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# Positive Talks: How Caregivers Can Talk With their AI/AN Child About Current Events and the Impacts They Can Have on Them

**IOWA**

College of  
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**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
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The National Child  
Traumatic Stress Network



# POSITIVE TALKS: How Caregivers Can Talk With their AI/AN Child About Current Events and the Impacts They Can Have on Them



The relationship that American Indian & Alaska Native youth have with family plays an immense role in how they cope with traumatic and adverse events. Through family, AI/AN youth can hear stories about resiliency, unity, and culture. When a strong child/guardian-caregiver relationship is present, AI/AN youth are able to feel supported in times of stress and crisis. Furthermore, it models healthy ways of coping, managing, and expressing feelings, and helps them to identify existing support systems for American Indian & Alaska Native youth. Developing a sense of openness with your child can be especially helpful when looking at traumatic-current events and the impact they can have on AI/AN youth. This booklet will discuss trauma, as it relates to current events, how this can affect AI/AN youth, ways in which guardians or caregivers can support and talk to AI/AN children about traumatic-current events, and resources to support guardians or caregivers of American Indian & Alaska Native youth.

## IN THIS BOOKLET:

- TRAUMA OVERVIEW
- HISTORICAL & CURRENT EVENT
- EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON AI/AN CHILDREN
- HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD
- HOW TO HELP AND SUPPORT YOUR CHILD
- RESOURCES & WHERE TO GET HELP



# What Is Trauma?

Trauma is an emotional response to an event that can cause both immediate and long-term reactions (American Psychological Association, 2022). Trauma can occur in response to a traumatic event, which can be any frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to your life or bodily integrity, as well as the witnessing of a traumatic event of a loved one.<sup>1</sup>

There are a range of traumatic events and types of trauma that an individual can experience.<sup>1</sup>

- Acute trauma results from exposure to a single event and can cause responses such as detailed memories, omens, hypervigilance, an exaggerated startle response, misperceptions, or overreactions.
- Chronic trauma results from a prolonged or a series of repeated exposures to traumatic events
- Complex trauma occurs from varied and multiple traumatic exposures that are often invasive and interpersonal in nature. Complex trauma may elicit responses such as disrupted physical and mental development of a child and formation of self, as well as the disruption in the ability to form a secure attachment with other individuals.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Events Causing Trauma

Dr. Maria Yellowhorse-Braveheart said it best, as she describes historical trauma as, *“The collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from a cataclysmic history of genocide”*

Colonization of Indigenous people didn’t happen in a day, it occurred over long periods throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. The effects of historical trauma inflicted on Indigenous people, compounded by continued systematic racism and oppression, linger on the souls of the survivors and their descendants. As a result, many AI/ANs experience high rates of mental and physical illness, substance abuse, or other drug-related illnesses and other attributes making it difficult for them to prosper.

**“It’s the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma.”**  
- Dr. Maria Yellowhorse-Braveheart

# Current Event

The Russian invasion of Ukraine led by the Russian President Vladimir Putin started on February 24, 2022. Attacks by Russian forces were reported in major cities across Ukraine. To date, over 12 million have been displaced and forced to leave their homes in Ukraine, many leaving loved ones behind.<sup>3</sup>

With every news channel covering this story, people across the globe are talking about the Russian and Ukraine war and many Americans are experiencing feelings of frustration, empathy, sadness, disbelief, and shock. The war taking place today may cause Indigenous peoples to relive traumatic experiences caused by *our* country's historical events. Sadly, many people have long forgotten the genocide of our Indigenous peoples, who were forced off their land, forced into assimilation, and endured millions of casualties from epidemics and violence.

Just as it is important to talk about the events taking place in Ukraine, it is also vital to emphasize and remember the significance and the effects of historical trauma on Indigenous populations. The actions of Russia toward Ukraine are reflective of what is now the United States. There is a need to educate, acknowledge and reflect on the past atrocities against AI/AN people.

# Effects of Historical Trauma<sup>4</sup>

- Psychological distress
- Poorer overall physical and mental health
- High suicide rate
- Low income/high poverty rates
- The lowest life expectancy of any group
- Higher domestic violence and sexual assault
- High numbers of child abuse/neglect
- Overrepresentation in the child welfare systems
- Limited education and employment
- High rate of co-occurring disorders related to substance abuse and mental health disorders
- High rate of mood disorders and PTSD



These current events may cause many Indigenous people post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the American Psychological Association, PTSD is an anxiety problem that develops in some individuals after extremely traumatic events, such as combat/war, crime, an accident, or a natural disaster. People with PTSD can relive this trauma by being exposed to anything that reminds them of their past traumas.

