

Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience for Native Military Parents and Caregivers

What is PTSD and its impact on American Indian/Alaska Native military families?

Both military families and AI/AN families have an increased risk of trauma.¹ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition caused by experiencing or witnessing trauma — an extremely stressful or terrifying event. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and unwanted thoughts about the event.⁵

Most people who experience traumatic events may initially have a hard time adjusting and coping, but with time and supportive care, they can usually process the event. If instead their symptoms get worse and affect their ability to function daily, they may be living with PTSD.⁵

AI/AN people experience traumatic events at a higher rate than the general populations,² with up to 22% of AI/AN people living with post-traumatic stress.¹ Understanding reactions to trauma and how to incorporate traditional healing practices and mental health treatment can help mitigate effects on families.

Factors Associated with Intergenerational Child Trauma

- Substance misuse
- Separation from family and community
- Suicide
- Violence or witness to violence
- Child abuse & neglect
- Teen pregnancy
- Lack of educational support
- Harrassment or discrimination
- Urban settings without adequate resources or culturally informed support
- Sexual abuse
- Parentification - when children are faced with adult responsibilities¹²

Military-Connected Factors Associated with Child Trauma⁸

- Deployments
- Prolonged separation from relatives
- Death or loss of parent or family member
- Parent suffers from PTSD, TBI, or physical injury
- Regularly moving away from community or culture and losing a sense of belonging
- Emotional distance from service members walking with duty-related trauma
- Conflict between personal values and serving in the military

How to talk to your child about their trauma

During the first year or so following a traumatic experience, reactions can include anger, denial, fear, guilt, confusion, distance, and sadness. These are all normal reactions and part of the healing process.³

If you are concerned that your child is experiencing these symptoms, it is important to talk with your child to learn more about their symptoms or difficulties. Acknowledge their feelings, offer help, and stay engaged over time to create support. If the trauma is outside of your capacity, seek further care.

Including cultural sources of resilience such as prayer, smudging, or crafting when discussing trauma can remind your child of the rich history of resilience found in Native military cultures.

If you have any concerns after talking with your child, you can reach out to culturally informed mental health specialists and/or trusted community or traditional resources.

Reactions to trauma at different developmental stages

Children of all ages

1. Experiencing more anger and irritability.
2. Fantasies of everything being as before the trauma.
3. Increased sexual interest.
4. Changes in physical health.
5. Worries about who will care for the child.
6. Shame and embarrassment.
7. Emotional distance as a defense mechanism.

Preschool

1. 80% are NOT told what happened, which leaves them confused and creates developmental challenges.¹
2. Returning to difficult behavior or losing developmental progress.
3. Fear of objects, places, events.
4. Self-blame - "If I'd only...", then it wouldn't have happened"; "If my daddy loved me, he'd stay"; or "She left, therefore I'm not loveable."

Adolescents

1. Pain, sadness, anger, loneliness.
2. Hesitance to trust in relationships.
3. Questioning situations related to the cause of the trauma.
4. Financial worries.
5. Pressure to act like an adult to fill in for missing parent or family member.
6. Finding fault in parents or others.
7. Detaching from parents or caregivers.

"Trauma takes people out of the circle, healing brings them back."

D. Johnson
& LaDue, 1994

Signs your child may need more support:

If you notice sudden behavior changes or feel your child is struggling to cope, look for the following signs⁴

Duration – The trauma or distress continues over a long period without signs of improvement

Impact – The child's ability to function in daily life (school, relationships, routines) is seriously affected

Frequency – Symptoms occur regularly or are increasing in how often they happen

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

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National American Indian & Alaska Native
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IOWA

College of
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NCTSN

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

Traditional Ways of Healing from Trauma

Incorporating cultural and traditional practices into the healing process can be important when addressing trauma and/or PTSD. Sacred traditions such as ceremonies and prayer circles can provide opportunities for healing journeys to take place.⁶

Cultural and traditional healing practices can include but are not limited to:

- Community gatherings, such as Talking Circles, support groups, or Warrior Societies
- Cultural celebrations, such as pow wows
- Spending time with youth, elders, and trusted mentors
- Seeking spiritual guidance from community leaders
- Prayer
- Purification ceremonies, such as sweats, smudging, and/or cleansing
- Use of herbal remedies and/or plant medicine
- Traditional food and movement practices
- Cherishing the seasons of change during healing
- Spending time in nature or with animals, such as horses, dogs, or pets
- Storytelling
- Journaling
- Traditional crafting
- Song and dance

If you are living away from your tribal community: maintain regular contact with relatives, make the most of online resources from your tribe, and see if there are Native resources in your community such as an Urban Indian Center or other facility.

