



Indigenous culture as prevention

Melissa Lewis, PhD
Cherokee Nation citizen
Associate Professor
University of Missouri School of Medicine

Main points: Indigenous Health



1. Indigenous health and wellbeing is **holistic** and consists of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural health.
2. **Colonization has degraded the health status** and wellbeing of Indigenous people
3. Indigenous culture and the act of **cultural revitalization** and decolonization relate **to positive health status**
4. **Traditional cultural practices** (e.g., Food, language, cultural activities) are **preventative measures** to physical health and mental health risks

Health is Holistic



Colonization + Mental Health



- Historical Trauma
 - Participation in forced colonial assimilation programs is related to worsened physical and mental health status such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and alcohol/drug abuse.
- Discrimination
 - Relationship between discrimination and mental health among IP in the US, New Zealand, and Australia
 - Each unit of increase in the discrimination measure predicting a two-fold increase in likelihood of depression
- Microaggressions
 - Microaggressions in daily life found a dose-response relationship between stress accumulation and depression among AI/AN adults

Decolonization



- “...to uncover the detrimental effects of European American colonialism and to assist historically colonized groups with preserving and reclaiming their distinctive cultural legacies, strengths, and institutions.”-Wednt & Gone, 2012
- `Decolonization' is a euphemism that only describes the formal handing over of the instruments of government, when in reality it must be a long-term process involving the cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial parameters. –Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Addressing the Root of the Problem



Root of the Problem: Colonization

- **Colonialism (and racism) is a social determinant of health**
(Reading and Wien, 2013)

Solution to Colonization: Our Culture

- **Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices**, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.
(UNDRIP, Article 24)



MH/SU Pathways for IP

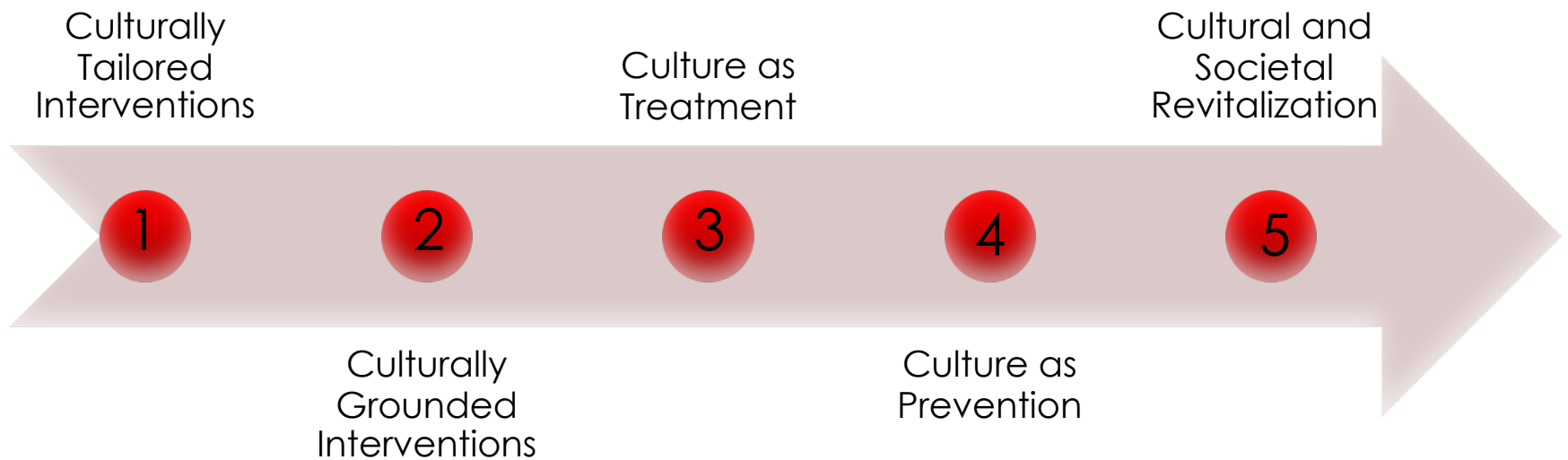
-Colonization
-Historical Trauma
-Interpersonal Trauma