**Yes, let us have empathy for Ukraine, but let this be a reminder of what some scholars describe as the worst genocide in history.**



# How Current Events and Trauma Can Effect AI/AN Children

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The current events can provoke fear and anxiety in your AI/AN child in a way that is traumatic in itself, or acts as a trauma trigger for your child. A trauma trigger is an aspect of a completely different situation but reminds your child of the original traumatic event in some way.<sup>5</sup> Traumatic events can be a single event, a prolonged experience, a historical event, a personal event, or an experience or event that occurs over time through several generations.<sup>6</sup> These events can “involve an actual death or other loss, serious injury, or threat to a child’s well-being, often related to the cultural trauma, historical trauma, and intergenerational trauma that has accumulated in AI/AN communities through centuries of exposure to racism, warfare, violence, and catastrophic disease”.<sup>7</sup> AI/AN youth may suffer from child traumatic stress if they have been exposed to one or more traumas in their life and they can develop reactions that continue to impact their daily lives even after the event has ended.<sup>1</sup>

## Behaviors/signs you may see in AI/AN youth experiencing trauma

All children experiencing trauma respond differently and it is important for you to be aware of common behaviors and signs that your AI/AN child may show in a time of distress.<sup>1</sup> Knowing when your child may be experiencing trauma is vital because if left untreated, traumatic event exposure can have numerous continuous implications on an AI/AN child that can have various significant impacts on their life as they age. These implications may include but are not limited to: problems with the brain and nervous system, unhealthy behaviors, mental health disorders, risky behaviors, and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.<sup>1</sup>

AI/AN youth may experience reactions such as, “guilt, helplessness, and withdrawal, risk-taking, mistrust, and social anxiety. Moreover, repeated exposure to trauma results in the impaired ability to have positive relationships, communicate well, and demonstrate resiliency. Trauma at a young age often leads to higher rates of behavioral health disorders in adolescence”.<sup>6</sup>

### Behaviors<sup>1</sup>

Some common responses you may identify in your child include:

- **Strong and persistent emotional upset**
- **Depression and anxiety**
- **Trouble paying attention**
- **Changes in behavior**
- **Problems with relationships with others**
- **Loss of previous skills such as those learned in school**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- **Physical pain**
- **Change in appetite**
- **Academic trouble in school**
- **Suspensions and expulsions**



# Recognizing and Acknowledging Your Own Trauma and How It Transfers to Your Child<sup>8</sup>

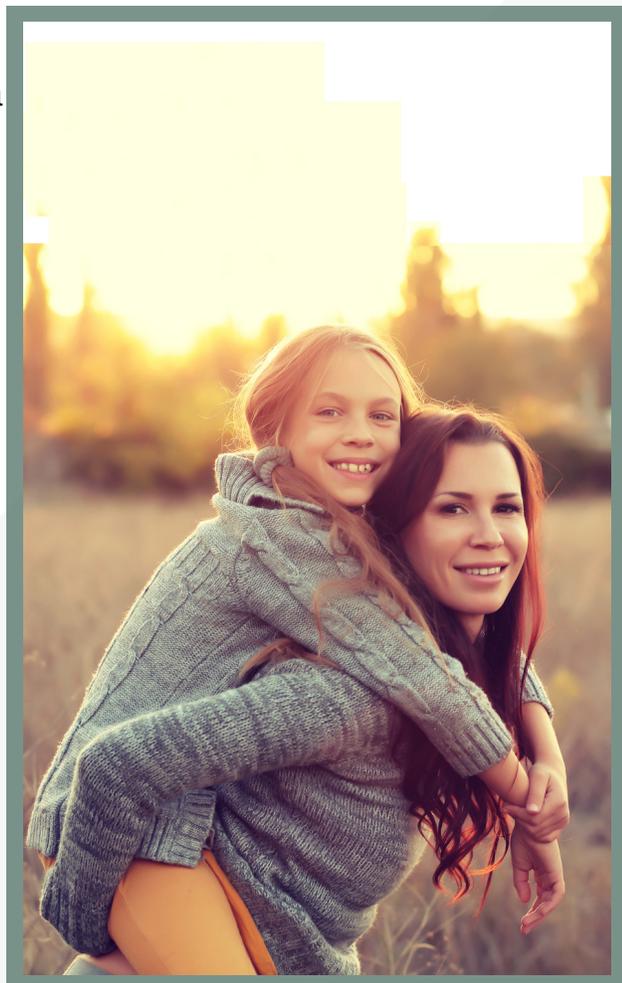
When your child is in distress, you may be unsure of the best way to help. One of the most important steps in being there for your child is being there for yourself. Whether your child is being impacted by current events, or another traumatic stressor, you have also been impacted. When thinking about how your AI/AN child might be impacted by current events, it is vital to acknowledge your own traumas and triggers and how your experience and reactions can influence and transfer to your child.

