



3/30/15 - Historical trauma affects mental health of today's Native American

By JOAQLIN ESTUS • MAR 30, 2015

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Historical trauma at the root of substance abuse and other mental health maladies

An Ojibwe woman and independent journalist recently visited Alaska for a series of stories on historical trauma and Native American mental health practices (<http://Read more at http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/07/27/mary-annette-pember-lead-yearlong-project-historical-trauma-156073>). Mary Annette Pember said the troubled lives of Native Americans reflect their troubled history.

In one of her articles, Pember tells the story of Oseira. In 1944, at the age of five, Oseira was removed from her home in a Bristol Bay area village and sent to a Catholic boarding school (<https://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/02/06/last-orphans-holy-cross-153438>) in Interior Alaska. There, Oseira said she and her sister joined dozens of other children in a strictly regimented life of hard work, harsh punishment, and little schooling.

Pember said her interest in historical trauma has its roots in her own family history. Like Oseira, Pember's mother was removed from her Wisconsin family as a child.

"My mother was a boarding school survivor," said Pember. "She's passed on now. But you know, as I began this whole looking at historical trauma some years ago, I kind of wanted to look at myself and my own family's struggles with dis-ease, substance abuse, mental health issues."

Pember said the history of Native Americans is one of overwhelming trauma such as widespread death from war and disease, dislocation from their homelands, and removal of children from their families.

“There's a lot of hurt. There's a lot of pain,” said Pember. “As humans I think it's a pretty human response to want the pain to go away. And I think that's what folks are doing.”

Dr. Dewey Ertz, of Rapid City, South Dakota, visited Alaska last fall to speak at a conference on substance abuse hosted by the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association. He's a member of the Cheyenne River Lakota, survivors of a notorious massacre.

“[We're the] people who not only defeated Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, but we're also the victims of Wounded Knee,” said Ertz.

During his 40 years as a psychologist, Ertz has treated trauma survivors and conducted research about trauma. He said people's reactions vary depending on the type of trauma, and the individual, their support system and resilience. But Ertz said many people find ways to numb overwhelming emotions.

“One very commonly is addictions or substances, including food. Another one is anger, because anger is a secondary emotion and covers up other emotions very effectively,” said Ertz. “Another is bad relationships because if you're in bad relationships you have somebody else to blame for everything. And the last one actually is sex. Now, people are not numb during sex but that's all that they're thinking about.”

And, Ertz said, some people use more than one of those numbing techniques.

“And then you have gladiators, who say if one thing is good to numb with, I will use all four,” said Ertz. “So they partner up with someone that they can drink or use drugs with, have a bad relationship with, be angry at, and have sex with, and that produces lots of children.”

Ertz said children learn these adverse maladaptive coping mechanisms from their parents, and later model them for their children. He said there's also now a theory that trauma alters the way genes express themselves. He said the idea behind epigenetics is that in the right -- or wrong -- environment, a person may be predisposed to unhealthy psychological reactions.

Still, Ertz said healing is possible – therapy helps. And in an article (<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/03/16/fearless-fight-against-historical-trauma-yupik-way-159611>) published March 16, 2015, Pember describes the success of a Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation program headed by Rose Dominick that uses ancient Yup'ik traditions in healing. Pember said healing occurs when survivors of trauma are in a safe environment and can share their story.

“I think awareness is a big deal,” said Pember. “And, you know, one of the things that Rose Dominick and her team talked about is laying it out on the table, on what you're dealing with, if it be substance abuse, or you were sexually abused as a child, really just talking about it and putting it out on the table really helps you gain perspective on it.”

Pember said that sharing helps people understand they're having a normal human reaction to repeated or prolonged stress, and that understanding can lead to healing .

You can see other examples of Mary Annette Pember's work at her website <http://mapember.com> (<http://mapember.com>) .



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