

Working to Improve the Lives of Rural Oklahomans through Increasing Protective Factors: Learning Strategies of Resilience from the American Indian Culture

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Exposure before the age of 18 to abuse, neglect, household substance abuse, parent mental illness, incarceration, divorce, and intimate partner violence, known collectively as Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs, have been found to dramatically increase the risk of chronic illness (e.g., cancer, heart disease), mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety), and social problems (school drop-out, teen pregnancy, delinquency). However, more than six decades of research on resilience provide evidence that positive relationships and environmental resources can buffer the harmful effects of ACEs. The Protective and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs) measure includes 10 experiences that promote resilience, leading to improved health and development in children and families. Many of these protective factors have historically been found among the American Indian (AI) culture but have not been identified as resilience-promoting per se. Specifically, key factors that contribute to resilience in AI communities include cultural connectedness, social support, spirituality, and collectivism. Although each AI community has its own characteristics, beliefs, and ways of coping with adversity, it is clear that AIs have developed strong resilience strategies that could inform interventions for the broader population. Efforts to translate knowledge about protective factors to promote resilience in rural and hard-to-reach communities include the creation of activities and programs that increase PACEs at the individual, family, and community level. Although these activities support positive behavioral change and build resilience, they are not influenced by the specific strategies historically and contemporarily utilized by AIs. Given the long history of resilience in the face of adversity among AI communities, current protective strategies and interventions can benefit from understanding approaches that AIs use to promote positive physical, mental, and social-emotional health.