National American Indian & Alaska Native
PTTC Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Using a Strength-Based Approach to Enhance the Quality of Prevention Programs in Native American Communities

Strength-Based vs Deficit-Based Concepts: A Comparison

This table provides examples of concepts and language to make the shift from deficit to strength in prevention efforts.

Strength-based	Deficit-based	Strength-based	Deficit-based
At-Potential	At-Risk	Avoids imposition	Dominant knowledge
Strengths	Problems	Validates people's experience	Diagnoses based on norms
Engage	Intervene	People's context is primary	Professionals' context is primary
Persistent	Resistant	Identifies and builds on strengths	Minimizes people's strengths
Understand	Diagnose	Community-centered	Mandate-focused
Opportunity	Crisis	Professionals adapt to community	Community expected to adapt
Celebrate (i.e., successes)	Punish (i.e., non-compliance)	Meet stakeholder in their environment	Stakeholder always goes to professionals
Time-in	Time-out	Flexible	Rigid
Adapt to	Reform	Focus on potential	Focus on problems
Empower	Control	People are inherently social/good	People are inherently selfish/bad
Process-focused	Behavior-focused	People do the best they can	People do as little as possible
Dynamic	Static	Support	Fix
Movement	Epidemic	Stakeholder-determined	Expert-oriented
Unique	Deviant	Inclusive	Exclusive

Table adapted from "A Strengths-Based Perspective" by Wayne Hammond and Rob Zimmerman; resiliency initiatives

What is a Strength-Based vs a Deficit-Based Approach?

Many western approaches to behavioral health programs tend to focus on what is lacking, risk factors, and weaknesses rather than focusing on positive community attributes such as strengths, protective factors, and wellbeing, which are more consistent with traditional American Indian and Alaska Native beliefs, philosophy, and way of life.

A strength-based approach to developing and implementing programs in Native communities focuses on the community's strengths rather than its weaknesses and deficits.

a. This highlights the community's assets, what is working and has worked for them over time and not just what is not working well.

b. It looks at what is helping and not just what is harming.

c. It provides a more holistic picture of what is going on within that community and creates opportunities for using and enhancing these strengths and assets to address the specific and unique challenges faced by Native communities.

A strength-based approach also moves the focus from risk factors to protective factors without ignoring the root cause of the problem. For example, it moves the focus from what is causing substance misuse to what is promoting abstinence, resilience, and wellbeing.

The intention is not to ignore the problem and the gaps or pretend they don't exist, as exclusive emphasis on positive indicators could lead to a denial of real suffering and specific health inequities that demand attention. Rather, the goal is to refocus prevention and treatment programs on identifying the strengths and assets within communities and build on these existing strengths to promote positive outcomes such as healthy behaviors, positive self-image, and a positive identity among AI/AN people.

In contrast, a deficit-based approach focuses on the problems and the perceived weaknesses of individuals or communities , which:

a. Result in a constant negative portrayal of the individuals or communities that reinforces stereotypes;

b. Directly or indirectly assigns blame, and, in some cases, these individual or communities become viewed as "the problem";

c. Can cause individuals and communities to internalize negative beliefs about their identity, leading to psychological distress and/or preventing a willingness to participate in health-promoting behaviors, thus defeating the purpose of building sustainable prevention efforts and programs to heal and work towards reconciliation.

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Some Strengths and Protective Factors in Native American Communities

Sources of Indigenous strength and resilience are multidimensional and instrumental in contributing to individual and collective self-esteem, promoting a strong cultural identity, and ultimately serving as protective factors.

Examples of strengths and protective factors in Native communities to focus on include:

Indigenous Knowledge, Teachings, Values, and Problem-Solving Skills

The UNESCO *Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (LINKS) defines Indigenous knowledge as "the understandings, skills, and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. These unique ways of knowing provide an important foundation for values and locally /culturally appropriate sustainable development."

Native American Indigenous knowledge is resilient, unique, and cumulative from centuries of living in close proximity with nature and the environment. It is holistic and invaluable, passed intergenerationally through language, stories, songs, traditional and spiritual ceremonies, practices for problem solving, sustainability, and meeting the needs of their communities.

