



CULTURE IS MEDICINE

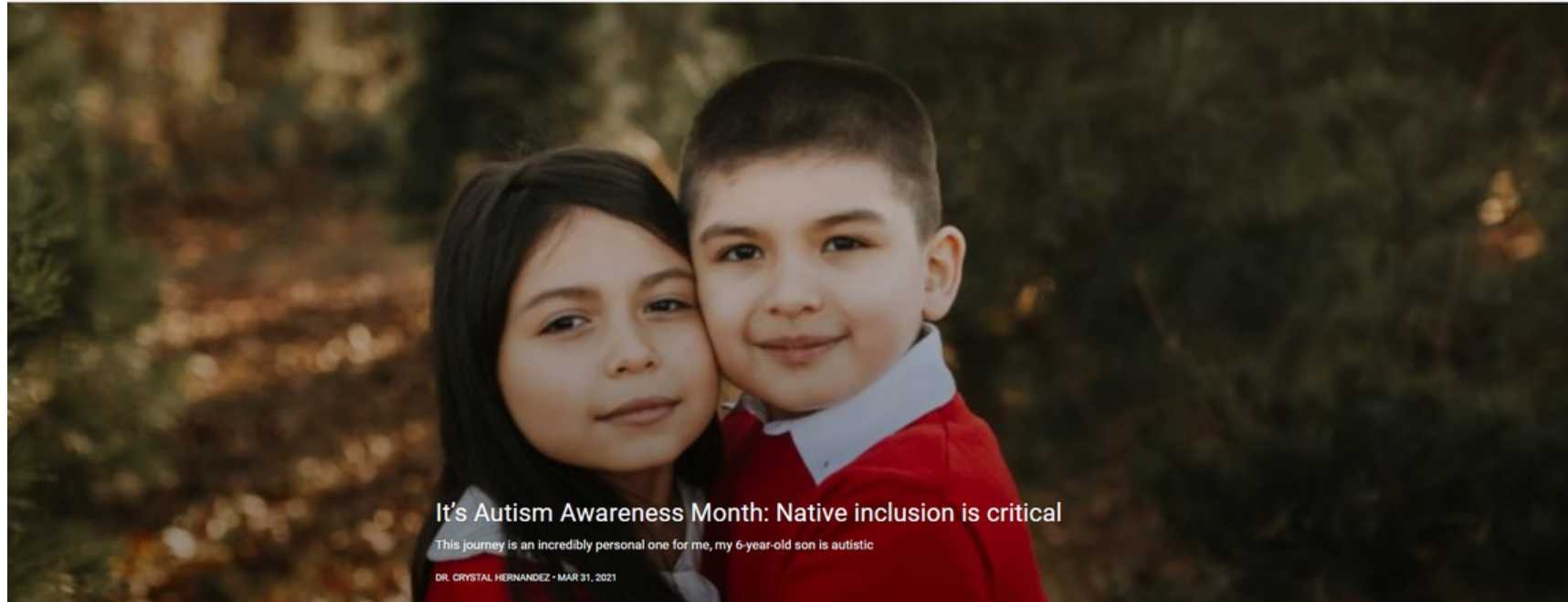
A PROTECTIVE FACTOR

Dr. Crystal Hernandez

OBJECTIVES

The Significance of our People

INTRODUCTION
OVERVIEW OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS
TRADITION & CEREMONY
SIGNIFICANCE OF INCLUSION
INTERSECTIONALITY OF TRIBAL & DISABILITY
COMMUNITIES
CONCLUSIONS



ABOUT ME

- Dr. Crystal Hernandez
- Cherokee Nation citizen
- Forensic psychologist by trade and training
- Over 2 decades of experience working in mental health, social services, and criminal justice systems
- National Tribal disabilities expert & Podcaster
- Collaborator with several Tribal Nations on their systems of care
- Experience in Government, nonprofit, and for-profit
- Thought leader & innovator
- Service on several local, state, and federal committees and boards

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is critically important to address **in meaningful ways** within the Intellectual and Developmental Disability Community, yet it is often not at the forefront of traditional prevention and treatment conversations, policy, funding, or service.