## How to Talk to Your Child About Trauma

### Best Practices For Communicating Traumatic Events to AI/AN Children<sup>9, 10, 11</sup>

It can be difficult to know where to start when talking about traumatic events, especially when the current traumatic event triggers historical and generational trauma. Below is a list of best practices when communicating traumatic events to AI/AN children.

- Remain calm and collected
- Initiate the conversation and find out what they already know
- Offer reassurance – you will be there for them, they can ask you questions any time, they are safe
- Encourage them to share their feelings
- Listen to them, communicate respect for their feelings
- Share your own feelings
- Focus on the good (look for people who are helping)
- Encourage compassion
- Help distinguish between real and pretend
- Avoid harmful stereotypes when talking about those involved in the events
- Model emotion regulation and problem-solving skills
- Don't push if they are clearly not interested in talking about it
- Emphasize the strength of traditional values, beliefs, and expressions of culture
- Know when to seek outside help for your child



## Questions to ask your child if you believe they are experiencing trauma<sup>9,10</sup>

- What have you heard about this event? (then correct any misconceptions they might have)
- Are any of your teachers/friends talking about this at school?
- Do you want to talk about it right now?
- What specifically is scaring you?
- Is there anything you need from me to help you feel safe?
- What do you mean by...?
- How long have you been feeling...?

## When to reach out for extra support<sup>9, 11, 12, 13</sup>

Knowing when to reach out for extra support regarding your AI/AN child and trauma depends on their developmental age and level. In general, if over four weeks have passed and they are still suffering, reaching out to a professional is recommended. There may be signs in their play or conversation that AI/AN children and adolescents are experiencing trauma. At a young age, they may be extra clingy, have sleep problems, and/or revert to baby talk, thumb sucking, or bedwetting. In older childhood, they might display fears about death, persistent upsetting thoughts, and/or preoccupation with the war. At the adolescent age, they might want to talk about gruesome details, but they also might deny the situation's impact on their emotions and avoid the topic not to show vulnerability. AI/AN teens are especially vulnerable to substance use when trying to numb their anxiety. Internalized oppression from generations of historical trauma may manifest as self-hatred and pent-up anger that comes in outbursts.

### Noticing symptoms... (still constantly occurring after four weeks have passed)

- Intrusive memories
- Avoidance
- Negative changes in mood/thinking
- Changes in physical/emotional reactions
- Negative thoughts about self and others
- Viewing the world as dangerous
- Hopelessness about future
- Difficulty maintaining relationships
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Overwhelming feelings of guilt/shame
- Self-destructive behavior
- Flashbacks
- Severe anxiety
- Distraction/derealization
- Angry outbursts/irritability
- Sleep problems/nightmares
- Headaches
- Reenacting traumatic events through play