Indigenous Family Structures

Indigenous family structures may differ from western family structures in that the former tends to include intergenerational households and extended family systems composed of parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and non-kin who are considered family members (with most Tribes, everyone in the community is considered your relative). This extended family system is thought to encourage the enculturation of Indigenous cultural values such as mutual respect, opposing violence to self and others, and strengthening cultural identity.

Indigenous resilience and wellness are linked to the importance of community, family, and cultural values. Research has shown that positive connections to self, family, and community increases resiliency in Native communities and individuals.

Cultural Connectedness

Cultural Connectedness refers to the "extent to which each Indigenous person is integrated within their native culture." Key categories of cultural connectedness include cultural identity and involvement in spiritual and traditional activities. Research shows that a high degree of cultural connectedness enhances mental wellness and serves as a protective factor against substance misuse.

Indigenous Language Preservation

Language preservation has been integral in passing down Indigenous knowledge and values from elders and older generations, as certain traditional concepts, philosophies, and experiences are culturally distinct — and thus better expressed in the Indigenous language. Oftentimes the appropriate word or way to describe a concept may not be found in the English language or other languages. Additionally, "Native humor," described as the heart of Native American resilience, is a huge part of Native life and has been instrumental in Indigenous storytelling and lifestyle.

Although Indigenous languages have been in decline for decades, several tribes and tribal organizations have developed programs to preserve and revitalize their native languages. Examples include the White Clay Language Immersion School at Aaniiih Nakoda College at Fort Belknap, Montana; the Native Language Nest in Minneapolis, where Dakota and Ojibwe are taught; and Ya Ne Dah Ah School in the village of Chickaloon, Alaska, where children are taught in their Ahtna Athabascan language.

For more information and examples of programs using strength-based approach for prevention programs, check out our center's repository on Native American promising prevention programs.

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Examples Of Strength-Based Practices/Programs

Culturally responsive and appropriate ways of elevating Indigenous knowledge and practices have shown to be effective in addressing behavioral health issues and enhancing the quality of prevention programs in Native communities.

For health promotion and well-being research to be effective, culturally responsive, and appropriate, considerations must be given to historical and cultural context of the community.

Examples can be seen in various promising and knowledge-based prevention programs and strategies, including:

- Indigenous storytelling as a means of passing on and preserving knowledge and information
- Language preservation and cultural revitalization programs
- Traditional and spiritual healing ceremonies as part of substance misuse treatment and prevention programs
- Native talking circles
- Native youth culture camps where traditional and Indigenous values are taught to future generations
- Community-Based Participatory Research and/or Programming
- Equine assisted prevention programs (e.g., Sunka Wakan Assisted Therapy – Activities that Teach Lakota Values)
- Gathering of Native Americans (GONA)/Gathering of Alaska Natives (GOAN)
- National Indian Child Welfare Association's Positive Indian Parenting (PIP)
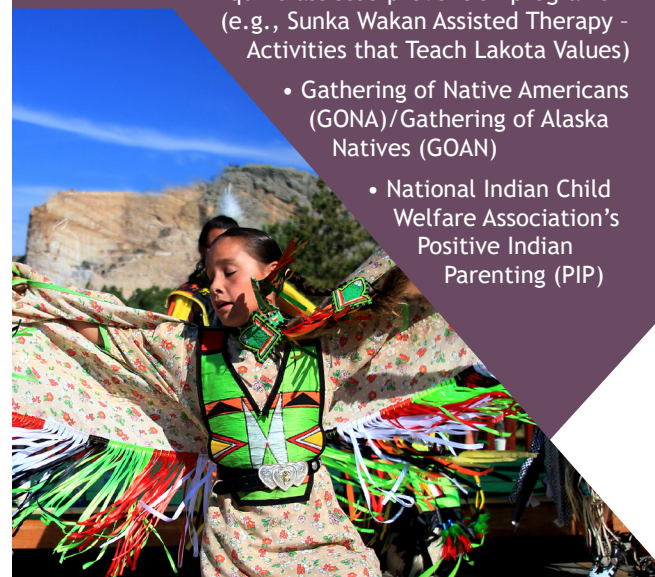
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