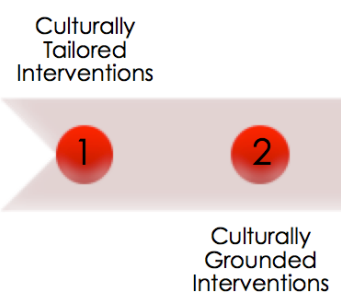
-Disconnected from
traditional cultural lifeways
-Trauma Experience and
Symptomology
-Racism, Discrimination

Distress and/or Mental Health
Illness:
PTSD
Anxiety
Depression
SUD



Decolonizing MH/SUD





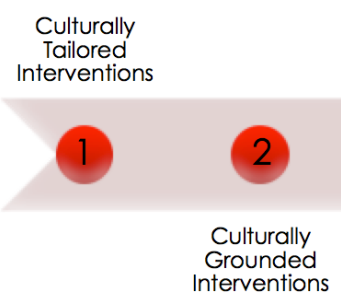
Cultural Tailoring

Culturally Tailored

- Created for non-Native people and tailored at a later date
- Use Western theory and techniques
- Improvements beyond non-tailored alternatives

Culturally Grounded

- Created for Native people
- May use a combination of western and Indigenous theories and techniques
- Improvements beyond non-tailored and only tailored alternatives



Tailoring SUD Treatment

- Native-serving clinic in the Upper Midwest
 - Prayers, Smudging
 - Talking Circle
 - Peer Models
 - Gifting
 - Meals
 - Spirit Plate

■ White Bison- Wellbriety



- Indigenous Motivational Interviewing (Kamila Venner)
- Trauma Informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Delores Bigfoot)



Culture as Treatment

- Blackfeet culture camp: An alternative to residential treatment includes a seasonal cultural immersion camp designed to approximate the day-to-day experiences of pre-reservation ancestors
 - “A (post)colonial return to Indigenous cultural orientations and practices **is sufficient for effecting abstinence and recovery** from substance use disorders for American Indians”
- HULA: Sig reduced SBP compared to control
- Pima Pride: Culture reduced blood glucose more than exercise and diet group

Cultural and Community Connectedness and Health



- Cultural connectedness
 - is an important aspect in Native youth resiliency and is a vital **protective factor**
 - Youth indicating a strong bond among family, community members (e.g., teachers), and elders have shown **greater resilience** and **increased protective** factors compared to youth with less cultural identity
 - **More effective than programs focusing on decreasing negative risk factors for AI youth**



Cherokee Mental Health Concepts

- ᑭᑦᑲᑦ ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Esga Udanta); Depression- Thinking back toward yourself
- ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Unayehisdi); Anxiety- Fear, worry
- ᑭᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ (Udanta Ayouvla); Historical Trauma- Heart (therefore thoughts) is Crippled



Culture as Prevention

- Prevention and/or wellness programs targeted to children, youth, pregnant mothers
- Example: Cherokee Nation RTR program

	T1-T2 Training Period	T1-T3 Return	T1-T4 6 mo f/u
<i>Positive Mental Health</i>	+4.29 [^]	+8.67*	+4.58*
<i>Stress</i>	-0.31	-0.70*	-0.45 [^]
<i>Depression</i>	-1.80 [^]	-2.60*	-3.31*
<i>Anxiety</i>	-1.80*	-2.53*	-1.56
<i>Anger</i>	-0.11 [^]	-0.16*	-0.20*
<i>Microaggressions</i>	-0.14*	-0.20*	-0.29*

Traditional & Cultural Activities



- Native people that identify strongly and positively with their identity and take part in **traditional cultural activities** are more likely to...
 - ✓ have improved academic performance
 - ✓ positive mental health
 - youth
 - adults
 - ✓ reduced substance use
 - youth
 - adults
 - ✓ improved physical health
 - smoking, obesity, diabetes
- Fosters a positive relationship among peers, decreases negative behaviors, and increases a positive bond to their family, community, and tribe



Cultural and Societal Revitalization

- Societal Rules = less fears
- Societal Roles = purpose
- Cultural/Linguistic Knowledge and Practice
- Connection
 - Family
 - Tribe
 - Land

Indigenized healthcare must include...