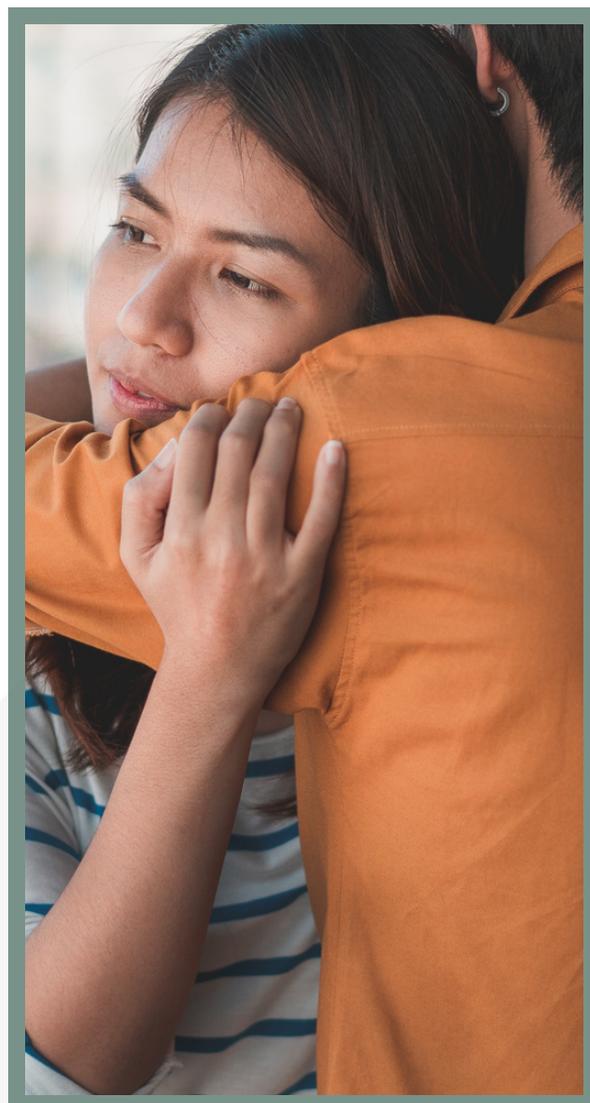
# How to Help/Support Your Child if They Are Experiencing Trauma

## Who Caregivers Can Reach Out To

- Elders
- Spiritual leaders
- Mental health professionals
- School Counselors

## Evidence-Based Activities to Help Children Experiencing Trauma <sup>13, 14, 15, 16</sup>

- Traditional healing (ceremonies, community gatherings)
  - Participating in a sweat lodge to connect with nature and restore balance
  - Smudging/cleansing to improve spiritual wellbeing
  - Traditional plant medicine
  - Cultural counseling (ex: talking circles)
  - Storytelling, listening and learning with elders
  - Native-inspired arts including crafts, beading, songs, and dance
- Outlets for expression (writing letters, drawing)
- Establish and/or maintain routines
- Breathing retraining (Click the links below for a tutorial)
  - [Box breathing](#)
  - [Take a deep breath](#)
  - [Breathing Retraining Info from Center for Clinical Interventions](#)
  - [Breathing Exercises from Berkeley](#)
  - Infinity Breaths/Spiral Breaths sheets
- Muscle relaxation
  - Relaxation Routine
- Positive imagery
- Read stories
- Have conversations filling in the sentence, "Today I feel..."
- Give opportunities to play
- Grounding exercises
  - [Staying Grounded Using Your Senses](#)
- Have a calm corner/safe space



# Resources

## Books

### **Keepers of the Children: Native American Wisdom and Parenting - Workbook/Journal** by Laura M Ramirez

"A companion to the parenting book, Keepers of the Children: Native American Wisdom and Parenting, the Keepers of the Children Workbook/Journal teaches parents how to create close, loving relationships with their children and raise them to develop their strengths, so they will lead purposeful and fulfilling lives as adults. The workbook is full of exercises that inspire action, change, reflection, insight and help parents get past the negative aspects of their own upbringing to give their children a springboard to happier, more conscious lives."

## Podcasts

### **All My Relations**

"All My Relations is a podcast that explores what it means to be a Native person in the 21st century. The hosts write: 'To be an Indigenous person is to be engaged in relationships—relationships to land and place, to a people, to non-human relatives, and to one another. All My Relations is a place to explore those relationships, and to think through Indigeneity in all its complexities. On each episode hosts Matika Wilbur (Tulalip and Swinomish) and Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation), delve into a different topic facing Native peoples today, bringing in guests from all over Indian Country to offer perspectives and stories... We want this space to be for everyone—for Native folks to laugh, to hear ourselves reflected, and give us a chance to think deeper about some of the biggest issues facing our communities, and for non-Native folks to listen and learn."

### **Young and Indigenous**

"YAI Podcast stands for Young and Indigenous and that's who we are: tribal youth of the Lummi Nation, original peoples of the land and water now called Bellingham, Washington. In order to try and help our Lummi community stay unified, we have created an outlet for people to express their opinions, voice their ideas and concerns, and share some of the, until now, untold stories of our people. YAI podcast is an attempt to preserve our culture, learn our language, and inspire future generations of youth to believe in and develop their authentic voices. Young and Indigenous is also for those people outside of our community who would like to learn more about us as Native people..."



