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Living Beyond the Wounds: Recovery & Cultural Tools for Emotional Survival

Introduction

Gunalcheesh, it's so good to be here and to see friends. Thank you for this honor to share with you today. My name is Diane Benson, my Tlingit name is Lxeis', and I am originally from Sitka; and of the T'akdeintaan Clan of the Raven moiety. I live in Chugiak Alaska with my dog team. I do lots of things, most of which is not paid work, but I do manage to work part-time as a Cultural Support Service Provider for Access to Recovery and as a Professor of Alaska Native Studies.

This workshop will be presented in several parts. First I will tell you my story, as an introduction to this topic of recovery and emotional tools for survival. Many of us who are survivors and or work with others in recovery have our own demons. I have had friends who seemed to be doing well working in the field, and then one day they were gone; to suicide, or drug overdose, or deadly stress. The fact that I have had similar tendencies from time to time has compelled me to look truth right in the eye and consider how to deal with this within myself and to help others from falling down that same hole. The fact is providers and sympathizers often carry their own pain. We all need to survive and live. The second part of this workshop is to provide you information, and the third, is your participation. It is after-all, about you. Yes, sometimes you must make it about you!

While I tell my story, I would like you to write down some words that come to mind about your own experience. Just any words that jump up in your mind – it doesn't have to be many.

Part I – My Story of Survival

[Tell Story]

Conclusion of Story

My son said when interviewed on national TV that “losing his legs was just a bump in the road in life; you have to live while you’re alive.” He has his internal battles too, but he and wife work through them together.

Whenever I experience a new trauma today, such as the sudden passing of my Aunt Sylvia, and my friend Tiny, my PTSD is triggered all over again. On top of that, I can instantly hear the old tape when I am faced with the loneliness loss brings, of how useless and irrelevant I am. When my shame is triggered I hear the world-would-be-better-off-without-me tape. And I know that this happens because of my history. I have to fight that voice inside that will point out that I wasn’t loved enough to keep as a child, therefore, I am unlovable. I wasn’t treated as a valued female, so I don’t deserve any dignity, and my failed marriage proves it. That I’m too skinny, and when an older Inupiat woman says to me at AFN that “It must take alot of work to put on so much make-up,” I feel the childhood shame that says, “I asked to be sexually abused.”

That since the tribe didn’t save me, the tribe doesn’t need me.

It’s hard to believe that I matter even still. My brothers were taken away from me by a Christian family that wouldn’t allow me to see them. A High School Counselor told me that like every other Native girl he met I wouldn’t amount to anything. A man I loved killed himself while he was drinking. I saw myself as someone who was not worthy. The messages in my life were quite cruel. It’s very difficult to change something that is so well in-grained.

But having our own role-models helps because that can give others hope for their own lives. I learned just from performing the story of a strong Native woman from our tribe – Elizabeth Peratrovich. We must know about the great people in our own history, and those living amongst us now, to help us in our own survival. I grew up in a violent insensitive world, but my cultural traditions remind me we come from strength. Each one of you is a brave and incredible person for whatever life has thrown at you. You survived. Your ancestors are grateful. I love Deborah Parker’s reminder that our ancestors are there for us.

I have hope that comes because of those who reached out to me in my worst moments. It has helped create a belief that we can improve our situation through kindness. You are here because you know the world is better when we are a true community of people. Part of that is being true to yourself.

Part II: TOOLS

I've done a lot of recovery work but even still I will go through periods where I withdraw; can't sleep; can't eat and then turn to some sort of vice like sweets; and if it goes on too long, get depressed and unable to focus on tasks, and in the worst of it, even have suicidal thoughts. I have learned to help myself get through this utilizing certain methods. I choose not to be medicated; it's like an elder told me when I was getting off meds, "you are not crazy, you're hurt." *Just as a word of caution, there are some who may truly require medications.*

[SLIDE – HUG PHOTO]

Words of kindness and validation have power, they do. Truth is, I sometimes have to muster the courage to allow myself contact with others. Today, I will ask you to reach out to each other and yourselves.

There is power and value in knowing and facing truth.

[SLIDE – OF TEXT: Face the Truth of Your Needs]

The truth is,

- We need to be valued
- We need to be of value
- We need to belong
- We need human contact

Say to each other

- I need to be valued
- I need to be of value
- I need to belong
- I need human contact

Respond to each other,
You are valued
You do belong
You matter

Please take a few moments to write

BASIC SELF CARE – THE NATIVE WAY
[SLIDE - Basic Self Care – the Native Way]

The Healing Elements: Water, Fire, Earth & Air

Operating from the basic principles that we as indigenous people understand our connection to our physical world, we shall start the healing plan here. These four elements are worthy of your time and meditation. Water, fire, earth and air...

Water – Drink it, feel it

Did you know that water is a profound healer? It is now proven that drinking water can not only ease headaches, which it can, but can also reduce depression. Many of us are actually walking around partially dehydrated. Our bodies and our minds require water. To bath, to go to a spa, just adds to its value - how much water soothes even our spirit too. PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury research has discovered the value of water for the brain. Drink water.

