I Remember Who I Am: Deg Xit'an Athabascan Perspectives on Wellness

LaVerne Xilegg Demientieff and Patrick Frank

Mother Nature Taught Native Dancing

After reading about the creation of the world in a Native legend, I wondered how the Creator made man … a man who learned how to Native dance. Sitting under a tall spruce tree meditating one late evening in April, the answer came to me.

Soft, sporadic gusts of wind whistled along the hillside. Listening intently with eyes closed, I heard the distant coming of soprano spirits, high above the trees like a band of swiftly flying pintail ducks, passing in an instant. Next alto sounds from a remote distance approached quickly, whipping the treetops as they passed.

The serenading of tenors began nearby and resonated through the trees rapidly then was gone. Last the vibrant tremors of base, slower in movement, sent waves of peacefulness through me, bouncing at ground level all around me. The Great Orchestrator of creation was replaying ancient melodies from my ancestors' songbook, guiding the singers around me in perfect harmony.

As the force of the wind swept over and around me, I had a visitor. I felt something brushing lightly against my left arm. Startled, I opened my eyes to see who was trying to get my attention. To my surprise it was fingerlike spruce branches swaying to the catchy beat of the wind.

Then I understood how man learned to Native dance! Elders often say, "Observe nature quietly for she is your teacher." Long ago my forefathers had similar experiences, sitting in the woods on windy days while opening their hearts to nature. They patiently observed trees swaying gently under light gusts of wind and moving more rapidly when stronger blasts whipped through the forest.

The movement of sturdy spruce trees was the men dancing, strong and proud. The women were the birch trees gracefully swaying to the soft tune of ancient music. The children were the small willows, flexible, innovative, with an essence as free as the wind. The wise Elders were the gigantic, wrinkled, cottonwood trees with branches waving proud signs of approval. The unseen sap was the spirit of all life, the ancestors, a connecting vibrancy of the universe.

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On a dark, windy evening under the trees, I'm still. I listen. I remember days when Native People were in tune with nature, in tune with their heritage, a people who danced to the ancient melodies drummed by the Great Creator.

I remember who I am.

——Patrick Frank, Deg Xit'an Elder

In this chapter, we present possibilities and hope for healing and wellness through cultural and ancestral knowledge. Highlighting and focusing on the strengths of people can be a very powerful perspective and tool. Focusing on the problem, or problematizing, is far too common in helping professions and can be very detrimental. Smith [1] says,

> The "Indigenous problem" is a recurrent theme in all imperial and colonial attempts to deal with Indigenous peoples. It originates within the wider discourse of racism, sexism and other forms of positioning the other. Its neatness and simplicity gives the term its power and durability. Framing "the … problem," mapping it, describing it in all its different manifestations, trying to get rid of it, laying blame for it, talking about it, writing newspaper columns about it, drawing cartoons about it, teaching about it, researching it, over and over …. how many occasions, polite dinner parties and academic conferences would be bereft of conversation if "the Indigenous problem had not been so problematized?" (p. 94)

When we focus on the problem, those in the helping field unknowingly create pessimistic expectations and predictions about the clients we work with, and the client also begins to internalize these negative labels [2]. Over time, this is damaging to both the helper and the client. It is essential to acknowledge that every person, family, and community has strengths and every person, family, and community deals with challenges. That is just human nature. We can shift is our lens to magnify and focus on what is working, especially what has worked for people culturally and traditionally. Deg Xit'an Athabascan teachings highlight an understanding of how our thoughts and energy work in the world. Elders share that putting out negative thoughts, feelings, and actions into the world not only hurts others but comes back on you as well. You cannot heal by fighting off grief or trauma with anger or with negative thoughts or force; you have to do this with love, compassion, and forgiveness in relation to all things. This is what I have learned from my Elders.

Deg Xit'an Athabascan People

The "I" in this chapter is LaVerne Xilegg Demientieff. Patrick Frank is my coauthor and uncle. My uncle has helped me to remember who I am as a Deg Xit'an Athabascan woman. He has been an integral part of my healing and he has taught me important concepts and values related to the seen and unseen world, sharing and caring, and the natural way our people show compassion and love for all things. Without him, this chapter could not have been written.

The perspectives and examples shared in this chapter mainly come from the Deg Xit'an People, Elders, and culture bearers who shared their knowledge with me

during focus groups for my dissertation on Deg Xitan wellness. *Xisrigidisddhinh* (I am grateful). *Dogidinh* (thank you) for your contributions.

The Deg Xit'an People are river people, very spiritually connected, and strong in mind, body, and spirit. The people come from a culture rich with traditions, customs, and knowledge that have been passed on orally from generation to generation for thousands of years. Yale anthropologist Cornelius Osgood described the Deg Xit'an People as peaceful people (1959). The Deg Xit'an People are the smallest in population of the 11 Athabascan groups located in Southwest Alaska on the lower Yukon and lower Innoko Rivers. The four main Deg Xit'an communities are Holy Cross, Anvik, Shageluk, and Grayling. These rural communities are accessible only by plane, boat, or snow machine. The population estimates for all Deg Xit'an People are unknown. A significant number of Deg Xit'an People live in the larger urban cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks. Many of the Deg Xit'an People currently living in urban communities do so for reasons that include being close to medical care, employment, and educational opportunities, or to be near other resources and activities. Many of these individuals often return home to their rural communities to subsist off the land, visit family, and to attend major events such as births, deaths, and traditional ceremonies, and some still own land or homes or have fish camps in and nearby these communities. Deg Xinag is the language spoken (see Fig. 1); currently, there are a handful of fluent speakers remaining and the work toward reclaiming and revitalizing the language is strong.

This chapter is an opportunity to share information on wellness and resilience from the perspective of the river people, the Deg Xit'an People of Southwest Alaska, and encourage mental health and health care providers to explore and incorporate the benefits of culture with their clients and incorporate compassion, connection, curiosity, ceremony, and community as part of their healing work.

