

Coronavirus, Mental Health and Indigenous People in the United States

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The coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic are causing stress across the United States, and communities of color are being heavily impacted—physically, mentally and financially.

This fact sheet explains what we know about the new coronavirus and how it is affecting Indigenous populations, including American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians. It also offers tips on how Indigenous populations can manage the stress and mental health issues that might occur during this difficult time.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a disease that affects the lungs and airways that is caused by a novel coronavirus. Symptoms of COVID-19 can be mild or severe and can appear 2 to 14 days after exposure to the virus. Some people have no symptoms from the illness and are unaware that they have COVID-19, while others have severe symptoms that could result in death from the disease.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste and smell,
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea (a feeling of sickness with an inclination to vomit), and
- Diarrhea.

Although older people and people with underlying conditions (such as diabetes, asthma, or liver disease) are most at risk for severe symptoms, people of any age can get COVID-19, including children and young adults.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 the following steps are recommended by the [Centers of Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC):

- Maintain “social distance” or staying about 6 feet or two arm lengths away from other people
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use hand sanitizer than contains at least 60 percent alcohol
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, countertops, handles, or other items shared with other people
- Wear a mask that covers your nose and mouth when you are out in public places

You should follow these precautions even if you do not have symptoms of the disease.

How is COVID-19 affecting Indigenous People?

Because of long-standing inequities in our country’s systems and structure, Indigenous People and other communities of color are at higher risk for physical, mental, and financial problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

American Indians are deeply affected by COVID-19. If the Navajo Nation were a state, it would have the highest rate of COVID-19 infection. COVID-19 has affected whole families.

American Indians have higher rates of chronic diseases and health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and obesity. These conditions are linked to more severe disease, complications, and death from COVID-19. Although all Indigenous populations have the right to health care through the Indian Health Service, many must travel long distances to see the doctor. Even before the pandemic, the Indian Health Service didn’t have enough doctors and nurses, and many healthcare

centers and hospitals didn't have supplies they needed to protect providers and treat patients.

In Indian Country, several generations of one family may live together in one home, sometimes without running water. COVID-19 spreads easily in close quarters. Without easy access to clean water, it is difficult to wash hands frequently to prevent spread of the disease. Indigenous people are also disproportionately represented in jails and detention centers, where the disease can spread rapidly.

Indigenous populations were hit hard by the economic effects of COVID-19. Many tribes rely on income from casinos and tourism to support their people. Most tribal businesses closed to prevent spread of the disease. This means tribes and individuals have less money for food and health care.

Many Indigenous people live far from grocery stores and healthcare services, which makes it more difficult to buy healthy food and seek care when needed. They may worry about the cost of care or about language or cultural barriers with healthcare providers. With a long history of discrimination and mistreatment, they may avoid seeking health care even when they are sick.

The economic pressures and health risks Indigenous people face put them at greater risk for trauma, grief, and other mental health issues.

What is the link between COVID-19 and Mental Health in Indigenous People?

Indigenous people are experiencing trauma and mental health issues for many different reasons during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include:

- anxiety from not being able to follow stay-at-home recommendations to protect themselves from COVID-19
- grief over the loss of friends and family members
- separation from friends and family, especially those who are sick and in the hospital
- unequal access to technology that allows continuing work, school or social interaction online
- emotional stress of close living situations and finding care for children out of school
- financial stress of job loss, and more

- ongoing difficulties accessing health care services

What are the signs of stress and mental health issues?

- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Feeling unsafe or anxious
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances
- Strained relationships with family members
- Irritability and blaming others
- Lack of energy
- Unexplained aches and pains

What can you do to manage your stress and mental health issues cause by COVID-19?

- Follow "social distancing" and other steps to prevent COVID-19 as best you can in your situation
- Take a break from watching, reading or listening to the news. Make sure you're getting your information from trusted sources, such as the [Centers for Disease Control](#).
- Stay in touch with friends and family by phone, video calls or other technology.
- Reach out to churches and other community organizations as many offer online and other virtual opportunities for connection.
- Try to maintain a healthy diet, exercise and sleep routine.
- Obtain or contribute food to local food banks. Some neighborhoods are creating their own food pantries.
- Do not put off urgent and emergency health care for new or chronic illnesses.
- If you cannot work, apply for unemployment insurance in your state. During the pandemic, the rules for who can apply have been loosened.
- Use prayer, meditation or other spiritual practices to find peace in difficult times.
- Share stories of resilience and survival from your past or your cultural heritage.
- Connect to cultural traditions and heritage as they can provide strength in difficult times.
- Use hotlines and other resources when needed.

This resource was prepared by the APA's Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities and the Division of Diversity and Health Equity. It was authored by Emily Paulsen and reviewed by Vabren Watts, Ph.D and Eric Yarbrough, M.D.

Hotlines

If you or someone you know are in distress, free counseling services are available by phone, text, or online chat. Most are available 24/7.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746
24/7 crisis counseling for people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters ([SAMHSA](#))

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call 800-273-8255 or [Chat with Lifeline](#)
24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress and prevention and crisis resources for you and loved ones. ([Link](#))

Suicide Prevention for Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Call 800-799-4889 or Chat with Lifeline
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>

Crisis Textline Text TALK to 741741

A live, trained Crisis Counselor will respond by text. ([Link](#))

National Helpline Call 800-662-4357

Confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
Confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. Territories for substance use/addiction and/or mental health problems.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-7233(English and Spanish)
800-787-3224 (TTY) or
Text LOVEIS to 866-331-9474
<https://www.thehotline.org/>
Support for anyone affected by abuse

Stronghearts

Call 844-7NATIVE (762-8483)
Safe domestic violence and dating violence helpline for **American** Indians and Alaska **Natives**, offering culturally-appropriate support and advocacy daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. CT. Anonymous and confidential

Veterans Crisis Line

Call 800-273-8255 or text 838255 or [live chat](#)
Connect with the Veterans Crisis Line to reach caring, qualified responders with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Many of them are Veterans themselves. ([VA](#))

Resources for Coping with COVID-19

Association of American Indian Physicians: COVID-19 Resources <https://www.aaip.org/media/news/m.blog/76/corona-virus-information-and-important-links>

National Congress of American Indians: COVID-19 Resources for Indian Country <http://www.ncai.org/Covid-19>

Tribal Epidemiology Centers: COVID-19 Resources <https://tribalepicenters.org/tec-covid-19-resources>

American Psychiatry Association: Coronavirus and Mental Health: Taking Care of Ourselves During Infectious Disease Outbreaks <https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2020/02/coronavirus-and-mental-health-taking-care-of-ourselves-during-infectious-disease-outbreaks>

National Medical Association: COVID-19 Resources <https://www.nmanet.org/page/COVID-19-Resources>

Crisis Text Line: How to Handle Coronavirus <https://www.crisistextline.org/topics/get-help-coronavirus/#dealing-with-coronavirus-1>

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Emotional Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Outbreak <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/current-events/supporting-your-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

World Health Organization: Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>