

Understanding Historical Trauma Key to Strengthening Community



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We know the way we see and experience the world around us is influenced by many factors – including our culture, how we were raised, and the unique challenges we have overcome along the way. The research around Adverse Childhood Experiences has revealed how adversity and toxic stress impact the developing brain, allowing for even greater insight into behaviors we may not otherwise understand, increased compassion for those individuals and families in our communities enduring hardships, and new notions around the most effective ways we can come together to support those of us most impacted.

An emerging field of research – Epigenetics – adds another layer of awareness to help us better understand how the experiences of previous generations impact us and who we are today.

Understanding the impact of Historical Trauma and Epigenetics from the American Indian perspective is a necessary step toward building more equitable and inclusive communities in Minnesota and beyond. Through expanding our knowledge base around the issues, we have fuller context and a broadened perspective, thus allowing greater insight into the contemporary issues our communities face. By doing so, we can begin to create a shift in our relationships and community culture that best support positive outcomes, resilience, and healing for today's children as well as generations to come.

The Greek prefix *epi-* in Epigenetics implies features that are "on top of" or "in addition to" the traditional genetic basis for inheritance. Epigenetics studies how gene expression, or readability of genes, is modified in response to environmental factors, allowing us to adapt to changing conditions without permanent changes to our DNA itself. The field of research helps us understand how events in a person's lifetime can impact gene expression, and how these changes can then be passed down to subsequent generations as a result.

Traditional indigenous knowledge has often included an understanding of these concepts – how our ancestors and their experiences are connected to us, and how we in turn will impact our descendants far into the future. Some examples of these notions are "blood memory," "soul wounds," and the idea of the Seven Generations teachings— a philosophy that takes into consideration the long term impact of the actions we take today. As much as we can draw strength and feel empowered knowing the fortitude and perseverance of those who have come before us is part of who we are, we also must come to terms with how the challenges, pain, and trauma that are a part of our collective histories may have been transmitted as well.

Historical Trauma is defined as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a Lakota social worker, professor and mental health expert, first defined the concept in the

1980's when working within her own indigenous community, after seeking to understand the disparities in health and social outcomes she was observing. Dr. Brave Heart expanded the lens to study how descendants of slaves, Holocaust survivors, and Japanese internment camp survivors were also impacted by the Historical Trauma their ancestors endured. Connecting the "symptoms" to the "root cause--" in the case of the American Indian experience-- the eras of forced assimilation, removal and relocation, and attempted cultural genocide, opened up a broader perspective from which to understand the issues and to begin exploring what healing may look like.

We know the journey toward transformation in our communities begins with a firm understanding of how adversity and toxic stress are at the root of many of the disparities in health and social outcomes we are seeing today. If we are truly interested in building self-healing communities for all that ensure better and more equitable results, our next steps must include exploring the implications of the underlying historical trauma and intergenerational adversities. When the conceptualizations of epigenetic inheritance, adverse childhood experiences and historical trauma are combined, it helps create a fuller picture of the immense opportunity we have today to come together to understand our combined histories and utilize the knowledge to work collectively toward a brighter future for us all.