Our Elders tell us stories and share Traditional Wisdom about how to live a good life. Our ancestors used this cultural knowledge and wisdom on a daily basis to live in harmony with the world around them and nurture wellness within the community. Deg Xit'an Elder, Jim Dementi, shared with me his understanding of wellness: "It's just the way we live our lives" (personal communication, n.d.). This is a very simple but also a profound statement. Remembering who we are as Native People, gaining knowledge about how our ancestors understood the seen and unseen world, and learning about and participating in traditional practices can be an empowering process that connects us to each other, creates a sense of belonging and pride, and teaches us how to heal and regain balance in our lives. The pain, shame, and grief perpetrated on Native People through colonization forced cultural knowledge and wisdom, language, spirituality, traditions, and ceremonies under the table to protect the people from harm by colonizers and also to keep the practices safe for future generations. Deg Xit'an Elder Pat Frank shared with me, and often shares with others, that it is time to put these things back on the table—take them out, let them be seen, let them guide us, let them be shared and taught to future generations—because

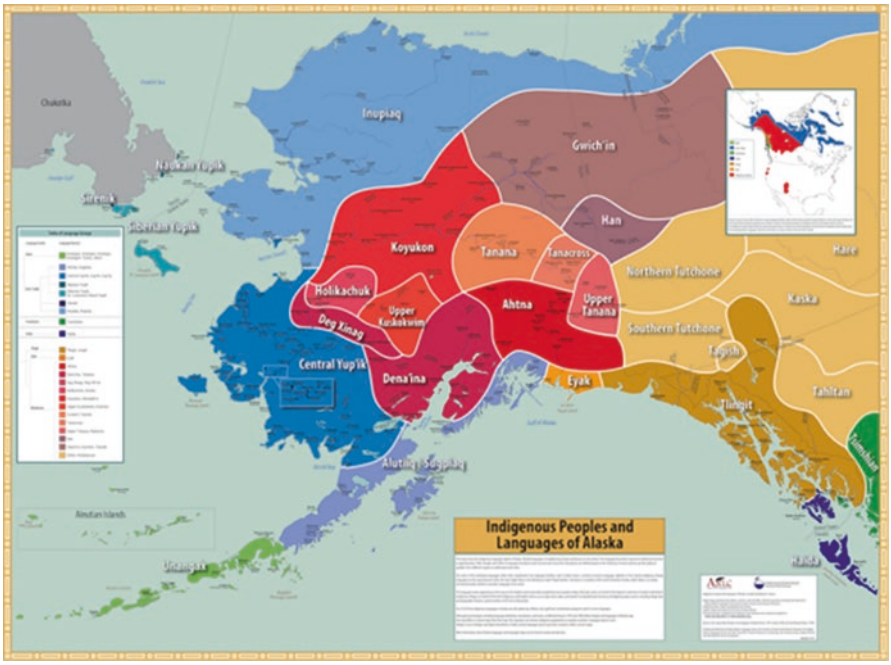

Fig. 1 Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska [3]. Michael Krauss, Gary Holton, Jim Kerr, and Colin T. West. Used with permission from Alaska Native Language Center and UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research. Online: http://www.uaf.edu/anla/map

that is what is going to create healing and power in our people (personal communication, February 2018).

During a social work conference in Anchorage, Alaska, in 2017, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF's) Vice Chancellor for Native Education very powerfully stated in a presentation on healing, "All you have to do is be who you are" (E. Peter, NASW-AK Conference, October 2017). Be who you are. For people who have lost so much for "being who they are," this statement can bring feelings of anxiety and fear because Western institutions still often do not embrace or incorporate diverse worldviews. However, if you are able to embrace this act of being who you are, it will also bring about liberation and freedom from shackles of historical trauma and grief and transform the individual and these institutions for the better.

In my own wellness and healing journey, it took me a long time to understand the significance of the phrase "be who you are." I started to wake up to this in my early 20s when I took a Deg Xinag Athabascan language class at the UAF, facilitated by a Deg Xit'an Athabascan language professor, a non-Native linguist, and co-taught by about six Elders from our region in Alaska. My own grandparents, maternal and paternal, died when my parents were young, so I did not know them and was not told much about them. It was a wonderful experience to be with these Elders, some of whom I had never met and others I had not seen since I was young. I introduced

myself to these Elders as I had been taught, listing the names of my parents and grandparents on both sides of the family. As I did that, the Elders began to make the connection, and once they did, it was like a puzzle piece fitting nicely into its spot and the bigger picture emerges. My uncle taught me that once the ancestral connection is made, the Elders look at me and see my parents or grandparents when they talk to me, the ones they knew and loved. In a way, I become them, and the Elders will treat me well to show respect for those they knew.

This class was my first introduction to the Deg Xinag Athabascan language, which has only a handful of fluent speakers left. My parents were raised partly in the Catholic mission in Holy Cross and did not grow up speaking the language, so my siblings and I did not learn. This experience was a pivotal point in my healing and wellness journey. The class was held in one of the Elder apartments at UAF and we learned the language through hands-on activities like making moose soup together, going on nature walks, and playing games. The Elders lovingly embraced me. They told me they were proud of me; they told me that I sounded good and that speaking Deg Xinag was in my blood. They also shared stories of my grandparents that I never knew. After each class, I would be inspired and invigorated and would share what I learned of the language with my mother. She would try to guess what I was saying and many times was correct. This was powerful because she was remembering a time when her parents talked to her in Deg Xinag when she was very little. Growing up in the Catholic mission in Holy Cross, my mother lost the ability to speak the language. She was so happy that I was learning the language and sharing it with her—it strengthened our connection and grounded us in our culture. The safe and loving space that these Elders created is a good cultural example of trauma-informed care. This is where healing begins. The walls of colonization in my mind and spirit started to break down as I learned about who I am as a Deg Xit'an woman through the language learning process. What I know now is that these Elders were modeling for me how to be a good Tea Partner (discussed in the following sections) and human being; they offered me connection, compassion, and love, as Elders do. The Deg Xit'an way, which values reciprocity and balance, is for me to offer my knowledge of this to others and to the next generation to come.

The Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey

As I journeyed through my doctoral dissertation on wellness among the Deg Xit'an Athabascan people, I learned more and more about our cultural traditions and the influence of our cultural traditions on our health and well-being through conversational focus groups with Elders and culture bearers. What I learned is that for many Indigenous People seeds are planted early on in a person's life in the form of stories, experiences, and modeling about how to be a Deg Xit'an person. The Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey created from my dissertation work with Elders and culture bearers tells a story about the themes that emerged from the conversational focus groups related to wellness. The themes include cultural and traditional practices; traditional values; embracing

challenges by remembering who we are; and Deg Xit'an beliefs and action recommendations. The Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey description is highlighted below.

> The Deg Xit'an, Athabascan people of Southwest Alaska have been taught traditional values and how to be in relationship with the physical and spirit world through the cultural practices modeled by our Elders, parents, and community leaders and seeds for wellness are rooted within us. When we know who we are and where we come from as Deg Xit'an People we are better able to embrace life's challenges. Our ancestors have taught us that the challenges we face in life are viewed as gifts that lead to growth, wisdom and resilience. When discussing wellness and wholeness among Deg Xit'an People the Elders and culture bearers remind us that the Deg Xit'an beliefs about how to live and be in the world give us insight and direction and lead us back to our cultural practices where we are able to live our values and the journey continues. The Tea Partner traditional practice is one example of how wellness was infused into the Deg Xit'an way of life" ([4], p. 103).

