

Understanding the Health and Wellness Needs of Two-Spirit Youth and Welcoming Them into a System of Care



Technical Assistance Partnership LGBTQI2-S
Learning Community Call/Webinar
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Introductions

- Miriam Bearse
 - Tribal heritage and affiliation
 - Two-spirit (and lesbian) identified
 - Spiritual and familial roles
 - Background
- Karen Fieland
 - Heritage
 - Lesbian identified
 - Spiritual and familial roles
 - Background

Learning Objectives

- Explore traditional and contemporary Native American two-spirit identity
- Identify challenges that two-spirit youth experience when seeking mental health, wellness and treatment services
- Identify the negative outcomes two-spirit youth can experience due to stigma and lack of appropriate mental and physical health care
- Talk together about culturally integrated approaches providers can use to identify, engage and assist two-spirit youth
- Build on traditional cultural strengths and reduce misconceptions about two-spirit youth that arise from colonial thought, biases in dominant society and/or individuals or groups in some contemporary Indian communities.

Two-Spirit Identity

- What does “two-spirit” mean?
- Two-spirit was a term created by Native American Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people in 1990 as an “umbrella term” to include and many of the tribally specific terms used to refer to those who are “not male and not female” or who “take on” the other gender.
- It comes from a Northern Algonquin word “niizh manitoag” (two-spirits)

Traditional Terms

- Many tribes had or have particular terms and roles for “two-spirit” people in their communities:
- Examples:
 - Nadleeh (Navajo)
 - Kwido (Tewa)
 - Winkte (Lakota Sioux)
 - Dubuds (Pauite)
- Many cultures had or have distinct spiritual or social roles for “two-spirits,” including marriage brokers, preparers of the dead, treaty negotiators, medicine people, and those who take in orphans

Colonization and Two-Spirit Experience

- When the colonists arrived on Turtle Island and began killing Native Americans, many missionaries and colonists targeted two-spirit individuals in tribal communities for death since they were seen as 'offensive' to the church's sensibilities.
- Many Native communities hid their two-spirit individuals from the colonists. In some communities two-spirit people and their roles went underground, in other communities they were destroyed.
- Many anthropological texts record two-spirit life prior to colonial alteration or destruction, and in some communities elders still recall the old traditions.

Two-Spirit Historical Trauma

- Many communities now are not aware of their own two-spirit people and traditions, or have adopted a colonial or missionary perspective shared by the dominant society that sees two-spirits as shameful.
- This has created loss and trauma not only for individual two-spirits, but also for communities.
- Providing acceptance to two-spirit people and recalling their traditions helps strengthen communities and reclaim traditional values.

Effects of Historical Trauma on Health

- Historical and contemporary traumatic events can lead to a “soul wound”
- A soul wound or “spirit wounding” is the cumulative effect of historical trauma brought on by centuries of colonialism, genocide, and oppression
- Emotional and spiritual effects include internalization of the oppressor, unresolved grief and mourning, and suicidality¹
- Mental health diagnoses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) fail to capture the deep wounding of the spirit that is caused by such traumas

Experiencing Loss of Inclusivity and Roles

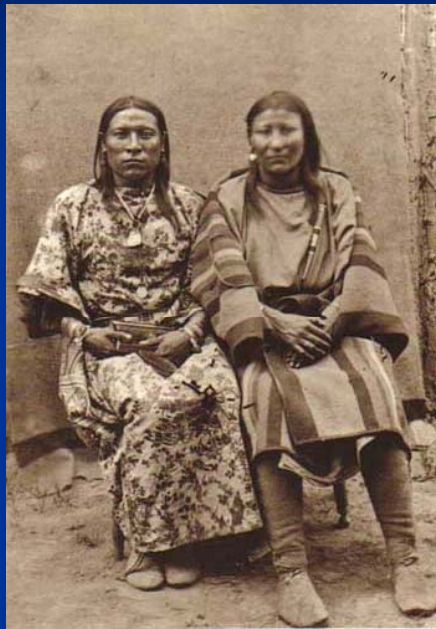
“There is a place within the circle that had been an empty hole for a lot of communities and for a lot of families for the better part of 100 years, people like me got killed or had to go way underground”

Jean, MTF²

Contemporary Two-Spirit Life

- Some Native Americans identify as two-spirit, others identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT), or identify as both, and/or identify with traditional terms.
- Contemporary LGBT society is not always accepting of Native two-spirits, but there are two-spirit groups in many major cities.
- Some two-spirit individuals reside in cities, some in reservations, and some move “back and forth.”
- Some are still recognized and raised in traditional ways as “two-spirit” in their tribal community.

Who Are “Two-Spirit” People?



Osh-Tisch (Finds them and Kills Them) Crow bade, 1877



**We are relatives, friends, partners,
brothers, sisters, clients, co-workers,
community members**

Discussion Question

- Do you know or think that you have two-spirit youth who are receiving system of care services?

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Two-Spirit Youth Experience and Identity

- There is limited research, but some research has shown that Native American youth:
 - Are more likely than non-Native youth to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
 - Are more likely than non-Native youth to suffer abuse and run away from home.
 - Start having sex earlier than heterosexual peers.
- Young Native women who identify as lesbian or bisexual are more likely to have heterosexual sexual experiences than non-Native lesbians/bisexuals.³

Mental Health Risks

- As a result of historical trauma, bias, stigma and abuse or isolation that can result from these experiences, many two-spirit youth have mental health and wellness needs.
- In one study, Native men under age 25 who identified as “not heterosexual” had a high risk of suicide (25% versus 8%).⁴
- Because *Native American youth as a whole* have an increased risk of suicide (5-14 times the risk) and LGBT youth have an increased risk of suicide (twice the risk), two-spirit youth are particularly vulnerable compared to non-Native youth.