# Where to get help

## National American Indian & Alaska Native Childhood Trauma TSA Category II Website: <https://www.nativecenter-ttsa.org/>

- **Technical Assistance (TA) Request:**

- **What is TA?** <https://www.nativecenter-ttsa.org/technical-assistance>
- **Request Form:** <https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=IUXEG7qaw0-47HuUpVhv3KOWXnSYMadEmPYoSSBvji1UMFU0QjNEQIFKWE5TSzBFVTUwQzFFRUc5VC4u&web=1&wdLOR=c6511C461-39DC-8B43-B938-595015A6FF61>

## **Helplines:**

### **Crisis Text Line:**

Text: NATIVE to 741741

### **StrongHearts Native Helpline:**

Call, text, or chat

1-844-7NATIVE (762-8783)

StrongHearts Native Helpline is a no-cost, culturally appropriate, anonymous, confidential service dedicated to serving Native American survivors of domestic violence and concerned family members and friends. Dial the number above, nationwide, 24/7 to connect one-on-one with knowledgeable StrongHearts advocates who can provide lifesaving tools and immediate support to enable survivors to find safety and live lives free of abuse.

### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**

Chat or Call: 1-800-273-TALK

### **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:**

Beginning July 16, 2022, 988 will be the new three-digit dialing code connecting people to the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, where compassionate, accessible care and support is available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress—whether that is thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support.

## **Websites with resources:**

### **SAMHSA Treatment Finder:**

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/locator?sAddr=Milwaukee%2C%20WI%2C%20United%20States&submit=Go>

- You can use this comprehensive database to search for mental health and substance abuse services across the United States.

**WeRNative:** <https://www.wernative.org/>

**NATIVE HOPE:** <https://www.nativehope.org/>

### **StrongHearts:**

<https://strongheartshelpline.org/>



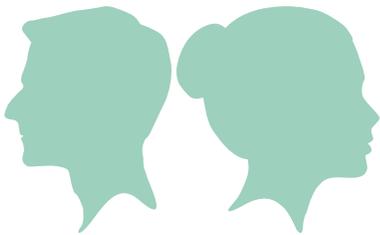
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# Positive Talk Tools

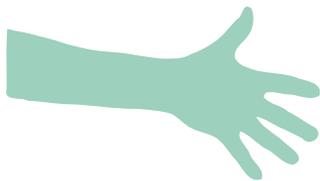
# Relaxation Routine



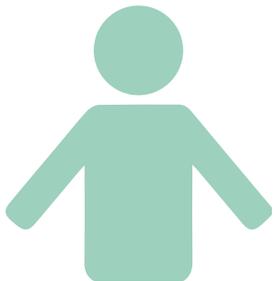
Sit or lie down comfortably.



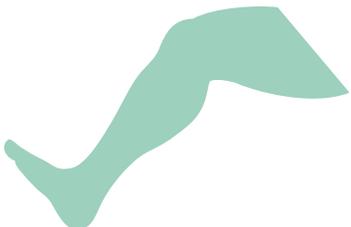
Scrunch up your face...  
and relax.



Tense your arms...  
and relax.



Tense your shoulders and chest...  
and relax.



Tense your legs... and  
relax.



Deep breath in... and out.

# Grounding Exercises With Your Senses



Relax, take deep breaths, and focus on...