The following are highlights from each of the four themes in my doctoral dissertation study on Deg Xit'an Wellness [4].

Cultural and Traditional Practices

Our values are embedded through the lived cultural practices and way of life modeled by Elders, parents, and community leaders. The cultural practices include preparing for the future, transmitting culture and language, and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength.

Preparing for the Future

Participants discussed the cultural practice of preparing for the future as an integral part of the Deg Xit'an way of life. It was a matter of survival. The people prepared from day to day, season to season, year to year, and for the future generations following. Everything that was done was done in preparation, thinking ahead, and planning for something coming. A male Deg Xit'an Elder discussed the importance of not taking too much from the land so that it will return in the future for you and your children and grandchildren. He said, "We were taught, never over trap a beaver house, I don't know how many lines or houses they would have in your day but they said never to over trap, just get so much out of a house then your line will always be there for you to make a living for your family, and your grandchildren" [4].

Transmitting Culture and Language

Participants discussed the importance of sharing our stories of our people and experiences, especially with young people. Deg Xit'an People have always been an oral society. Stories are how we learn information, values, skills, protocols, lessons, humor, and more. We also have to learn our story to be able to tell our stories. We will not have a culture if we do not tell our stories to others so they can pass them on and on.

Many stories were shared that began with the phrase "I remember …". These stories were shared with expressions of love, humor, sadness, respect, and longing, and mainly with the intent to teach or learn something from the past. Cultural practices emphasize the Deg Xit'an ways of life and how to be human and navigate through life's challenges. One Elder male participant stated, "It's important to remember … the Elders always say, think about the way you live. Remember your people, remember your ways, remember your language, all the stuff … and they say that for a reason. There's a real reason there—that's to survive" [4].

Building Physical, Social, Mental, and Spiritual Strength

An Elder woman participant discussed how strength is gained through cultural practices and through our own feelings of worth and empowerment. She stated, "I think it just boils down to knowing your power … so many of us go through life and we don't know our power, our power to do anything …. be it, refrain from alcohol, be it, getting a degree, or be it, becoming whatever. And I think if people realize they have the power then they'd find the strength cause they have it within them, that's the human way, the human condition. And I think power is all over, that we gain our strength from, and when you look at it culturally all the setting was there, the Native dances, the hunting, the storytelling" [4].

An Elder male participant spoke about getting spiritual strength from nature. "For me it's out in nature. When I go to nature I pray and it fills me up, the power of the water, I go on the water and … sometimes the trees, animals, and the nature reveal themselves to you and I actually feel their power. When I go on the Yukon, I go out there, that's where I fill myself, that's where I get my strength … how I ground myself is I look for water…because I'm from the Yukon" [4].

Traditional Values

We are taught the Deg Xit'an values of respect, relationships, balance and reciprocity, sharing and caring, and happiness and humor, which are deeply instilled within us from the time we are born. These are not all our values but ones that emerged strongly from the discussions.

Respect

The Tea Partner traditional practice emphasizes this value of respect. An Elder male participant said, "What our people designed years ago was a Tea Partner that connects how you treat one another. How the men treat the women. How the women treat the men. How we all took care of one another, even though you're not related" [4].

Relationships

The Deg Xit'an worldview is that the people are in relationship to everything: people, land, animals, water, spirit, and Creator. An Elder woman shared a story about her relationship with the crow. She said, "When they would travel on the water, she would look up at the clouds, and her mom believed that … the crow was very spiritual. She said, we watch for the crow. He's flying along, then he turns over and he drops and they said, when he does it that means drop a pack sack of good luck to me … and he rights himself up and he flies on, so, we would watch for them, watch for the crow. *Yixgitsiy* we called it" [4].

Balance and Reciprocity

An Elder male participant shared an example of how Elders practiced balance and tended to the spirit of the community. "I always look at the Elders and really wise people do the rituals and ceremonies, they were designed by our ancestors. Even though they didn't have a doctorate degree or master degree or anything, they tended to the spirit of the community. If it was too heavy they did things to bring it up, if it was too giddy they bring it down more logically, they balance it all the time, always tending to the spirit of that community. And as Native People we believe in the seen and the unseen and there is a lot of forces that affect the village that are unseen. So, by introducing spiritual, or rituals and ceremonies, they tended to these forces that carried the well-being with the villages" [4].

Sharing and Caring

An Elder woman also emphasized the value of sharing and caring by discussing the Tea Partner tradition. "I think, my mother chose my Tea Partner, because we had a teacher and his wife over there … and she told me, Mr. so and so is your partner, and every time they would have food passed out he would bring me a nice plate of food, which I was very happy for, and then mom would help me fix up a plate to send over to him, so he was a white man, but he was my partner, my Tea Partner, and that's what I remember about that. It was a good way to have friends, and they cared about us and we cared about them, you know" [4]. This memory highlights incorporating non-Native People from outside the culture within the traditional practices. The net connecting people together is cast far and wide.

Happiness and Humor

The value of happiness and humor as discussed by participants held many meanings. It was used strategically to bring joy to the community, to change the energy from negative to more light and positive, to show friendship and love to someone

through teasing and joking, to lessen sorrow and grief, and also to tell stories and teach lessons. One Elder male shared the joy the Elders displayed. He said, "The Elders in Holy Cross, when I first went there … they were a happy bunch, I could remember them, I think about them a lot. I think about the village how it was, the two rows of houses, with, an Elder, almost an Elder in every house, when I first went there" [4]. Humor is healing.

Embracing Challenges by Remembering Who We Are

As Deg Xit'an People grow and develop, and as they move through their wellness journey, they encounter life's challenges, including competing values and practices from Western society and various other types of struggles related to isolation and disconnection, identity and belonging, historical trauma and grief, and alcohol abuse and addiction. These struggles sometimes lead to poor health and mental health and can distance the people from their cultural knowledge and practices and create barriers to wellness. Yet, because Deg Xit'an values have been deeply instilled in the person, they do not ever lose who they are as Deg Xit'an People.

Isolation and Disconnection

An Elder male participant shares his thoughts on wellness as stemming from a community coming together. He wants to make sure people do not think we are just all well. He makes the point that we are not well, but that instead of pulling against each other, we should be coming together and helping each other. He states that we need to get back to the old culture—the ways people lived back then—and we need to try to find solutions to this. Depression, addiction, and suicide happen when there is too much isolation and disconnection. To bring this back to the Tea Partner tradition, which is one good potential solution, the Tea Partner is about connection and respect and sharing and caring.

