




Why is it important to know about historical trauma in Alaska?

Prolonged exposure to stress changes the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects of a person. For Alaska Native peoples, as for American Indian people across the country, historical trauma began with forced relocation, removal from families as small children, and placement into boarding schools, where they were prohibited from speaking their language or practicing their cultures. The layers of stress, grief, loss, and abuse that resulted from these and other events are known as historical trauma.

Alaska's Native Elders have lived through times of enormous stress and have accumulated trauma not only over the course of their lifetimes, but from the trauma experienced by their parents and grandparents.

Staff who support Resident Councils should know about historical trauma experience by nursing home residents because trauma plays a role in a person's overall wellbeing. Trauma-informed care in long-term care settings acknowledges and respects Elders' life experiences, helps them feel safe, and empowers them to make their own care decisions.



Some resources on historical trauma and resilience are included in the bibliography and their citations are listed in the footnote below.¹

Communicating with Alaska Native Elders

Background and Purpose

Alaska has 229 federally recognized tribes which is almost half of all the federally recognized tribes in the United States. Alaska Native cultures vary widely by region, by tribe, and by community. Serving a Tribal population in one community does not mean that one size fits all. Individual differences exist within a culture, community, and family depending on a person's life experiences.

¹ (J. P. Lewis 2011) (Roderick 2010) (State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services 2018) (J. Lewis, Elders' perspective on how to age successfully 2019) (Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services undated)

What is my role as the staff person who supports the Resident Council?

One of your roles is to support the Resident Council leader and other staff to understand the people of the region and acknowledge and honor the cultural differences among residents in order to have an effective Council. The following information on communication is a general overview but knowing how each Elder communicates is the most important place to start.

Non-Verbal Communication

- Observation is important when interacting with Elders.
- If an Elder raises his/her eyebrows, it may mean “yes”.
- If an Elder shrugs shoulders, it may mean “I don’t know”.
- Nodding does not necessarily mean “yes.” Sometimes it means “I hear that you are speaking”.
- As a sign of respect for the Elder, avoid making direct eye contact (follow lead of the Elders – if they do not make direct eye contact, use the same communication style).
- A gentle handshake is a sign of respect.
- Sit still and avoid distractions when speaking and listening to an Elder (put away your phone, notes, etc.)

Verbal Communication

- Allow Elders to speak first.
- Ask an Elder’s permission to speak.
- When they do speak, listen to what is being said and respect the time from the Elder.
- Leave time after asking questions, or in discussion, for Elders to respond. They take time to reflect and compose a response, so leave adequate time for them to respond.
- Ask direct, open-ended questions.
- Defer to an Elder to offer an answer to a question.
- Elders may appreciate humor, so try to relay information with amusement or laughter.
- Use a soft, gentle tone and simple language.
- Be consistent with your voice; do not use high pitch as if you were speaking to a baby.
- Don’t interrupt.



Narrative Communication

- Alaska Native Elders often offer their teaching or advice in ways that are narrative, such as through storytelling.
- Some Elders do not answer questions directly. Rather, they share a story or respond with different information. Be Patient. Their response will either answer the question or provide insight on what the Elder wants others to know.
- Elders may ask for something while not being specific – they will ask for something indirectly so they are not viewed as a nuisance or needing something. For example, “I wish I had more coffee” can mean, “If you are going to the store, please pick some up for me” or “I need a ride to the store”.
- Try to learn a few words in their traditional language to help better communicate with an Elder.
- If you have questions or comments for an Elder, you should wait until the end of the story to ask them.



Show respect

- Do not openly argue or disagree with an Elder.
- When food is served, serve Elders first.
- Stay humble.
- After trust is established, body contact may be appreciated.
- Bragging or bringing attention to oneself is not appreciated by Alaska Native or American Indian people, including Elders.
- Have a sense of humor.



Pay attention to time and pace

- Talk at a slow pace and use pauses. Be comfortable with silences.
- Allow time for opinions and thoughts to be expressed. This may sound like storytelling.
- The concept of time is “in the moment” rather than “by the clock”.
- Use the seasons for the year to talk about time. Example: “When did you knee start hurting?” “When snow came, when snow thawed, etc.”

What do Councils do?

Identify problems and solutions, make recommendations to staff. Residents can talk privately with each other at Council meetings. Staff can be invited to the meetings to listen. Council leaders talk with staff on behalf of residents.

Welcome new residents, support residents. Councils contribute to a sense of community, much like in a small town or village.

Communicate with staff. Tell staff about resident concerns without naming names, and also share what's going well.

Inform residents of their rights. Keep residents informed about what their rights are while living at the nursing home.

Raise funds for projects that residents identify. Residents may decide to do a project, and raise funds through the Council to support it.





Who can be on the council?

Anyone who lives in the nursing home can be on the Council. Some nursing homes are small, which makes it easy for everyone to talk together.

In large nursing homes, residents may decide to have someone who lives in the same area speak for them. For example, residents who live in the same cottage might select one resident to bring things to the Council.

Nursing home staff cannot be members of the Resident Council.

The president is apprised of things that go on. There are things we think could help and get advice on: colors, furnishings—not just quality of care. We ask and get feedback.

What kind of things do Resident Councils talk about?

Anything that residents like or think needs to be changed. Some examples of things that Councils in Alaska have worked on include:

- Food (changing up the menu, having more menu choices). Often residents want traditional foods from their culture
- Broken things at the nursing home (for example: the van to take residents out, the TV, call buttons, hot water for showers, ice cream machine)
- Resident's clothes get lost or ruined in the laundry
- Things missing from a resident's room
- Different activities or to decide where to go for trips outside the nursing home
- Staff sleeping at night
- Telling about someone who is not kind.

"We can't stand around. We are working people who have come here, we want something to do. We garden, we raise funds. We are kind of like a big family together, and we treat each other like family."—A Council leader

How does a Council choose a leader?

Residents should pick a leader who is good at listening to others and who is willing to talk with the staff about what the Council wants to address. Find a resident who is respected. Sometimes the quiet people are the best leaders because they listen.

Sometimes a person volunteers to be a leader. Sometimes people ask someone to be a leader.

Sometimes more than one person wants to be a leader. When that happens, the residents choose to have an election. This is usually a vote by secret ballot. This way residents can vote without worrying about hurting someone's feelings.

To recruit new potential presidents, she asks their help with council activities: "I need you to help me present this to the meeting tomorrow"—A Council leader

Where do Councils meet?

The Council should have a quiet place to meet so that everyone can hear what each resident is saying. Some Councils have asked for a microphone so that everyone can hear.

The Council should meet someplace private so residents can talk freely.