- Language
- Culture
 - Foodways
- Community, Children & Elders

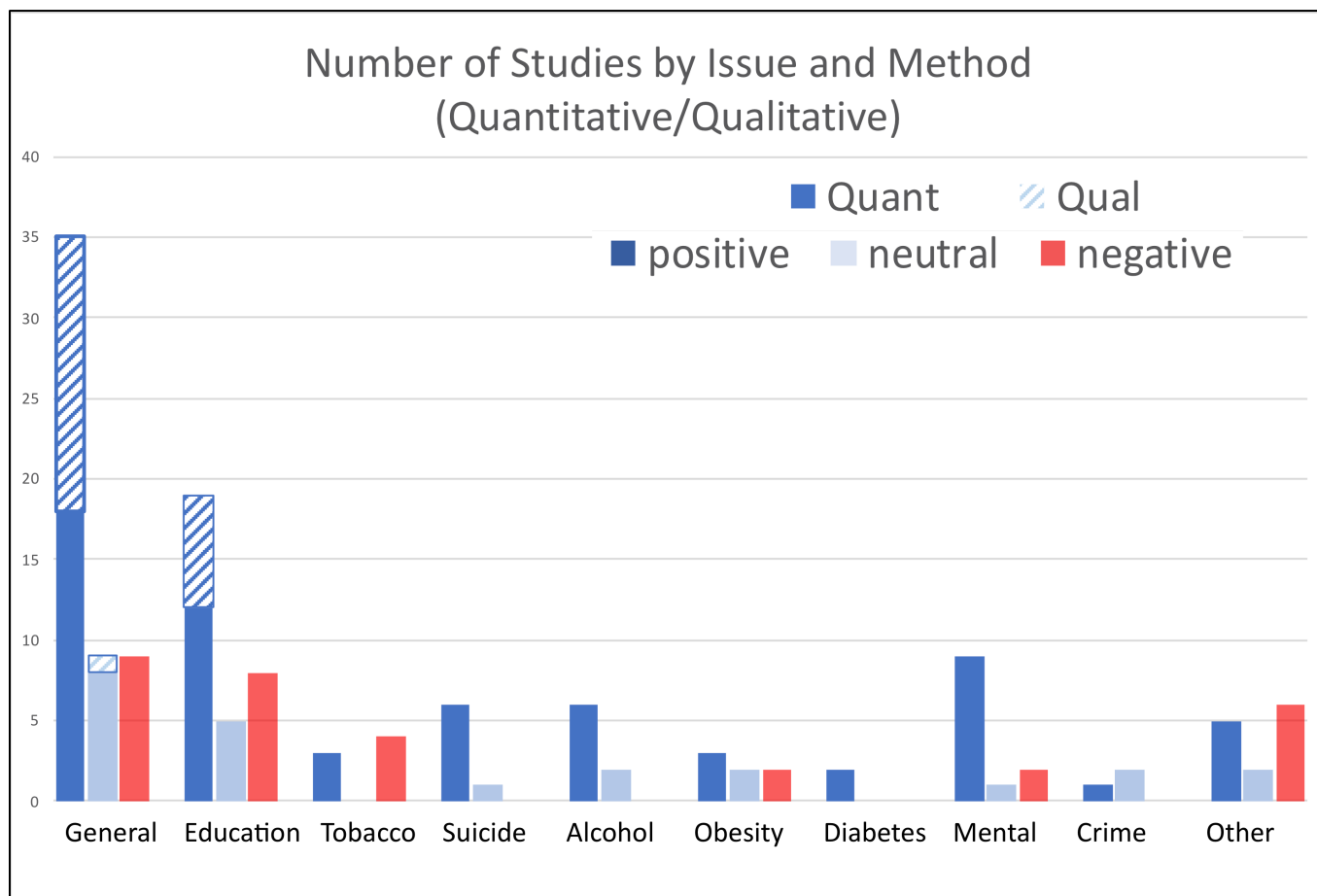
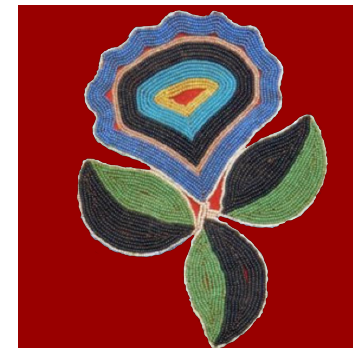