Identity and Belonging

A young male participant talked about his interest and connection to the culture and to wanting to know more and learn more. He stated, "I'm really interested in … I've never actually seen our dancing before, and I don't know if you guys remember how it was done or if you want to bring it back, you know, but, I'd love to see pictures, if anyone has pictures, and you know I never knew who I was on my Deg Xit'an side so, I'm now finally starting to get back to my roots as a Deg Xit'an person, so I really am interested in learning from you guys, you know, if you ever want, if you ever need someone to talk to, or if you want to teach anyone, I'm here. I love to listen to Elders and if anyone has knowledge out there I'm here and I want to learn"

[4]. The young people are energized and open to learning, practicing, and sharing the culture, as well as creating and adding their own unique spin on traditional practices. It is an exciting time.

Historical Trauma and Grief

Historical trauma and grief were discussed by participants as the efforts and impacts of Western society to colonize and assimilate the Native People, in this case, the Deg Xit'an People. They discussed examples related to mass epidemics, missionaries and boarding schools, religion and church, and loss of traditional ways.

Alcohol Abuse and Addiction

Alcohol abuse and addiction came up in the discussion among participants as a very widespread challenge. Another Elder male participant shared his thoughts on getting sober, stating that being sober does not mean being boring, it means starting to live your life. He said, "You tell kids to stop doing destructive things, but you then tell them, here's what you're supposed to do. I remember a couple of times encouraging people that you've got to stop, and we all have to be sober, and when I say sober to anybody they think and picture someone sitting there sober—not smiling not doing anything except stopped, but that's not the way people are. Think about our families, our people—how they go to a dance, have a good time. You can just see them smiling, and dancing, and their spirits, their whole bodies just exploding with happiness, and you can feel it. Mind, body, and spirit, happy and living the way they're supposed to be living. This is the way they were designed to live. This is the way they should live. It's complete—mind, body, and spirit—being … developing, moving, and enjoying … and that's sobering up, but continue on with life. Yeah, get sober, but continue on with your life. So, wellness is the same way" [4].

Deg Xit'an Beliefs and Action Recommendations

In response to generational changes and life struggles, Elders and culture bearers continue to pass on their knowledge and wisdom of what can be done to get the people back to cultural practices that promote wellness and their way of life. These community action recommendations include people coming together as a community, doing things in a good way, and caring for themselves and others. Through the community action recommendations, these shared values are able to emerge and provide the person with a sense of belonging, direction, and purpose. Through these actions, the Deg Xit'an person will be able to return to the cultural practices of preparing for the future, transmitting culture and language, and building physical,

social, mental, and spiritual strength, which then models Deg Xit'an values and practices for the next generation, and the cycle continues.

Coming Together as a Community

An Elder male stated, "What I notice about Holy Cross, even up to this day, when someone passes away, when you lose someone among the people, the people band together. They're strong. They support that person's family, and you could see it there, that there's a degree of wellness that I know of, that's when people are well, and, I told the people, you know we get together, only in sad times nowadays. Why don't we get together in good times? You know. Together. Get the people together" [4]. Coming together as a community has so many benefits. It can create opportunities, build connections and relationships, create a sense of pride and belonging, bring joy, teach the culture and language, and spark radical possibilities.

Doing Things in a Good Way

This includes tending to the spirit of the people and community and also being in relationship with the spiritual world and knowing how to keep oneself and others safe from harm. It is important to be aware of the energy, positive and negative, that exists in the world and to understand how to manage it in a good way. Everything in the world has energy. An Elder male participant discussed the importance of clearing out bad energy or spirits when needed, saying, "So, anybody who comes into the building brings different energy. It's all energy, and it could be good energy, bad energy, or something like that but it stays right in the house. We have to clear it out. There is correct protocol to do this, there is always a good way to do things" [4].

Sharing and Caring for Self and Others

Everything should be done within the spirit of sharing and caring for others. They are both essential values as well as practices. The Tea Partner tradition is an excellent example of how sharing and caring was practiced traditionally. An Elder male participant shares that in order to heal and be well we have to share our knowledge and success. We have to "pass it on" and "give it away," he said. "I found out the easiest way to stay sober today is to help another person that needs it … to pass it on to someone else" [4].

As a people, we have to continue sharing our culture, planting those seeds, so when our kids go through challenges they have that knowledge, those values, and the practices to get them through tough times, and to heal and regain balance and wholeness when they find themselves in these difficult circumstances.

The lessons learned from the Deg Xit'an People related to wellness are many. One lesson is that no human or community or culture is perfect, and that ceremonies

were created and used because life is challenging and can topple us out of balance. Together, and with love and compassion for each other, we can move through grief, find joy, and create our best lives on this earth.

Awakening the Spirit: The Influence of Culture on Wellness and Healing

Examples of resilience and wellness are rooted in all cultures and communities across Alaska. Society as a whole can learn and gain a lot from the wisdom and practices of these diverse cultures that incorporate into daily living community practices grounded in love, connection, belonging, and healing. Our Indigenous communities experience the highest levels of wellness when we are able to express ourselves as cultural and spiritual beings and when we feel valued by society for who we are as a people. This includes the ability to speak our language, practice our spirituality and traditions, freedom to subsist off the land, and the right to determine our own needs and solutions. Woods et al. [5], in *A Preliminary Report on The Relationships Between Collective Self-Esteem, Historical Trauma, and Mental Health Among Alaska Native People,* share that "Alaska Native individuals who still positively view their heritage and who are still culturally connected (high levels of Collective Self-Esteem) despite historical colonialism and modern day oppression may be less likely to experience distress and depression, which also lowers the likelihood of substance use and suicide" (p. 2).

They go on to say that programs that help individuals become more aware of the positive characteristics and aspects of their heritage, and helping them stay connected with their heritage, might prevent people from experiencing psychological distress and depression.

We as human beings are multidimensional; from an Indigenous perspective, health and mental health are not separate entities to be dealt with or worked on separate from culture, spirituality, family, and community. Cultural traditions around the world have a lot to share with, and teach, the mental health profession. These diverse cultural practices and ceremonies have been brilliantly constructed by our ancestors and incorporate a holistic approach to wellness, to include a deep love for one another, connection, belonging, community, and values such as having a compassionate spirit, reciprocity, and sharing and caring.

Healing often happens alongside remembering who we are as Native People. This is a process with many stages. It includes claiming who we are as Indigenous human beings, claiming our ancestors, learning our stories, songs, and dances, listening to the Elders, learning about lineage and connecting to our relatives, learning about our unique relationship with water, land, and animals, hearing and speaking our language, partaking in traditional practices and ceremonies, and nourishing our spirits with traditional food from the land. In my Deg Xit'an wellness dissertation, one Elder male participant stated, **"**It's important to remember … the Elders always

say, think about the way you live. Remember your people, remember your ways, remember your language, all the stuff … and they say that for a reason. There's a real reason there—that's to survive. So, that's directly from the Deg Xit'an Athabascan people, and other Athabascan Elders" [4].