Even less included is the Native American disability community.

Native Americans are largely missing in disability research & service, but are disproportionately represented in the overall disability community.



STILL WE PERSIST

The atrocities committed towards Native Americans has a long and tragic history, with continued impacts bleeding into modern day, such as poverty, broken systems, incarceration, displacement, victimization, and loss of identity.

Oppression, efforts to erode our culture, injunctions and legal challenges, historical trauma, deficiency of representation, and discrimination compound the difficult path forward.

BUT, still we persist. We build up from the rubble, we expand infrastructure, we strengthen our care systems, and we continue to pursue the reinstatement of our language, lands, and rights.

We continue to persist, survive, and thrive.





Mental health and mental illness also have a complicated history, one of stigma, shame, misunderstanding, judgment, abuse, and punishment.

The disability community shares in a similar complex, difficult, and painful history.

All three have been stigmatized and marginalized historically and still inequities and injustices continue to exist.

We must do better.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

There is no question that we have seen a massive increase in mental illness, psychological stress, isolation, suicide, and a general decrease in overall well-being in our world. The pandemic highlighted the massive impact of fractured systems, specifically for our disability community.

The impact of protective factors which increase mental health, resilience, wellbeing, and coping has never been more important.

Protective factors include things that support resilience, help people more effectively manage stressful events, and strengthen other characteristics that minimize the risk of mental illness or substance use challenges.

Native American culture holds significant protective factors by nature, such as connectedness to one another and tradition, grounding, and community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE

It is our culture that will save us, that heals us, that teaches us, and protects us.

Our traditions, practices, connectedness, and kinship are all protective factors in overall well-being and mental health.

When these protective factors have an equitable space and respect as mental health treatment and supports, true positive change will occur for Indian country.



OUT OF THE BOX?

Interventions aimed at mental health treatment & disability supportive services should never fit in a box, specifically when the box removes the dignity, the practices and customs of people, and the very things that make culture our medicine.



EXAMPLES OF INCLUSION

Just a few examples of ways to give space to traditional ways of knowing, balancing, healing, and connecting.

- Drumming & singing
- Dance
- Beading
- Stick Ball
- Food
- Smudging & Prayer
- Understanding extended family compositions



HOW DOES SOMETHING EVER CHANGE?

Archiac methods for research collection & inclusion give little thought to the negative impact on Indian Country that the design structure and regulations create.

- intruding & disrespectful
- disruption of the community
- distrust
- historical impact
- metric issues
- lack of representation

But without a robust mass of data, it is essentially impossible to move forward in appropriate ways-funding and system shifts that are desperately needed.



INTERSECTIONALITY

As mentioned, Native Americans disproportionately represent people experiencing chronic health conditions related to disability and the intersectionality between both the Native American community and the disability community must be significantly understood.

The need to understand issues related to disability, prepare healthcare systems to serve Tribal Nations, and develop policy and program leaders who have a strong cultural understanding and investment in mental health and disability issues cannot be overstated.