Traditional Language & Health



- Mental:
 - **Canada:** Youth suicide rate for bands in which 50% of the community is conversationally fluent was 1/6th that of less fluent bands.
- Socio-Ecological:
 - **Australia-** Speakers had reduced health risk factors such as excessive alcohol consumption (8% vs. 18% for English monolinguals), illicit drug use (16% vs. 26%), and violence victimization (25% vs. 37%)
 - **Hawaii-** Language immersion high school had 100% graduation rate compared to 70% for standard schools
- Physical:
 - **Southwest & Plains Tribes-** % of smokers in tribes where indigenous languages are widely spoken =14%; where language use is sparse =50%
 - **Hopi-**More speakers classified into “good” wellness category (82.4%) than those who could not speak it (70.1%).
 - **Canadian** -Groups who used language more had significantly lower rates of diabetes even after factoring out socioeconomic factors

Traditional Language & Health



The role of diet in mental health



■ Neurotransmitters

1. Serotonin – I feel happy!
2. Dopamine – I feel joyful and motivated!
3. Norepinephrine – I feel alert and focused!

■ Micronutrients necessary for these neurotransmitters to function properly

1. Vitamin D (95% deficient)
2. Vitamin B complex (10% deficient)
3. Magnesium (52% deficient)
4. Omega 3 (100% deficient)

Pre-contact Cherokee Foods + Mental Health



- Pre-colonial Indigenous diets were rich in these micronutrients:
 - Cherokee Foods:
 - Vitamin D – Mushrooms, Wild Bird Eggs, Trout, **Sunshine**
 - Vitamin B – Corn, Beans, Squash, Hickory Nuts, Ramps/Wild onions, Venison, Wild Boar, Bison, Mushroom, Trout, Sunflower and Pumpkin seeds
 - Magnesium – Corn, Beans, Squash, Hickory Nuts, Sunflower and Pumpkins seeds, Wild Greens
 - Omega 3 – Hickory Nuts, Trout, Sunflower and Pumpkin seeds, Wild Boar, Venison, and Buffalo

Omega 3 [EPA & DHA]