Some major challenges for Indigenous People are related to historical and intergenerational trauma, and the embodiment of trauma and how it has manifested as illness and addiction. Colonization efforts have created a loss of trust within Indigenous People. Deg Xit'an Elder, Sam Demientieff, shared with me that much that was lost through colonization and historical trauma was related to trust. As helpers, we recognize that trust is essential to healthy relationships. The loss of trust goes very deep and is very difficult to regain, especially with continued oppression and racism (personal communication, 2017).

I have always been interested in the topic of historical trauma because it is part of our story and it has influenced my people and my family and myself. Yet it is only a part of our story. The more important story to tell is our wellness story, our story of resilience. We have a long line of ancestors whose strength, perseverance, knowledge, and love are part of our DNA and the only reason we are here today. I have been blessed that as I was growing up my aunt, Rose Jerue, instilled in me that the women in our family are very powerful and that my ancestors were extremely strong, proud, and determined people (personal communication, n.d.). That knowledge has carried me through many challenges. I have also had the blessing of having my uncle tell me that when I acknowledge my ancestors they stand behind me and with me, so I honor them by acknowledging them (P. Frank, personal communication, n.d.). These sentiments have laid a foundation of resilience and determination in my spirit.

Our culture is powerful and when practiced has the ability to awaken our spirit and open us up to a profound experience of gratitude and joy. Deg Xit'an Athabascan Elder, Sam Demientieff, shared that practicing cultural traditions is often experienced as an "awakening of the spirit." He often lovingly and animatedly tells the story of his father describing how he feels when he starts to sing and dance to the beat of the drum. He said that his father would share that when he begins to dance, it starts slow but you feel the power entering your spirit, it begins to build as you dance harder and sing louder, and this power and energy fills you up. His father described it to him as an "awakening of the spirit," because speaking the language and engaging in our cultural traditions connects our spirit to our ancestors and Creator and fills our spirit with feelings of joy and connection (personal communication, n.d.). I have heard similar stories from other Alaska Native Elders who describe similar experiences of healing, relief, connection, strength, belonging, pride, and love when partaking in their songs and dances with their community. When I hear Alaska Native People singing loudly and dancing hard, and having fun, I have myself felt the overwhelming feelings of pride and connection and deep love for our people. It is as if the spirit comes alive and is filled with purpose and joy. Definitely, something profound is happening. I believe it is a feeling of deep connection emanating from within our cells and connecting us to our ancestors and to the future generation.

Cultural beliefs and practices connect to the wisdom and knowledge about what it means to be human. Indigenous People know how to live a balanced life, which has always included singing, drumming, and dancing; sharing stories, including survival stories highlighting responsibility, safety, and the power of nature and animals; and participating in ceremonies and practices that helped the people move through grief and trauma, as well as to celebrate life. These practices taught about how to live in harmony with nature, animals, and people. Yes, there were challenges, wars, famine, extreme weather, loss, and other issues; however, the ceremonial practices always imparted how to regain balance and connection. More and more of the literature on the positive influence of culture related to health and mental health is emerging …. reclaiming culture, "culture as a buffer" against stress, cultural protective factors, cultural continuity, cultural resilience, and more [6–10]. This is a positive step in the prevention and intervention of mental health challenges and toward restoring wholeness within ourselves and our communities.

There is a movement within the state of Alaska and around the world in which Indigenous People are reclaiming their culture, including language, traditional practices, singing, drumming and dancing, and connecting to their spirit and spirituality. They are remembering and embracing who they are as a people. Community members, young and old, are interested in learning about their culture and language, they are interested in connecting with others from their culture and using that knowledge and those practices to live a healthy life. Walters et al. [11] created a model highlighting the importance of "reconnecting with our original instructions." They wrote:

> Associations between traumatic life stressors and adverse health outcomes are moderated by cultural factors that function as buffers, strengthening psychological and emotional health, decreasing substance use, and mitigating the effects of the traumatic stressors. Although a vast literature considers the interrelationship among stress, coping and health, little empirical research has addressed either the particular culture-specific stressors of AI or the coping strategies and protective aspects of Indigenous culture. (p. 105–106)

Culture embodies beliefs, values, medicine, identity, spirituality, ceremonies, rituals, food, land, water, language, art, music and dance, and other ways of knowing and being in the world. These aspects are found in all cultures around the world; however, the meanings and practices attached to these concepts throughout and within Indigenous communities are very specific to each culture, and that diversity should be recognized and understood by helpers and those interested in being a part of the solution. In the following paragraphs, I have highlighted and discussed four aspects of culture (land, language, medicine, and traditional practices) to give a few examples of the diversity one might see within distinct cultures.

Land

For many Indigenous People all over the world, the health of the land is often connected to the health of the people. The people of an area took care of the spirit of the land and had a strong relationship with the land. There is also a political history, that

varies between tribal nations, related to land. That history, incorporates matters such as reservations, Native allotment, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, historical and political removal of Indigenous People from land, sacred and ceremonial sites, and subsistence living and harvesting , all of which varies from culture to culture. Willox et al. [12] highlighted the impact of climate change on people's health and wellness. They wrote:

> For Inuit communities such as Rigolet, land activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and foraging for berries and edible and medicinal plants, as well as the ability to regularly and safely travel on the land, sea, and ice, is of the utmost importance to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. (p. 18)

This deep connection to the earth and place is considered very sacred, and understanding the diversity of meanings attached to land is extremely important. In her "Ingalik" article in the *Handbook of North American Indians*, Snow [13] stated,

> The relationship between the Ingalik and the world of nature was very close. The principal support of human beings was thought to be the various "animal people" on the flesh of which people lived ([14]:115). All these animals required respectful treatment or they would no longer be available for food. The function of "songs" or magical spells, was to bring into equilibrium the conflicts that existed among the worlds of the spirit, nature, and society. The songs created good relations between the Ingalik and the spirits of the fish and food-giving mammals. (p. 607)

Ingalik was a term used to refer to Deg Xit'an People. It is a derogatory name that was used for many years and has since been replaced with the accurate name of the people, Deg Xit'an. Advocating for the use of correct names of people and places is an essential part of the healing process. The practice of having good relationships between spirit, nature, and society can still be seen today in the way people hunt and harvest food, care for animals and nature, and tend to the spirit of the people and community. Snow's referral to "magical spells" is likely the observation of the Deg Xi'tan people's close connection to spirit and understanding of energy in the universe.

