



National Council of
Urban Indian Health



EXCELLENCE · EQUITY · EFFECTIVENESS

Virtual Native Language
Revitalization for Behavioral
Wellness

ABOUT NCUIH

The National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) is the national non-profit organization devoted to the support and development of quality, accessible, and culturally-competent health and public health services for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) living in urban areas.

NCUIH is the only national representative of the 41 Title V Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) under the Indian Health Service (IHS) in the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA). NCUIH strives to improve the health of the over 70% of the AI/AN population that lives in urban areas, supported by quality, accessible health care centers.



Learning Objectives:

1. Understand cultural significance of Native languages as a tool to enhance sense of self-identity
2. Learn culturally appropriate terms when discussing suicide and substance misuse with youth
3. Building awareness of Language Programs/Training resources through apps and webinar training platforms during COVID-19



What does Virtual Language Revitalization Mean?

Virtual Native Language Revitalization addresses:

- Current terminology; and
- Use of traditional languages

Integration of behavioral health terms and language sensitivity for the discussion of contemporary issues.





“Language is a core part of who we are as Indian people. Each of us has our respective languages that connect us to our place of birth, teach us how to pray, and show us who we are as Indian people. Language is sacred.”

– Benny Shendo, Jr., First Nations Board Chair



Why is Language Revitalization Important?

- Language is sacred to Native people
- Tribal languages can be used as a tool to enhance one's self and identity formation
- Language provides youth:
 - Teachings of their people (creation stories, migration, history)
 - Preservation of cultural/traditional knowledge
 - Sense of belonging
- Many contemporary behavioral health issues have different understandings/perspectives in different cultures
 - Language can help bridge this gap



Using Language for Difficult Topics

- Important to use terms that do not assign individual blame
 - Recognize that mental health issues are often biological/social in nature, not due to personal fault
- Keep in mind that there may be culture differences in the way certain issues or events are perceived
 - For example: suicide may be conceptualized and understood differently within indigenous cultures than Western culture
- Do not assume that people haven't experienced struggles with mental health issues in the past

Using Language for Difficult Topics continued

- Substance misuse:
 - Use: **person in recovery, person with addiction issues** instead of **addict**
 - Use: **substance misuse, substance use disorder** instead of **substance abuse**
- Suicide
 - Use: **death by suicide** instead of **committed suicide, completed suicide, successful suicide**
 - Use: **suicide attempt or non-fatal suicide attempt** instead of **unsuccessful suicide, uncompleted suicide, failed suicide attempt**

Using Language for Difficult Topics continued

- Trauma-specific terms:
 - Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) vs Historical Trauma (long-term, generational stress)
 - Be cognizant of compound traumas
 - Lateral oppression
- These are sensitive topics, but many Native youth have already experienced them or known family and friends who have.
 - Don't assume ignorance when discussing with them
- Terms in their Native language may give more meaning and understanding when discussing these issues



So How does Language Revitalization Fit in?

- Language is a tool
 - The primary purpose of language is communication, but it has many other benefits, including connection to culture and historic past
- Connection to culture is a protective factor against suicide
(<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma17-5050.pdf>)
- Preserving language both increases the exposure of youth to this protective factor and preserves the language for generations to come



Language Resources

- Many tribes have apps, websites or other programs designed for language immersion
 - Cherokee Nation
 - First Nations:
<https://www.firstvoices.com/explore/FV/sections/Data>
 - Navajo
 - Northern Pomo Tribes:
<http://northernpomolanguagetools.com/>
- <http://www.native-languages.org/> Is a great resource for many different languages
- Be respectful and remember that language is sacred!



Other Opportunities

- Many schools offer language programs for the language of whichever tribe's lands the school is located on
 - Elementary and high schools do this, although more common in Canada than the U.S.
 - Early childhood language immersion is a evidence-based and effective method of connecting youth with their native language
- Many colleges and universities also offer language courses in this manner:
 - The University of Oklahoma offers a Native American Language Program in Cherokee
 - The University of New Brunswick offers a Bachelor of Education in the Wabanaki languages and culture through involvement of tribal elders



What is working so far?

- Online language portal with many accessible elements
 - Audio and visual aids
 - Traditional speakers
 - Variety of resources available
- Early childhood immersion
 - Before age 5
- Scholarships for language immersion courses for Native students
- Making your language a part of everyday life in greetings/salutations and thank you's





THANK YOU





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