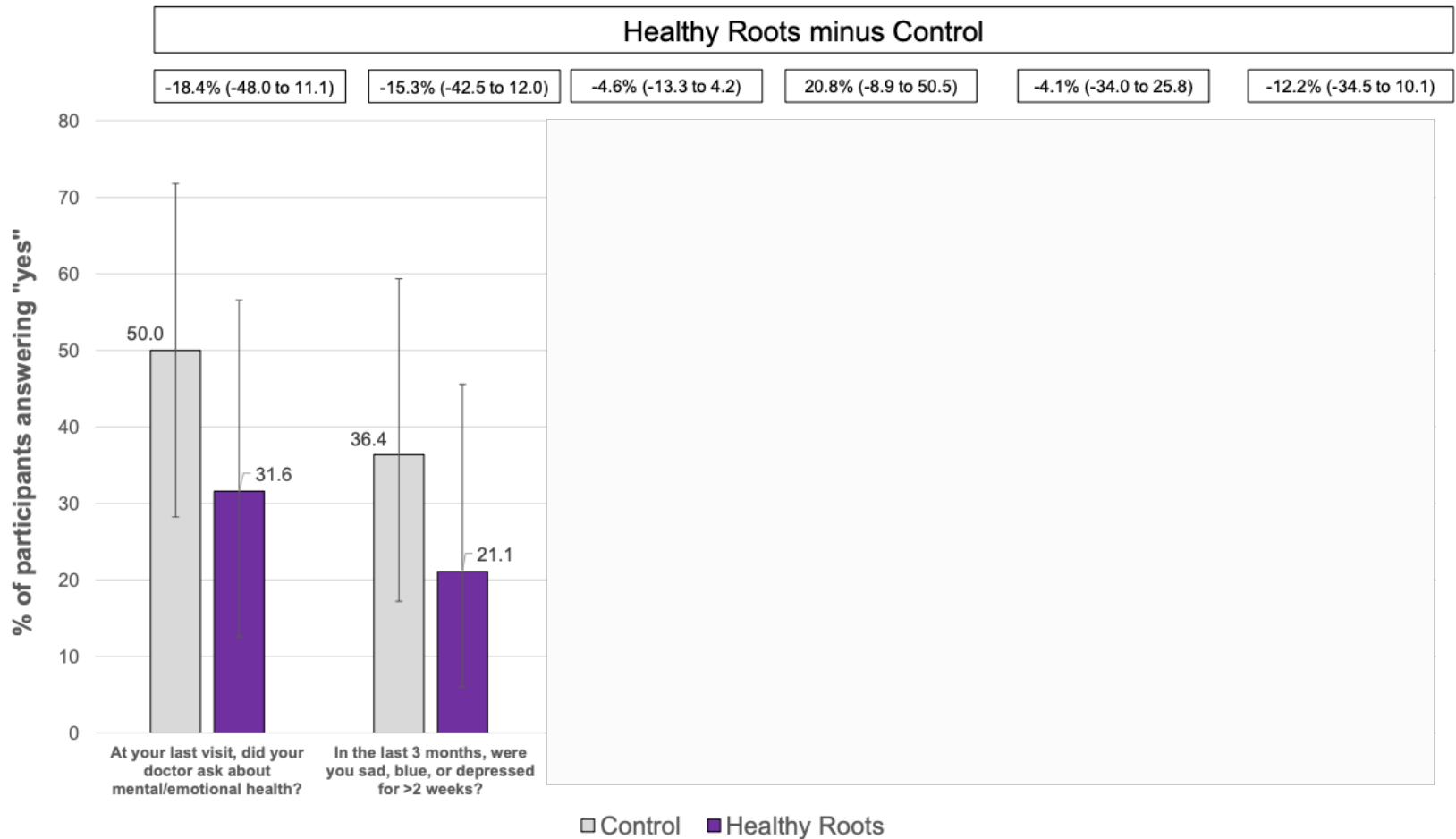


- Mental and Cognitive Health
 - Omega 3's can lessen depression and anxiety
 - Can reduce symptoms of ADHD in children
 - Can Improve Mental Disorders
 - Can fight Mental Decline and Alzheimer's Disease
- Cardiometabolic Health
 - Can decrease risks of heart disease
 - Can reduce symptoms of Metabolic Syndrome
- Other
 - Can fight inflammation
 - Can fight Auto-Immune Diseases
 - May Improve Sleep

Healthy Roots



Changes in Indicators of Self-Reported Mental Well-Being





Changes in Practice

- Consider decolonizing clinical practice
 - Indigenous Research Methods
 - Indigenous Healing Methods/Lifeways
 - Relationships/Gathering
 - Foodways
 - Language
 - Other clinical techniques...
 - Trauma informed care
 - Healing Centered Engagement
 - Somatic body work



Discussion: Thoughts, questions, feedback

Wado!