Language

Language includes our stories, medicine, spirituality, and knowledge of who we are as a people. While sitting in a language revitalization gathering in Fairbanks, Alaska, I heard one Elder Athabascan woman share that when she hears the language spoken it is like hearing birds singing. I found this statement very moving and I believe it highlights the deep connection we have to the language. Indigenous People's experiences and relationship to language are very specific, depending on many factors, including political history, time of first contact and colonization efforts, and boarding schools and missionaries or government efforts to remove children from Native homes and place them in non-Native homes. All of the Indigenous languages in Alaska are endangered. As with many other languages spoken around the world,

there is not a homeland to return to where people are speaking the language if we as Native People do not reclaim it. There were punishments for generations of children who spoke their language, which had numerous impacts, one being that it created trauma around the language. There are strong efforts to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous languages all over the world. Hallett et al. [7] shared their research conducted among Canada's First Nations communities and found that those communities where a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of a First Nations language also experienced low to absent youth suicide. By contrast, those communities in which fewer than half of the members reported conversational knowledge, suicide rates were six times greater. There is very little other research published on the connection between language and health, but we know the link is profound; therefore, much more work in this area should be done.

Medicine

My uncle, a Deg Xit'an Elder and cofounder of the wellness and healing group "Returning to Harmony," often reminds me and also shares with others that we have to recognize the power and impact of both the seen and the unseen world in our lives if we are to know how to help others (P. Frank, personal communication, n.d).

Medicine in a variety of cultures can include Traditional Healers, medicine men and women, shamans, spiritual healers, seers, plants, animals, food, and spirit. I recently heard a Yupik Elder in Alaska refer to medicine in reference to the healing stories we share with each other. Bassett et al. [6] highlighted findings from a study with Traditional Healers. They state,

> According to the healers we interviewed, culture is the primary vehicle for delivering healing. The overarching principle articulated here, that "culture is medicine," means that connecting with one's culture has both protective and therapeutic value, promoting both resilience to and recovery from traumatic events. The details of treatment will differ depending on the cultural specifics related to one's culture; however, the principle of culture as medicine is the same across Native cultures, according to the healers we interviewed. Thus, indigenous means of treatment through culture may include any or all of the following: language, traditional foods, ceremonies, traditional values, spiritual beliefs, history, stories, songs, traditional plants, and canoe journeys. Connecting Native patients with their Native culture promotes better health outcomes. (p. 25)

The Healers in the Bassett et al. [6] study gave advice for working with Indigenous People more effectively. They encouraged clinicians to build trust and advised that they needed to have Native Healers on hand and to have visible Native symbols present. Showing inclusion, and having spiritual healing discussed by Healers is extremely important for clinicians to accept and understand. Elders spoke with me about Healers and what they were taught growing up:

> "It's a hard thing … to deal with that trauma … that's an ongoing trauma." "Many people are torn between being told not to talk about what happened or you will be hurt and that it is important to talk about to heal from it." Another Elder male participant shared,

> "Sometimes it's hard to talk about traditional medicine or traditional ways because they were told it was not good, you know." An Elder woman made a similar statement, saying, "It makes me think that now. A lot of the time, when I was growing up, we're not supposed to talk too much about everything." She went on to say, "… not to spill everything out and talk too much because we could get hurt by it." An Elder male shared his thoughts on this topic of talking or not talking and he stated, "We've got to start talking about it. Who else is going to help these young people if we don't start talking about it, so even if I get reprimanded I'm not going to be quiet anymore" ([4], p. 88–89).

The use of traditional medicine is one aspect of Indigenous culture that is still "under the table." There is still fear and misunderstanding about what it means to be a Healer or to use various types of traditional medicine for healing. There are many ways to heal and people need options. We need to bring this out from under the table to the top of the table and use our traditional tools appropriately and as needed. I am grateful to South Central Foundations, Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, Alaska, for opening up a Traditional Healing clinic that incorporates various types of Traditional Healing, including hands-on healing, Traditional Counseling, and a Traditional Healing garden that grows medicinal plants. It is a step toward awareness, acceptance, and healing.

Traditional Practices

Traditional practices, ceremonies, and rituals are very specific to each Indigenous group and community. Below I will share three Alaskan examples of ceremonies that build connection and strength in communities and support the resilience and wellness of the people. These are the Potlatch, Naming ceremonies, and Tea Partner ceremony [15].

The Potlatch is a traditional practice that can be found among many groups within Alaska. Potlatches include community celebrations or coming together in times of tragedy and healing. The Athabascan memorial Potlatch is a traditional practice that pays respect to those that have died and is a process for healing from grief for the family with the community. The family and community prepare together for 1 year or more for a memorial Potlatch to say the final goodbye; throughout the year food is hunted and gathered, beading and sewing occur, and songs are created. This grieving process is not done alone; instead, it is done with the community and is a very powerful process for sending the deceased away in a good way and healing from the loss together. During the Potlatch, the family gives away many gifts to the community for all their support and together the people eat food from the land, and sing and dance together, sometimes for days. The families are held up by the community in their time of grief and loss [18].

Naming practices occur in many cultures in Alaska. A Yupik example would be when an Elder woman's husband passes away, a newborn baby in the family or community will be named after the Elder who passed. In a spiritual way, this child is now the husband of the Elder woman and will grow up with the responsibility to

help her when she needs it, packing water or wood, hunting for her, and so on. In turn, the Elder woman will knit socks or sew warm clothing for the child as he grows. This reciprocity ensures connection, support, and a loving tie to one another, and new relatives are created, strengthening the community as a whole.

The Tea Partner tradition is a Deg Xit'an Athabascan custom that is another example of a cultural practice leading to individual and community wellness. In the Deg Xinag language, the term *sixoldhid* is used to describe this tradition, which means "my friend" or "my partner." This traditional practice is like a community-based, culturally grounded "safety net," where individuals create connection, resources, mentorship, share knowledge, stories, and humor, and provide and receive support over a lifetime. The overall intent is to help each other to survive and thrive in a challenging and ever-changing environment, to nurture and promote health and wellness, and establish continuity for future generations. In this traditional practice, a Deg Xit'an man or woman is partnered with another person of the opposite sex, often from a differing community, usually older or younger, and sometimes with someone from outside of the culture. Elders or parents in the community, through a variety of ceremonial processes, connect partners together; and these partnerships last a lifetime and are considered an honor to be a part of. These connections are not romantic; instead, the partnership is meant to be a lifelong friendship (some view the role as a godparent), to create a network or web of support across communities. One could have several partners across communities. The spirit of the Tea Partner meant that you share your best food with your partner, for example, king salmon, moose, *vanhgiq* (fish ice cream), and that you help them and offer them support when they come to your community, and that you gift them with things you make, such as beaver mittens or a warm marten hat—and, in turn, they will share their catch with you. It is all about sharing and caring for others, about reciprocity and balance, and survival. You can imagine the strength that this creates because of these connections. The Tea Partner tradition was closely associated with Deg Xit'an community Potlatches and Mask Dances. Your partner was someone you would honor throughout their lifetime and in turn they would honor you.

