



A Parent's/Caregiver's Guide to Understanding Child Traumatic Stress

If you are an American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) parent or child caregiver who may be concerned about child traumatic stress and what it means, this guide was created for you!

What is Traumatic Stress?

Traumatic stress is different from every day or small stresses, upsets, and difficult moments. It occurs when violent or dangerous events overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Some examples include:

- 1 Neglect and psychological, physical, or sexual abuse. See <https://quizlet.com/16231943/chapter-4-child-neglect-flash-cards/> for examples of neglect and <https://quizlet.com/230256638/parent-child-relations-exam-2-part-4-flash-cards/> for sense of self worth
- 2 Community and school violence, natural disasters (e.g., tornados, floods), terrorism
- 3 Witnessing or experiencing intimate partner violence. See <https://strongheartshelpline.org/abuse/what-is-domestic-violence> and <https://strongheartshelpline.org/abuse/ptsd-effects-on-children>
- 4 Commercial sexual exploitation (sex trafficking). See examples of human trafficking: <https://strongheartshelpline.org/abuse/human-trafficking>
- 5 Serious accidents, life-threatening illness, or sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- 6 Military family-related stressors, such as parental deployment, loss, or injury
- 7 Refugee and war experiences.

Natives, through DNA in our genes, inherited the historical and intergenerational trauma of our ancestors who experienced extreme suffering at the hands of colonizers. Our ancestors were subjected to many different forms of violence (slaughter,

physical and sexual abuse, exposure to disease, and forced removal of children from their tribal homes for placement into government- and church-run boarding schools). These atrocities and others were committed with the intention of destroying our indigenous ways of life, being, grieving, supporting, and healing. Our genes carry the memories of our relatives, and these intergenerational and historical traumas may impact us in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual ways. (For more information about historical trauma, see references at the end of this guide).

As Natives, resilience is also passed down from one generation to the next. There are many ways we can call upon our strengths as Indigenous people to heal and to model that for future generations, including our children.



Children at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.





Why is it important to help my child deal with traumatic stress?

Traumatic stress overwhelms our mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical balance so drastically that our brains have difficulty processing or are unable to process the experience.¹ As with adults who experience unaddressed traumatic stress, children, adolescents, and teens may be susceptible to relationship problems, drug and alcohol abuse, violent behavior, suicide and depression, problems in school, and bullying and victimization.²

Can traumatic stress be healed?

Healing from traumatic stress is a process; it does not happen overnight. While there are many ways to heal, Native people created traditional wellness and healing practices rooted in a 10,000-year history that has been passed down from generation to generation.³ Some examples include but are not limited to:

- Traditional plant medicine used for cleansing and healing (sage, sweetgrass, red cedar and tobacco)
- Song and dance
- Drumming
- Storytelling
- Sweats
- Prayer
- Relationships
- Culturally sensitive and supportive counseling (talking circles)

(For more guidance on traditional wellness and healing practices, see references at the end of this pocket guide.)

While these practices are often used in combination with Western-based medical therapies to promote health, prevent disease, reduce pain, and enhance wellness, Native wellness and healing practices involve a holistic focus on developing and maintaining a healthy mind, body, and spirit in a way that culturally fits you and your family.



What can I do as a parent or caregiver to help my child with traumatic stress?

Assure your child that they are safe and talk about the actions you are taking to get help and keep them safe at home and school. Assure your child they are not responsible for what happened (children often blame themselves). Surrounding a child with protective factors like a stable and caring adult, physical activity, mentoring, and a healthy environment, can lessen the effects of trauma and help them form new pathways in the brain that do not activate the stress response.⁴ Pocket Guide #2 provides additional actions you can take as a parent/caregiver to lessen the effects of child traumatic stress and benefit you and others in the process!

Parents and caregivers can also help a child heal from traumatic stress through supporting and nurturing healing relationships. Your relationships have power and the ability to promote healing through connection/reconnection to your Tribe, important others, and Mother Earth. For examples of resilience, see <https://in.nau.edu/cair/resilience/>.

Native people have always figured out how to overcome significant obstacles and have managed to move forward with resilience. We can honor the sacrifices of our ancestors and model resiliency. Facing, rather than ignoring, traumatic stress and other adverse life experiences head-on can build resilience and begin a healing process.

A cautionary note: Depending on the nature and severity of the traumatic stress your child may have experienced, you may need to enlist the help of others, such as Native or Non-native clinicians and medical professionals trained in traumatic stress to help children and families cope with the impact of traumatic events and move toward recovery.

References

1. <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/3-ways-begin-healing-trauma-today>
2. <https://www.nnctc.org/what-we-do>
3. <https://www.wernative.org/articles/traditional-healing-1>
4. https://co-invest.org/wp-content/uploads/Insights_XVII_June2019_Final.pdf

Additional Resources

- <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/recognizing-and-treating-child-traumatic-stress#signs>
- <https://www.wernative.org/>
- <https://www.nativehope.org/>

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