

CULTURE FORWARD



V. CONNECTIONS TO OUR LANDS AND
ELDERS ALLOW US TO THRIVE

SECTION OVERVIEW

- ▶ Indigenous ways of knowing and interacting with the world are grounded in relationships to place, land, family and community.
 - ▶ Connections to homelands and our communities inform our sense of identity and purpose.
 - ▶ Elders are vital to transmit cultural knowledge.
 - ▶ Programs that promote these factors through emphasizing traditional wisdom in connection to lands and communities are successful at preventing suicide and promoting resilience.
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INTRODUCTION

Our communities share a deep relationship with environment, land and place. Our peoples have always been stewards of the lands that support and nourish us. The ecosystems we are a part of not only provide physical resources, they engender spiritual connection and meaning.

Regardless of whether we live in rural, urban or reservation areas, we are always on Indigenous lands. For urban communities, adapting and creating a new community together is consistent with our worldviews and social values. No matter where home is, we have roots to that place and collectively share creation and oral histories that tie us to traditional homelands. To that end, our lands and communities are a fundamental source of purpose, wisdom and identity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of our peoples is also described in academic literature. TEK signifies that Native experiences

“We are the land ... that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life ... the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the Earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) ... It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is our self... It is a matter of fact, one known equably from infancy, remembered and honoured at levels of awareness that go beyond consciousness, and that extend long roots into primary levels of mind, language, perception and all the basic aspects of being.”

—Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo)

of the world are spatially oriented and based on a strong connection to place and mindfulness of other individuals, plants and animals that share the spaces we inhabit. Central to this wisdom are concepts of relatedness and connectedness, which are also fundamental pillars of many Indigenous clan systems. These concepts convey the acknowledgment of all beings—people, plants, animals, land, sky, water—as relatives to be honored and respected.

Research shows that learning through interaction with the land is an important pathway to connect Native peoples with spiritual and traditional knowledge and lessons that promote rhythms of living in healthy balance with respect for nature. Cultural teachings, strengths and resilience are derived from our rich historical experiences and interactions with our lands. This robust connection to our lands, ancestors and Elders can be a profoundly powerful source of healing.

Healing exists on a continuum and is intertwined with prevention. Connection to lands and wisdom not only allows us to survive but also to thrive. Engaging with the land and living with the lessons passed down to us through generations in our daily lives keeps us strong, healthy and resilient.

Our cultures are dynamic and constantly evolving, just like our connections to lands and place, our ancestors and the knowledge our Elders share with us. Sustaining these connections conveys resilience and means we can engage the strengths of these connections wherever we may be.

HOW DO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS PROTECT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Academic research supports that connections to lands, community and traditional wisdom prevent Native youth suicide. In a study exploring well-being and healing among Inuit youth, family and cultural practices emerged as crucial ingredients for living a healthy life and preventing suicide. This study noted that it was difficult to fully distinguish the theme of family from the land and cultural activities because these things so often went hand-in-hand. Researchers in Alaska measured “awareness of connectedness” to one’s family, community and environment and showed that higher levels of this awareness strengthened reasons for living.

Research also supports that a sense of belonging to community and interacting with lands can reduce depression and suicidal thoughts. Efforts to promote interconnectedness among peoples, lands and all living things will aid community-based suicide prevention strategies.

“The Elders, and those things that we take for granted, the natural gatherings. Those are prevention... When we walk on the land and hunt and provide, that makes you feel good. That’s spiritual.”

—Grassroots Leader & Elder



Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

STORIES ABOUT HOW OUR CONNECTIONS TO OUR LANDS AND ELDERS ALLOW US TO THRIVE

Using Tribal Traditions to Navigate Youths' Journey Through Life

The Healing of the Canoe project is a collaboration between the Suquamish Tribe, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe and the University of Washington.

The program was developed around the Canoe Journey, an integral cultural practice for Coast Salish tribes, as a guide to life. The canoe is a versatile vessel for travel, ceremonies, transporting food and resources and subsistence activities. The Canoe Journey as a traditional activity and a metaphor for the program's curricula synthesizes historical and contemporary connections to land, ancestral knowledge and Elders.

Curricular modules focus on four domains of a holistically healthy life: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. The lessons are steeped in traditional tribal values, practices and knowledge that impart teachings about the importance of community, managing emotions, solving problems and communicating, among other things. The program is designed for high school students and is adaptable for use in specific tribal communities. The flexible curriculum can be delivered over any desired length of time and is inclusive of LGBTQ/two-spirit peoples.

Providing a Cultural Toolbox for Youth to Thrive

The Qungasvik intervention comes from Southwest Alaska, where a community invited researchers to collaborate to further enhance suicide and substance use prevention efforts. Community based participatory research guided the development of this toolkit, which is grounded in local culture and harnesses Indigenous and

Western wisdom to promote cultural strengths to increase resilience among youth and reduce the risk of suicide and alcohol abuse. The program is designed for youth between ages 12 and 18 and focuses on bolstering protective factors through 36 cultural activities for communities, families and youth.

Qungasvik means toolbox and represents the tools that this intervention package provides youth with to help them thrive through participation and connection with their culture and community. It uses the Qasgiq, a meeting place structure, as a model to facilitate young persons' access to ancestral resilience and knowledge that has allowed Yup'ik people to thrive for centuries. One piece of the toolbox is called, "The Land Provides for Us" and, among other things, includes lessons from the land, subsistence activities and values such as respect, carefulness and awareness.



Photo Credit: Killii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)



Photo Credit: Killiii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

Yappalli: Choctaw Road to Health

Yappalli means “to walk slowly and softly” in the Choctaw language. It is the name of a culturally-grounded program that stems from experiences with Choctaw lands and Indigenous knowledge. Yappalli confronts historical trauma by guiding participants through re-walking a part of the Choctaw Trail of Tears. By revisiting the land where relocation once took place, participants remember and retrace traumatic events in a profound, experiential learning process. Remembering these events by engaging with the land on which they happened allows participants to grapple with personal challenges and embody a positive future.

More than just linking to land, this project is about connecting to specific places tied to significant historical events. Knowledge gleaned through interactions with such spaces is rich in cultural and spiritual teachings that can be harnessed to protect and promote health today. The Yappalli project guided participants across 254 miles of land that their ancestors had walked years before. Along the way participants spent time camping and engaging with lessons related to Choctaw language, history and cultural/health values. This experience stimulated new thoughts and insights into the participants’ understanding of health and their health behaviors, which paved the way for discussion about promoting health in their communities.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- ▶ Work with your community to develop or adapt a strengths-based intervention to promote protective factors through activities and teachings that are relevant to your community's context and history and incorporate connection to land, ancestors and Elders.
- ▶ Engage people across the community to promote greater connection and interaction with Elders to preserve and pass on important cultural knowledge and place-based learning.
- ▶ Collaborate to develop ideas about how to spend meaningful time connecting to lands and histories.



Photo Credit: Killii Yuyan (Nanai/Chinese American)

LEARN MORE HERE:

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