Start with strengths from military culture to support your child's healing: Veterans develop skills relating to teaching, coaching, and mentoring during their time in service. Drawing on these experiences can give caregivers tools to help their child feel safe and strong during tough times.

Resources for Understanding and Supporting Family Members as They Navigate Trauma

When a family member is navigating a traumatic experience or PTSD, the entire family can feel the impacts. It is important to remember that you are not alone in these feelings and experiences. People in both your Native and military communities are supporting people in their lives that are working through trauma.

Although not specifically tailored to Native military communities, the following books and website can be useful tools for understanding and supporting family members on their healing journeys:

- *Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing* by Tom Golden, LCSW
- *Loving Someone with a Mental Illness or History of Trauma* by Michelle D. Sherman, PhD, ABPP and De Anne M. Sherman
- *I'm Not Alone: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has a Mental Illness or History of Trauma* by Michelle D. Sherman, PhD, ABPP and De Anne M. Sherman
- Sesame Street for Military Families: <https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/injuries-long-term-caregiving/>

These resources can be useful for individuals, but they can also provide a basis for a support group for people in your communities with similar experiences.

Visit nativecenter-ttsa.org for an activity booklet for military-connected Native youth to explore their resilience.

Blending Traditional Healing with Support from Mental Health Professionals⁷

Mental health professionals can work alongside traditional healing by using different treatments. They help people face and change harmful thoughts caused by trauma through cognitive therapy. Exposure therapy helps individuals safely deal with memories and feelings tied to their trauma. They can also use holistic methods like mindfulness, acupuncture, and stress relief techniques. Mental health professionals treat related problems like substance use and may prescribe medicine to ease PTSD symptoms and other mental health issues.

Benefits of talking to a healing-informed mental health provider

- Providing a safe place for your family to heal
- Confidentiality when sharing difficult information to protect your family's privacy
- Receiving help from trained professionals who work with children and families
- Learning how to better support your family's needs
- Gaining tools for coping with your experiences
- Potentially covered by insurance

Finding a culturally informed practitioner

To connect with compassionate and culturally informed practitioners, you can seek recommendations from community leaders or use one of the following sources as a starting point.

- <https://americanindianrecovery.com/>
- <https://supportforheroes.com/exploring-va-tribal-veteran-services-specialized-support-for-native-american-veterans/>

NOTE: Asking about the provider's experience working with military culture and traditional culture may help to determine if the provider would be informed about your needs.

Signs to seek immediate support

- Engaging in self-harm
- Hurting others, pets
- Excessive use of substances
- Child on child aggression

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Additional Resources

NCTSN Checklist for symptoms of trauma: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/understanding_child_trauma_and_resilience_for_military_parents_and_caregivers.pdf

Find an Urban Indian Organization: <https://www.ihs.gov/urban/urban-indian-organizations/>

Behavioral Health Services from United American Indian Involvement, INC: <https://uaii.org/health-services/behavioral/>

United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY): <https://unityinc.org/>

Motherhood is Sacred and Fatherhood is Sacred: <https://nicwc.org/events/>

Conversations with children about trauma: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281112429_A_Veteran%27s_Guide_to_Talking_with_Kids_about_PTSD

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6. Peterson, S. (2018, November 5). About child trauma - What Is a Traumatic Event. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Retrieved from <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>
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8. Kluge, S., McElhenny, A., & Leskin, G. (2020). Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: For Military Parents and Caregivers. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.
9. Finding IHS Urban Indian Organizations: <https://www.ihs.gov/urban/urban-indian-organizations/>
10. WIND Program: <https://uaii.org/health-services/behavioral/>
11. Unity: <https://unityinc.org/>
12. Parentification: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019074091400040>