

Mental Health and Native Hawaiian Youth

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The Hawaii Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division (CAMHD) serves youth with serious emotional disturbance. In order to qualify for our services, a young person's diagnosed mental health disorder must cause a moderate or severe impairment in their daily functioning. Of these kids with the most significant mental health challenges in our state, about half of all youth served by CAMHD identify as Native Hawaiian.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) shared that suicide rates for indigenous youth are twice that of white youth.

These disproportionate findings can be understood as the aftermath of colonization. Colonization leads to structural violence, which refers to a system where social, economic, political, financial and religious benefits are conferred on the dominant power and the rest are marginalized. And this leads to cultural trauma, leaving the colonized population with stress, shame, discrimination and denigration for generations to come.

“Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in a fundamental and irrevocable way.” (Andriescu, Daria. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, 2013)

This intergenerational legacy of cultural trauma has robbed Native Hawaiians of critical resources like land, wealth, power, language, pride, connectedness, agency, and culturally relevant coping strategies. These resources are all social determinants of health, including mental health. Social determinants of health are nonmedical factors that impact health outcomes, such as housing, transportation, access to nutritious foods, and access to healthcare. Without these resources, many Hawaiians have an increased likelihood of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood, such as growing up in a household where there is mental illness, violence, substance abuse, etc. ACEs have been linked to increased mortality from both physical and mental illness.

It is easy to see how colonization led to structural violence, which led to cultural trauma, which impacted social determinants of health and resulted in Adverse Childhood Experiences and a host of other health disparities among Native Hawaiians.

And yet in westernized nations, indigenous health disparities are often treated as a result of individual choice, or as a resistance to assimilating into 'mainstream' cultural ideals. This feeds the narrative that Hawaiians themselves are to blame for their terrible circumstances.

To combat this, services need to adopt a more trauma-informed approach. This means a paradigm shift away from “What is wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”

Culturally-sensitive, trauma-informed strategies:

- Understand colonization and the resultant cultural trauma legacy that Native Hawaiians continue to endure
- Recognize the profound health disparities experienced by Native Hawaiians past & present
- Appreciate the Native Hawaiian world view especially as it relates to health/illnesses
- Identify traditional lifestyle ways & healing practices that led to good health
- Explore lessons from the field of traumatology - and the similarities and differences in treating traumatized individuals vs treating a traumatized population
- Take time to unpack perceived resistances to treatment compliance
- Represent – have Native Hawaiians in helping roles

Helping young people reconnect with their culture can be empowering if they can see their culture as way to solve their problems, not as the source of them.

This approach, in addition to having caring adults in their lives, can increase the likelihood that mental health services will be acceptable to Native Hawaiian youth, in addition to being accessible.