

Shouldering Grief: Validating Native American Historical Trauma



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Story by [Nora Chavez](#), NM CARES Health Disparities Center

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Ph.D. (Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota) is President of the Takini Institute. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and the Director of Native American and Disparities Research at the University of New Mexico in the Center for Rural and Community Behavioral Health. She is also a principle investigator for a research project through the NM CARES Health Disparities Center.

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Historical trauma is defined by the author and the Takini Institute as the "collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from a cataclysmic history of genocide." Dr. Brave Heart states that the effects of historical trauma include: unsettled emotional trauma, depression, high mortality rates, high rates of alcohol abuse, significant problems of child abuse and domestic violence.

"Takini" is a Lakota word meaning "survivor or one who has been brought back to life". The Takini Network is a collective of Lakota (Teton Sioux) and other Native natural, grassroots helpers and human service professionals. The mission of the network, which is located in Rapid City, South Dakota, is to improve the quality of life for Native people by helping them transcend and heal from historical trauma.

Dr. Brave Heart states that the origins of historical trauma for Native Americans are in genocide compounded by Boarding schools and transferred across generations through impairment of traditional parenting skills, identification, and other complex processes.

"Children of massacre survivors, children of boarding school survivors, pass on the trauma to their descendants," she adds. "In order for healing to begin, it is critical that we concentrate on healing the next seven generations. It's important that we incorporate our ceremonies in the healing process as well as develop Native research on historical trauma and its interventions. Our historical trauma, including individual current lifespan trauma, must be acknowledged and validated."

"Our purpose is to heal from the historical unresolved grief that many indigenous individuals and communities are struggling with. Historical unresolved grief is the grief that accompanies the trauma," states Dr. Brave Heart. The historical trauma response is a constellation of

features in reaction to massive group trauma. This response is observed among Lakota and other Native populations, Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants, and Japanese American internment camp survivors and descendants. (Brave Heart, 1998, 1999, 2000)

Continuing her research at UNM, Dr. Brave Heart is currently working with Native youth in New Mexico in recognizing historical trauma and its effects. As co- PI for the project, she adds that next steps are to collect more sophisticated research and to obtain NIH funding; to develop evidence-based practices. She was recruited by UNM because of their desire to bring in native research faculty for the Center for Rural & Community Behavioral Health. She currently has a NARCH grant in review on development of a pilot historical trauma model for tribal colleges. She has also developed a website for the Albuquerque Indian Health Service on historical trauma.

Dr. Brave Heart She was formerly an Associate Professor at Columbia University School of Social Work and a clinical intervention research team member at New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. She was Associate Professor at the University of Denver for many years and developed historical trauma and unresolved grief theory and interventions among American Indians. In 1992, she founded the Takini Network, a non-profit organization based in Rapid City, South Dakota, devoted to community healing from massive group trauma. Dr. Brave Heart's Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief Intervention was selected as a Tribal Best Practice by First Nations Behavioral Health Association and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Dr. Brave Heart's prior work as PI on SAMHSA-funded projects such as the Lakota Regional Community Action Grant on Historical Trauma and Integrating Historical Trauma Intervention in a Lakota Parenting Project informs her current research. Dr. Brave Heart is also PI for the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas Survey on collective trauma, grief, and loss and is working with the Aberdeen Area Indian Health Service in designing an outreach video on PTSD for American Indian veterans.

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