Fire – Warm with it, Cook with it

Think how great you feel when you sit around the campfire with friends. Haven't had time to do that? Make time. We cook our Native foods with it. We warm our homes. Once a week bring family or friends or a friend together and cook traditional foods. It creates a sense of community and connection to ancestors.

Earth – Somewhere we can find a place to walk in earth's beauty. Taking time to notice this and do it clears the mind and renews our sense of belonging. We belong to the earth. Gather foods from it. Go berry-picking or gather grasses or roots for basket-making. Get

something from the earth, and you will find a connection with your ancestors.

Air – We breathe it. Sometimes we don't breathe very well or don't know how to take it in effectively. Learning to breathe fully gives our whole being the gift of life. Some parts of us are deprived of its benefits because we breathe so shallow. Take a meditation class and learn to breathe, or take time to sit in a quiet place and feel yourself breathe. Focus on it and nothing else for a few minutes. Let only breathing be your focus for that time.

Think of these four things each day. When you make your gratitude list add water, fire, earth and air. Let these connections be the basis for your personal healing plan.

I have found a number of things to be particularly healing and helpful.

1. **Touch is Healing** – I can isolate and withdraw so easily that I don't even know I am doing it. To monitor this, I ask myself, when was the last time I went out of the house? (I do a lot of work out of my home office, so I can isolate pretty good!) When was the last time I spoke to someone in person? It doesn't count to be outside with my dogs. I have to have human contact. When someone takes the time to talk and be concerned; when someone touches my hand, or gives me a hug and asks nothing in return, it is profoundly healing.

2. **Getting Good Sleep** – sometimes I think I am getting sleep and in truth I am not. I can be tossing and turning and waking up more tired than when I went to bed. I will wake up hours before the alarm. So I have found getting up when I wake up and doing something that is on my mind like writing a letter to someone I am thinking about, or doing some work will relieve those thoughts and then I can go back to sleep for an hour. Usually this gets me back on track, along with getting out in the daylight and getting exercise. Go for a walk. Notice the sky. What color is it? Notice beauty.

3. **Eating Well** – I have found one simple answer to the strain on my brain from not eating or eating poorly: eating some salmon. If I can eat some fish strips, or go to the store and buy a slice of salmon it almost never fails to move me away from sweets and my disinterest

in eating. Nothing awakens my brain and softens my mood like salmon - absolutely nothing. I say, that when the going gets tough, the tough eat fish strips! Once interest in good food is reactivated I can eat. So when I eat, even though I am eating alone, I will set the table nicely and treat myself like I am special. I baked some halibut recently that was sooo good I smiled all night. Cook your favorite Native food and treat yourself!

4. Busy the Brain with Activity – Ever have days when you feel your brain just won't work? I provide myself games to play or Sudoku puzzles to do, and do them every day. I am used to doing it, even when I am in the throws of depression and can't seem to solve the puzzles. If I keep trying anyway, eventually I am able to get my mind working again. That, and making sure to drink water and exercise. I worked on one Sudoku for a week and finally cracked it, and that made me feel good. It was a little achievement that helped me to feel worthwhile again. Find something for your brain that isn't emotional.

5. Letting my sadness or anger out – Sometimes when I am sad or angry at the way I've been treated I allow myself a full-out "pity-party." For my one-person pity party I have some rules. No self-mutilation. No breaking or destroying property. No drugs or booze. And it can only last 3 hours. But, for my pity-party I can cry and scream, hit a pillow, and blame and cuss and stomp my feet. But when three hours are up, it's over. Given that I used to fall into crying fits for literally days, and harming myself in various ways especially when I first kicked drugs, this has become quite an achievement. And now, a pity-party is lucky to last an hour, if I even feel a need to have one at all.

6. Change the View – Sometimes the blues take over and suicidal thoughts move in when I've been beating myself up over something. I used to have a friend who would say to me, "Are you beating up my friend again? I don't like it when someone is beating up on my friends." It would make me smile. One time a friend of mine in Canada was feeling suicidal and I convinced him to come to Alaska first. I told him, "If you are going to die anyway, why not come and visit me and we can have some fun in the snow before you do so." He said it costs too much. I said, "Well, if you are set on dying what difference does it make? Use a credit card." And to Alaska he came.

I took him on four-wheeling drives over mountain roads that hadn't been plowed; I took him camping, and hiking on a glacier. And today, he teaches his language and he is happily married. Good thing he didn't do himself in. He would have missed all that. So for me I imagine any other thing I would want to do as if I was told I only had six months to live, and then go do something, and once I do, I have lost interest in the idea of suicide, and have usually bought myself enough time to sort out some of the things that were troubling me. Make yourself a sort of "bucket list" of things you'd like to do and look at that list and pick something when you find yourself in despair.

These are things I do to help avoid slipping into the dark hole as I call it. Sometimes though, you simply have to call for help. Recovery is an on-going activity and requires community. I also go through a gratitude list every morning to remind myself that even though my son and grandson live far away, I still have them. When I actually get to share something meaningful with someone, I get happy. I would miss these gifts in life if I let wounds be more than scars.

Probably the best tool of all is one that indigenous people have used to survive many things. Humor. Going and getting stupid or just plain silly with a friend or family member is a good thing to do. Being too serious takes all the fun out of life. Just because it was bad before, doesn't mean it has to be bad today. Not if we give to one another.