There are so many more beautiful examples of cultural practices within our communities that highlight connection and belonging and strengthen our communities. We can and should learn from these practices and implement them into our healing strategies. Today, these practices may not be exactly done in the way our ancestors carried them out, because we live in a different time and there is a protocol to consider. However, the spirit of these traditional practices is what can be shared, with the understanding that for each community the practice and ceremonies may differ and incorporate Sacred Knowledge and processes that are not shared outside of the community. Indigenous Knowledge and practices offer significant insights into the importance of creating solutions, programs, and policies that incorporate within them ways to build connection, show compassion, and nurture strengths of both the individual and the community together. It is important for mental health and health professionals to recognize the diversity within experiences as they work with distinct groups of people who are either connected or not connected to their culture and traditions.

Alaska Native cultural and traditional practices such as the Tea Partner, the memorial Potlatch, Yupik Naming, Whaling Festivals, and numerous other ceremonies are all traditional Indigenous practices that promote and nurture connection and belonging among the people in a multitude of ways. As we continue to advance in a technological society, we also have to remember that culture is dynamic, not static. It is changing and growing with us. Cultural traditions, created with the loving minds and spirits of our ancestors, have remained in the world because they work, are useful, and guide us toward balance and harmony. Our ancestors laid this foundation and prepared us for our journey.

> Culture is an ever evolving process for Indigenous people that is based on traditional values and helps people to establish an identity and a sense of belonging in the world, describes the origin of a people through an oral tradition of legends, songs and stories; and defines people's understanding of why things happen and what they can do to make change. ([6], p. 23).

"I Remember Who I Am"—Reclaiming Our Power

My own healing and wellness journey are both personal and collective. It can be no other way. Since my introduction to learning my language in my early 20s, and feeling the power of the Elders' love and support, I have sought out numerous opportunities to spend time and learn from my Elders and community. Most recently, I have taken trips back to Anvik and Holy Cross, Alaska, my ancestral homelands. These trips have connected me spiritually to who I am as a Deg Xit'an woman in this world. Below is an excerpt from a journal I kept during a trip to Holy Cross in 2017, after being gone for 38 years.

> The first day I came to Holy Cross the Chief told me, *Welcome to Holy Cross, Welcome back …. I mean welcome home!* It's hard to put into words what that meant to me. *Xisrigidisdhinh* is the word that I learned that means I am grateful. I think this captures how I feel. The first day back I also found my dad's miniature cache, cabin, and fishwheel in the visual display case at the school. I was so surprised to see them there and so in awe since my dad has been gone, passed away, for almost 20 years. The school I am staying in was built over the old Catholic Mission, which both my parents attended when they were little. It has been surreal, profound, emotional, and wonderful to be here in my ancestral homeland with so much history of my parents and people. When visiting the gravesite, my sister, nephew, and I found the graves of our Grandpa Stanley Demientieff and Great Grandpa Ivan Demientieff, and Grandma Edith Bifelt, and we paid our respects to my Aunt Marie Alexi and Uncle Claude Demientieff and Aunt Martha among others. I see the Catholic Church next door to the school and know that my great grandfather helped build the original church. I have met numerous cousins and kin and have had the pleasure to meet loving and wonderful people. We hiked up to the cross on the hill and enjoyed beautiful views of the community and the Yukon and Innoko rivers and valley. I got to feel the spirit of the land and community. I continue to learn about and remember who I am as a Deg Xit'an person and a Frank (Modiak) and Demientieff family member. The language work I have been a part of over the years has always led me home. I am so passionate about learning the language because the more I learn the language I am also learning about my culture, history, family, traditions, protocol, and so much more. I am remembering who I am!

Elders Teach Us and Model Love and Compassion

Elders can help us to remember who we are as a people. I am fortunate to teach social work classes with Elders as co-instructors. What I have learned is that Elders create a space for students and myself to be who we are, to be cultural and spiritual beings in the classroom, to connect what we are learning with what is happening in the context of our communities. Elders draw on their experiences, they relate the learning to their people, communities, and culture, and they share what is important and relevant with love and compassion.

A Yupik Elder from Bethel, Esther Green, tells the students regularly that, "Learning is healing. As we expand our knowledge of the world we also learn about ourselves, we grow and heal." This is not something you might necessarily hear in a Western classroom but it is taken very seriously in this classroom, where students are getting an education mainly to create a better quality of life for their people. Another teaching she has shared with students is that "When we focus deeply on something, focus really hard, it becomes a part of us." For me, this Elder is telling me that when I pay attention, when I work hard, when I take the time, that whatever I am doing and learning or focusing on will become a part of me. It also reminds me that if I am focusing on positive thoughts, that will become a part of me, and when I focus on negative thoughts, that also will become a part of me. So, what is it that I want to become a part of me? So what is it that I want to focus on? The Elders help us recognize and remember that as we heal and become more balanced, we will be stronger and can help at a higher level (personal communication, n.d).

An Inupiaq Elder, and co-instructor in the social work department, Elizabeth Fleagle, tells the students that she loves them and misses them when they are away. What a beautiful way to create a safe space of love and belonging in the classroom. Her joy in life is contagious, and I am grateful for her mentorship and modeling of love and compassion in the classroom (personal communication, n.d). Athabascan Elder Howard Luke often reminds us to "take care of our luck." Teaching us that what we do in the world always comes back around to us. Sharing with others and doing things in a good way will eventually find its way back to us (personal communication, n.d). Two Deg Xit'an Athabascan Elder family members have taught me that we have to include "spirit" in all that we do. The seen and the unseen both impact us every day (P. Frank and S. Demientieff, personal communication, n.d.).

This same Deg Xit'an Elder has shared with me also that when a person is healthy, the spirit is round and soft and smooth, and when there is an imbalance and trauma and unhealthiness, the spirit can be seen as jagged and pulled apart, and that this is very physically visible (S. Demientieff, personal communication, n.d). We have to take care of the spirit. I have quoted these Elders because their wisdom is so deep and loving, and the wisdom of Elders can be taken in so many ways. I often have my own interpretation of what Elders share, and someone else might have a different interpretation, which is also true. That is the beauty of listening to Elders … you take away a message that is meant just for you.

It is good to start and end any new endeavor by honoring our ancestors, our creation, acknowledging how all things in the universe are connected, and the importance of remembering who we are as a people. Through this act of remembering, the healing journey begins and we can then light the way for others to follow.