5 things you can see

4 things you can feel



3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell

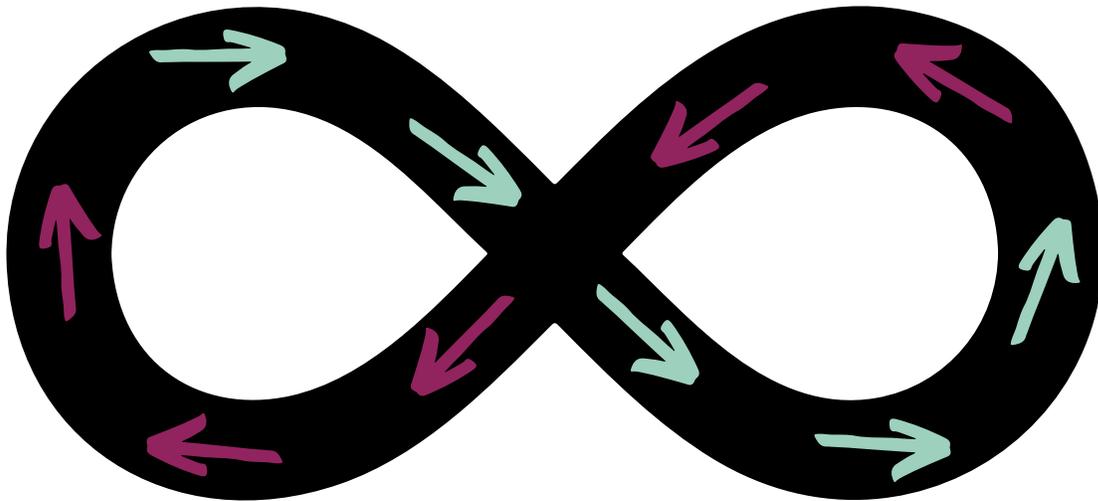


1 thing you can taste

# Infinity Breathing



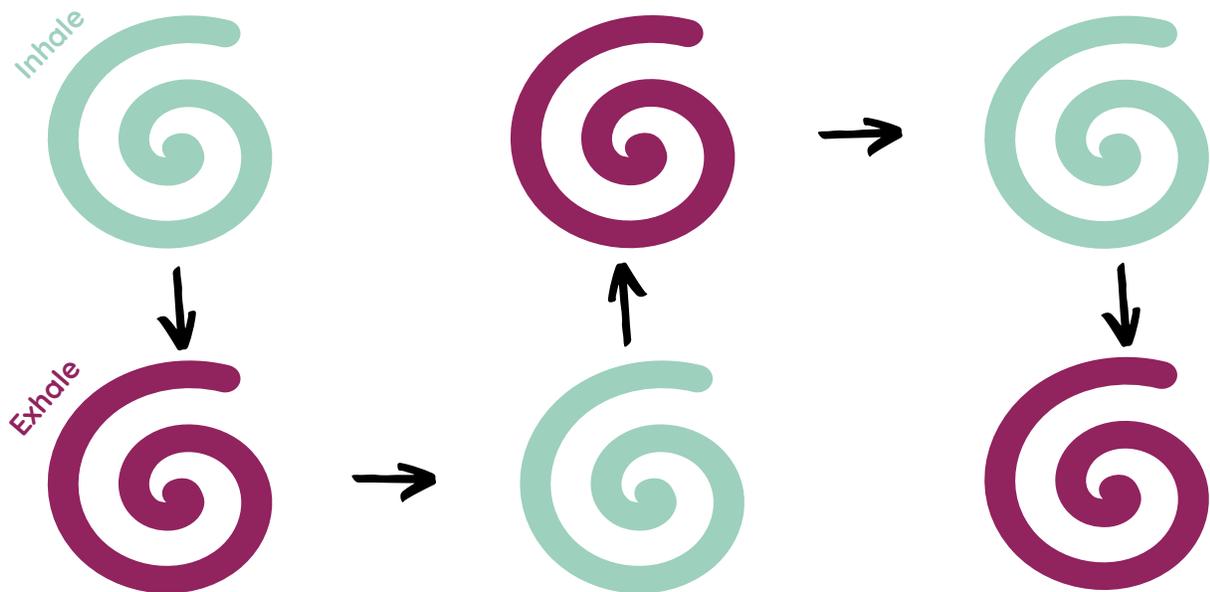
Slowly trace the arrows as you breathe in and breathe out.



# Spiral Breathing



Slowly trace the spirals as you breathe in and breathe out.



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**TSA personnel:** [Teresa Brewington, MBA, MEdL](#)

Coharie (enrolled), Lumbee (descendant)

Co-Director, National AI/AN Childhood Trauma TSA, Category II

[Liz Saathoff, MPH, CHES](#)

Program Coordinator, National AI/AN Childhood Trauma TSA, Category II

[Anne Helene Skinstad, PhD](#)

Director, Native Center for Behavioral Health Director, National AI/AN Childhood Trauma TSA, Category II

[Makenna Clark, MA](#) Graduate Research Assistant

[Mya Davis, MPH](#) Graduate Research Assistant

[Eleanor Witt](#), Graduate Research Assistant