenous worldviews.

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## LISTEN: Lived Experience

Actively listen to narratives revealing isolation or burden feelings (Joiner, 2005). Seek guidance from Indigenous clients and knowledge holders.

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## ACT: Responsive Practice

Implement interventions addressing perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2005). Collaborate to integrate traditional healing practices (Gone, 2009).



# Interactive Case Study: Maria's Journey

Maria, a 19-year-old Shoshone Bannock youth, has a history of suicide attempt. She reports feeling like a "burden to her family" and believes she "doesn't fit in anywhere". Maria also feels disconnected from her cultural roots, her aunt has been missing since not returning home from work more than a year ago. Maria expresses that "no one cares what happens to us, the other kids said we should've all been dead by now anyway" when talking about this concern. (Joiner, 2005; Gone et al., 2019).

## Discussion Question:

Considering Maria's background and feelings, how would you, using a culturally responsive approach, engage with her to address her feelings?



# Reframing Safety Planning: From Western Templates to Indigenous Wellness Plans



## Traditional Western Approach

- Generic worksheets & standardized templates
- Lack cultural relevance; Western-centric focus
- Impersonal and can alienate clients
- Hinders therapeutic alliance



## Indigenous Cultural Wellness Plans

- Co-created with culturally rooted strategies
- Prioritize indigenous knowledge and practices
- Integrate community connections, elders, traditional healing
- Focus on protective factors & innate resilience
- Incorporate land-based interventions & ceremonial support

This reframing matters because it:

- Honors cultural identity and worldview
- Builds on existing community strengths and resources
- Integrates traditional and contemporary healing approaches
- Creates culturally safe and affirming therapeutic relationships



# Guidance for Clinicians

- **Respect Cultural Protocols**

Understand local Indigenous protocols for approaching Elders. Ask permission, offer tobacco or gifts, respect their time.

- **Integrate Knowledge in Treatment**

Collaborate with Elders to weave cultural and spiritual guidance into treatment plans, enhancing holistic care.

- **Develop Referral Strategies**

Establish relationships with local Indigenous organizations to identify appropriate Elders for referrals.

- **Acknowledge & Honor Expertise**

Recognize Elders as experts in Indigenous knowledge and healing practices. Compensate them fairly for their contributions.

(Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, 2021)

# Building a Path Forward

## Cultural Relevance

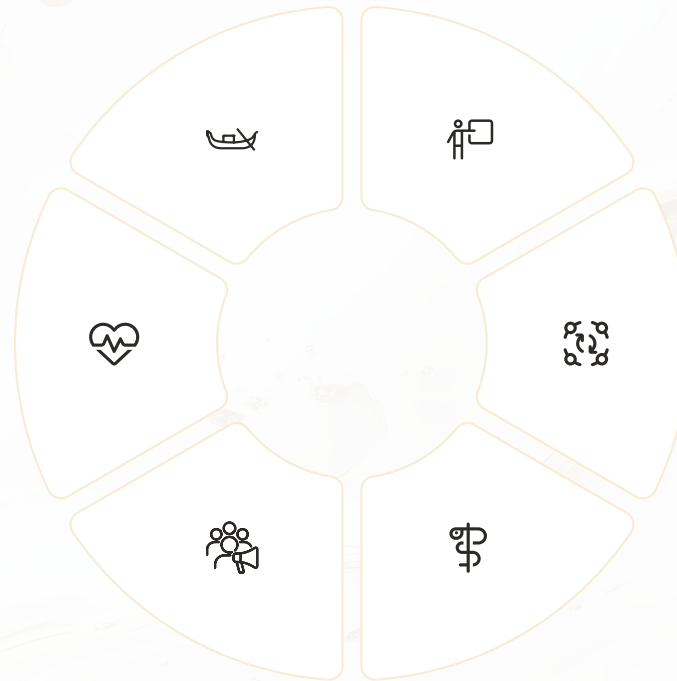
Aligned with Indigenous worldviews and traditions (Cultural Identity Studies, 2022).

## Intergenerational Healing

Addressing the impact on family bonds and cycles of historical trauma (Trauma-Informed Healing Practices, 2022).

## Community Empowerment

Increased self-determination and collective capacity in addressing health disparities (Self-Determination & Health Outcomes, 2021).



## Cultural Preservation

Upholding Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and arts as vital for well-being (Native Cultural Continuity, 2021).

## Community Engagement

Active participation in program design and delivery, reflecting community-led healing principles (Indigenous Participatory Research, 2020).

## Holistic Well-being

Mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health, integral to Indigenous health paradigms (Holistic Health Frameworks, 2023).



# Essential Resources

## 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

24/7 confidential support with links to specialized training for Native American/Alaska Native callers through the SAMHSA Website.

## Zero Suicide in Indian Country

Comprehensive frameworks and tools for Indigenous communities with culturally relevant practices (Indian Health Service Website for Best Practices).

## Tribal Community Health Systems

Frontline workers like CHR's, Peer Support Recovery Specialists, and Behavioral Health Aides are bridging tribal health systems, community, and traditional healing.

## Idaho Crisis & Suicide Hotline

Localized, culturally sensitive 24/7 support for Idaho residents and Zero Suicide Collective of Southeast Idaho.



## Call to Action: Be the Bridge

### Support Indigenous-Led Solutions

Advocate for sustainable resources funding Indigenous health initiatives and culturally relevant services (Browne et al., 2016).

### Challenge Colonial Narratives

Recognize and honor Indigenous contributions to holistic health, decolonizing curricula and clinical practices (Linklater, 2020).

### Build Authentic Partnerships

Engage as genuine allies based on respect, reciprocity, and humility, honoring Indigenous sovereignty (Oré et al., 2025).

**Our healing is found in our remembering. Connection is prevention, and culture is the conduit through which coping skills are built, compassion is transmitted, and safety is planned (Brave Heart et al., 2011).**

**Oose - Thank you** for your vital work and dedication to fostering healing and resilience. Together, as compassionate architects of connection, we weave traditional Indigenous wisdom with modern practices to create holistic well-being.





## Reference & Resource List:

### Connection is Prevention 2025 by Willow Abrahamson



#### LINK & QR CODE FOR:

This resource list explores the intersection of Indigenous healing practices, mental health interventions, and culturally responsive approaches to wellness. Drawing from over 150 scholarly sources, this collection examines historical trauma, traditional healing methods, and the critical importance of cultural identity in Indigenous communities' journey toward healing and resilience.

[Willow Abrahamson Connection is Prevention 9.19.25 Resource List.docx](#)

Click here

<https://www.mybib.com/b/7P0eD0>


# Willow Abrahamson 2025 Resource Guide



## RESOURCE GUIDE:

How to use Willow Abrahamson

Indigenous Healing and Mental Health: A Research Bibliography

 Guide Willow Abrahamson 2025 Indigenous Healing and Mental Health Research Bibli...

[Click here](#)



This bibliography guide explores the intersection of Indigenous healing practices, mental health interventions, and culturally responsive approaches to wellness. Drawing from over 150 scholarly sources, this collection examines historical trauma, traditional healing methods, and the critical importance of cultural identity in Indigenous communities' journey toward healing and resilience.



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