Moving Forward in a Good Way

Five important concepts that professionals in the field of mental health and beyond can take away from this paper as something to consider, reflect on, and integrate into practice are compassion, connection, ceremony, curiosity, and community. I believe that discussions and teachings on trauma-informed care or healing-centered care in all disciplines should include these Five Cs.

Compassion

The concepts and practice of compassion and love are often missing or underused in work with people in the helping profession. Indigenous Elders often show deep love for people, even if they do not know them. When the impacts of trauma on the brain, body, and behavior are understood, we are able to have more compassion and patience, which builds a sense of safety and trust. Love is an essential part of that process.

Connection

Cultural practices within Indigenous communities often incorporate connection at the highest levels: connection to spirit, land, people, and so on. Connection is built into the fabric of the community, creating a foundation of strength and a collective safety net, as in the examples I have discussed in this chapter. The mental health of Indigenous People, and people in general, is complex. One component can be linked to feelings and experiences with connection and disconnection in many facets of life. Continued inequality and oppression on all levels are also major factors impacting mental health. Many challenging life issues, including depression, addiction, anxiety, and suicide, are related to disconnection with family, community, culture, ceremony, spirituality, and society. Add to that the crushing weight of racism, discrimination, institutional racism, and oppression, and mental health becomes very complex for Indigenous People. The unfortunate irony is that the people who need the most connection in their lives, because of their addiction or anger or depression, have the least connection with others. That is why we have to work even harder to find ways to show that connection and compassion and love. The question many

people ask is, how do we help build that positive connection? Many Alaska Native Elders and culture bearers hold ancestral knowledge of cultural practices and traditional ways that have been passed on for hundreds and thousands of years, and they are willing to share if people want to listen. These practices should not be seen as remnants or notions of the past; they should and can be reclaimed and practiced in a way that makes sense in the world we live in today. These practices are based on 10,000-plus years of evidence and are considered best practices.

Ceremony

Ceremony has been discussed as a component essential to individual and community wellness, building resilience, and bringing balance back into our lives. Ceremony is important for healing, not just individually, but collectively. According to Athabascan Elder Wilson Justin, one important reason Indigenous People are still here today, despite all of the attempts to eradicate and colonize our culture and people, is because we had ceremony, and the reason ceremony works is because ceremony is about connectivity…a spiritual sense of belonging (personal communication, March 21, 2018). Ceremony links us to the spirit and our ancestors and generations coming. I believe we can incorporate ceremony in multiple ways in work within the field of mental health. One example is through self-regulation and co-regulation practices that help us to regulate our emotions and bring us back into balance, as well as enhance self-awareness, self-care, and community care.

Curiosity

Curiosity is about understanding the whole person, the multifaceted and complex human being who influences the world with their actions and who in turn is influenced by the world, including the past, the present, and the future. We have to be critical thinkers and explorers as we work toward healing and wellness with individuals and communities. Asking questions about what happened is essential. As is asking questions about what is strong with you, what is going well, what is beautiful. Curiosity is about being committed to lifelong learning. It is super exciting to imagine all that we do not know about the world and can learn as we grow and heal together.

Community

Community is essential, as healing and wellness happen within our relationships. Elders shared with me many examples of how our communities came together for celebration and in times of hardship. Our people do things together, such as fishing,

berry picking, and other activities. This is also how we have survived and thrived. Elders shared that more positive wellness gatherings need to occur where the people can have fun, laugh, and learn from each other in healthy ways.

The health and mental health field as well as other fields and disciplines have an opportunity to learn from local initiatives and about local solutions from a vast number of Indigenous cultures around the world. There is wisdom and medicine in these diverse ways of knowing and being. What our world needs right now is compassion, connection, ceremony, curiosity, and community to make it through these challenging times. Connecting with and learning from our Elders is a good start. We have a bright future. Things are changing and it is going to be a better world. We no longer have to be stuck reliving our past traumas. We have the power within us, in our cells, in our spirit, in our Traditional Knowledge and practices, to be whole and well. We have to start remembering all that we are as a people, all the strength and all the resilience, and believe it.

Conclusion

It is essential to incorporate Traditional Healing, cultural grounding, reflection, and learning about culture into helping organizations that work with Indigenous People as individuals and as a community. We have to provide Indigenous People opportunities and options for healing that they connect to culturally and spiritually. It is time to move our traditions, knowledge, and practices out from under the table and display them openly on the table without fear of disapproval or reprimand. This is who we are. Our traditional practices are part of our DNA, and through them, we model connection, compassion, and ceremony. Let us learn about them and from them and pass them on as gifts to our future generations. One does not do anything successful in life without the support of the people, communities, groups, and agencies around them. "Indigenous therapeutic interventions usually involve the individual, family, and community and healing occurs within the context of the community as a whole" ([6], p. 24). Our efforts toward wellness and healing, small or large, send ripples throughout the present, send ripples into the past, and send ripples into the future, and influences the healing of all people [16].

This chapter is dedicated to my beautiful mother, Alice Frank Demientieff, and maternal aunts (Cecelia Andrews, Rose Jerue, Marie Alexie, Mary Talley, and Mary Turner)—the Franks and Modiaks—who taught me that physical, mental, and spiritual strength runs powerfully through our blood and that I can call on my ancestors anytime and they will be with me and guide me in my life. This work was supported by the Indigenous Substance Abuse, Medicines, and Addictions Research Training program through the University of Washington's Indigenous Wellness Research Institute; as well as the American Indian/Alaska Native Clinical and Translational Research Program through the University of Alaska's Center for Alaska Native Health Research and Montana State University; and funded by the National Institutes of Health IDeA CTRP grant GM115371. *Dogidinh! Xisrigidisddhinh!* (Thank you! I am grateful!)

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learning and teaching her Deg Xinag languageand facilitates a weekly Deg Xinag language learning group. LaVerne's research interests focus on exploring how cultural and traditional practices contribute to individual, family, group, and community resilience, health, healing, and wellness, specifically with the Indigenous People of Alaska. She is also interested in studying the connection between language and well-being.

Patrick Frank is a Deg Xit'an Athabascan Elder storyteller, writer, herbalist, and traditional consultant. As a Native Family Systems facilitator for over 25 years, he also served as an adjunct faculty member for the University of Alaska's Rural Human Services Program for 5 years on campuses in Fairbanks, Anchorage, Bethel, and Sitka. Patrick has facilitated workshops focusing on individual, family, and community wellness to over 35 communities in Alaska, including six regional health corporations. A Vietnam veteran, he also served on his regional profit and nonprofit corporations as an executive board member.