A FEW PROJECTS



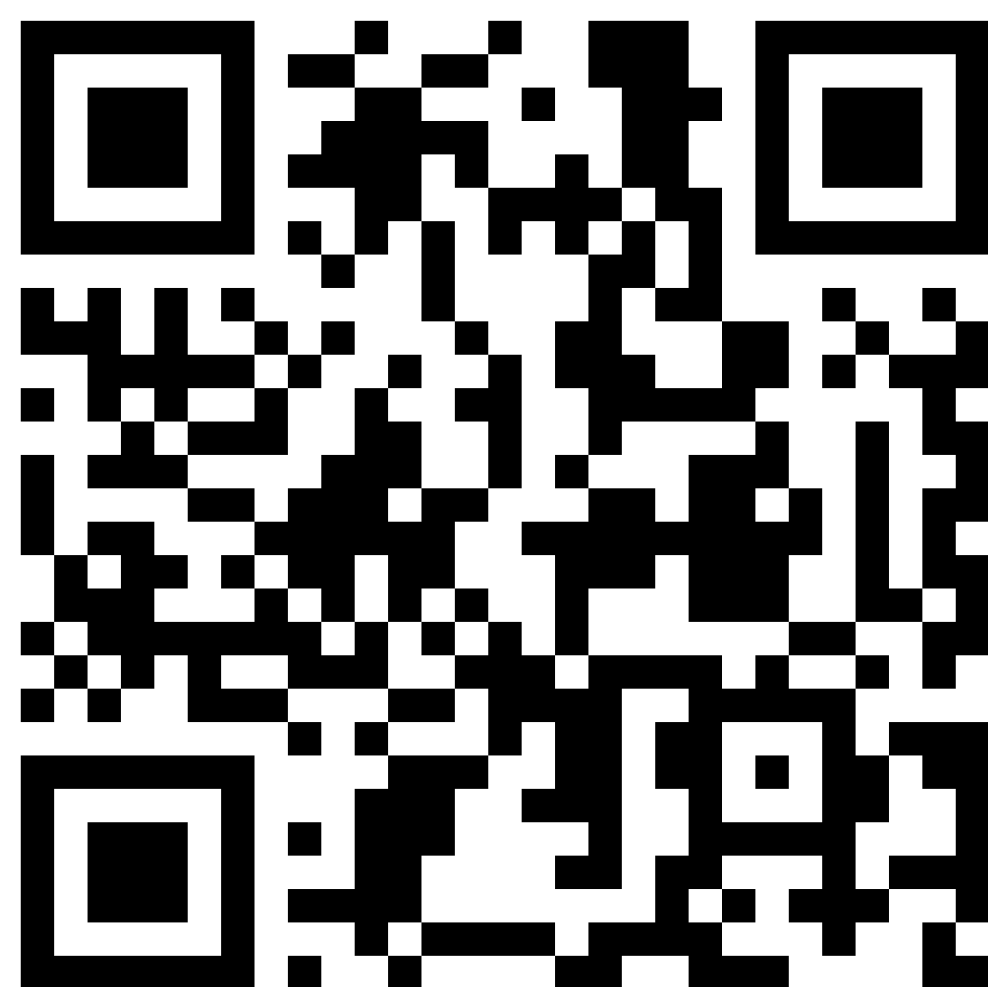
The National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA) has released a toolkit dedicated to increasing awareness and knowledge of the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native persons living with disabilities. The toolkit – “Understanding Disabilities in American Indian & Alaska Native Communities.”



*UNDERSTANDING
DISABILITIES IN NATIVE
COMMUNITIES*

**"PEOPLE THINK WE'RE
A CULTURE THAT
NEEDS RESCUING, AND
WE'RE NOT. WE DON'T
WANT TO BE SERVED;
WE WANT TO BE PART
OF BUILDING SERVICE
STRUCTURES."**

DR. CRYSTAL HERNANDEZ



REPRESENTATION MATTERS

The need for representation within the systems that impact change and delivery of supports and services cannot be understated.

Representation must be:

- Realistic and not just symbolic.
- Must be in the spaces and places that truly have the capacity to impact change.
- Must include the very people that the laws, policies, and systems are supposed to serve and protect.
- Examples:
 - Policy makers
 - Elected officials & law makers
 - Higher education systems and boards
 - Service governing agencies



CULTURALLY ROOTED CARE SYSTEMS



The path forward provides space for cultural inclusion, culturally rooted supports and services, Native healers, elders, and ceremony.

The provision for accommodations in ceremony is essential. This allows for continued connection to our history, our people, and our protective factors.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Never in our history have we been at a moment of change, like we are today.

We can take the teachings from our past, the observations from the systems around us – including their failures and successes, and craft one of the most powerful and culturally-rooted systems for our Disabled Tribal Communities.

Intersectionality must be a practice and at the forefront of thought by all. Inclusion matters, and now that we consistently know better, we must do better.

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THANK YOU