Mental Health Risks

- In a community-based study, two-spirit adults reported significantly more anxiety and symptoms of posttraumatic stress than their heterosexual Native peers ⁵.
- In that same study, two-spirit adults reported having their first drink at an earlier age (12.6 vs. 14.7) than their heterosexual peers (though current drinking status did not differ); they were also more likely to have used illicit drugs other than marijuana (78.3% vs. 56%) ⁵.

Mental Health Risks

- Two-spirit individuals are at high risk for being victims of violence, due to both their LGBT/two-spirit identity and their Native identity; both groups experience higher rates of violence exposure compared to the general U.S. population.
- Comparing sexual orientation bias experienced by two-spirit individuals and a predominantly White group of LGBT persons, those who are two-spirit reported higher rates of physical assaults (36% vs. 5-13%) and sexual assaults (29% vs. 3-7%).^{6,7}

Mental Health Risks

- Two-spirit individuals are at further risk for mental and physical health difficulties, as they often do not access needed health and social services due to fears of discrimination based on their sexual orientation and/or their “being Native” ⁸.

Two-Spirit Experience and Mental Health

- Miriam Bearnse (two-spirit individual with mental health system experience, mental health provider)
 - Difficulty finding two-spirit or two-spirit aware providers
 - Lack of recognition of both historical trauma and two-spirit identity by both LGBT and Native health providers
 - Two-spirit youth “falling through the cracks” of mental health systems, child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- Karen Fieland (ally and provider)
 - Two-spirit individuals are very concerned about confidentiality regarding their sexual orientation
 - Two-spirit individuals are reticent to share their sexual orientation as they fear rejection and loss of their family and community

Discussion Questions

- Where do two-spirit youth find support in your community?
- Where do they find a lack of acceptance or hostility?

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Developmental Concerns

- Adolescence is a developmental period where youth are exploring and defining who they are.
- Youth need trusted adults who they can speak with about sexual issues, gender identity and related cultural issues without fear of being judged, condemned or rejected.
- Two-spirit youth also need this support in their families and communities in order to stay within their family and culture, counter internalized bias, gain a positive sense of self and be protected from making harmful behavioral choices.

Challenges in Identifying

Youth often have challenges speaking openly about their identity, due to:

- Potential rejection from family, and therefore exclusion from the extended family unit of support and identity
- Concerns about violent reactions
- 'Everybody knows everybody,' word getting around in a small community
- Lack of positive two-spirit role models as well as negative images of Natives in LGBT subculture and negative stories/images of LGBT people in Native communities

Honoring the Lives of Youth

- Respect what youth term themselves (LGBT, 'two-spirit,' etc.)
- Let youth know indirectly or directly (through comments, imagery), that you are open to hearing about their lives and identity
- Don't assume gender pronouns (he, she), but follow the term the youth use for themselves
- Don't assume a trauma history due to identity, but try and provide resources specialized for their needs
- Try and find ways to connect youth in a positive way to their culture and cultural history

Suggestions: Reservation-Based Providers

- Speak with elders or look into history (or present) to find positive role models for two-spirit youth in your community- share those role models with young people as appropriate.
- Maintain confidentiality or follow what youth request in terms of openness or disclosure to others.
- Look for ways of approaching and healing historical traumas.
- Hold discussions with social service and child welfare staff on two-spirit youth issues and promoting wellness for two-spirit youth.
- Determine supportive resources for two-spirit youth on or near the reservation and advertise those resources.
- Encourage a climate of openness and acceptance with staff and in community.

Suggestions: Urban-Based Providers

- Ensure a diversity of images of youth in offices and service areas.
- Work with other Native organizations to find out about cultural resources and two-spirit organizations to provide resources to youth.
- If there is no two-spirit youth support group, determine a culturally appropriate way within the community to bring such youth together, focusing on affirming strengths.
- Provide training for Native and non-Native staff on two-spirit issues.
- Post a 'no tolerance' policy for any form of discrimination or harassment including racism, cultural tokenism and homophobia.

Suggestions: Non-Native Providers

- Most training materials on LGBT issues that are widely available do not include information specifically related to two-spirit identity. Make sure that the particular issues faced by two-spirits are known to your providers.
- Train staff on Native history, historical trauma, Native cultures and cultural strengths and resources for youth and families.
- Establish a respectful collaborative relationship with local tribal providers or urban Indian providers and organizations.
- Help establish a support group or cultural group for two-spirit youth co-sponsored by your organization and a Native group.

Poll and Discussion Question

- Instant Poll: Is your system actively providing supports to two-spirit youth?
- Is there one thing you feel you can do in your System or Circle of Care to reach out to and serve two-spirit youth more effectively?

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Video Clip

A selection from:

Traditional Indigenous Values

A film by Ruth Villasenor, San Francisco



Question/Answer

- Please feel free to ask any questions or offer experiences based on your experience or experiences of those in your community.

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Thanks to...

- Participants and their communities
- SAMHSA Systems/Circles of Care
- Ruth Villasenor and Antony Stately, who contributed to prior presentations, and to Ruth for letting us share her film.
- Youth and their supportive families and communities

-All My Relations

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