



# Health Benefits of Native American Talking Circles During COVID-19: Measuring the Preventative Impact

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## Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic took a disproportionate toll on American Indian and Alaska Native communities. According to the CDC, AI/AN persons were 1.6 times more likely than white non-Hispanic persons to contract COVID-19, 3 times more likely to be hospitalized, and 2.1 times more likely to die.<sup>1</sup> This is despite data showing that Native groups have consistently had among the best vaccination records since COVID-19 vaccines became available.<sup>2</sup> In addition, social distancing protocols prohibited many tribal communal activities that are known to be protective of mental and behavioral health for Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup> To provide an alternative for traditional in-person Native gatherings, the National American Indian and Alaska Native Technology Transfer Center launched Virtual Native Talking Circles, where participants could gather to share stories and support each other through these uniquely challenging times.

## Description and Format:

The Virtual Native Talking Circles (VNTC) met bi-weekly via Zoom beginning April 9, 2020, and were open to all Natives and non-Natives. The sessions were 90 minutes long and not recorded.

Each session opened and closed with a blessing. Participants were called on to share in the order in which they arrived. The Virtual Native Talking Circles were facilitated by Fred Little Bald Eagle from Rosebud, South Dakota.

A “here and now” format was used as a group guideline for participants.

## Considerations:

The VNTC took into consideration AI/AN cultural concepts, the unique application of the talking circle model in a virtual setting, how to maintain protective factors related to the talking circle model, impact statements from participants, and qualitative data supporting the role VNTC played in the well-being and health of the participants attending group sessions.

## Aim:

The primary aim of this poster and presentation is to offer a brief overview of the role VNTC (Virtual Native Talking Circles) have played in addressing stress, hopelessness, grief, trauma, and disconnectedness that came from the COVID-19 pandemic. American Indian populations in the U.S. have been severely affected by the recent pandemic.

## Numbers and Data Collection:

- 37 broadcasts
- 1,902 participants (April 2020-2022)
- GPRA N=489 starting April 9, 2020

## Tribal Affiliations:

Those identifying as AI/AN were asked their tribal affiliation in an open-ended question.

23 people provided this information. Responses were diverse:

- Blackfeet (5 individuals, 10.6%)
- Navajo (2 individuals, 4.3%)
- Cherokee (2 individuals, 4.3%)
- Seminole Nation of Oklahoma (2 individuals, 4.3%)

These were the only tribes with more than one person indicating affiliation.

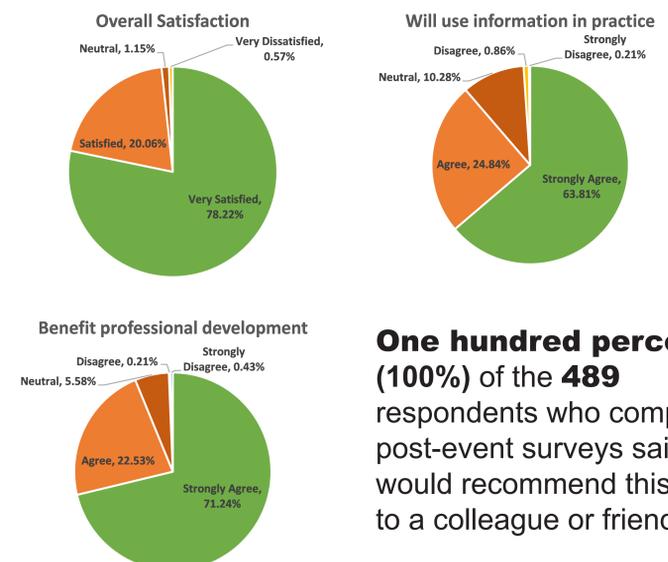
Other respondents reported affiliation with Athabascan, Blackfeet tribe in Montana, Mono/Chukchansi, North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians, Pueblo, Pueblo of Laguna, Seneca-Cayuga Nation of Oklahoma, Spokane Tribe, Toneedze Gheltselne (Athabascan), Tule River, and Yurok tribes. One respondent simply identified as “Tribal Member and Staff.”

## Participant Demographics:

The graphs below represent data collected from 468 respondents who attended the Virtual Native Talking Circles.



## Assessments (N=467):



**One hundred percent (100%) of the 489 respondents who completed post-event surveys said they would recommend this event to a colleague or friend.**

## Comments:

“These connections have played a vital role in my own mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being and I wish to maintain them. I loved it.”

“I have gained a lot from listening to the Talking Circles, it is true medicine.”

“I want to say how honored I am to be among you. I feel energized by just being among you all and would love to continue this unity thank you.”

“Thank you for this opportunity, for the opening prayer, song and to everyone for sharing. This is a beautiful circle, I am grateful for all the work that everyone is doing.”

## Survey Summary:

- Survey responses highly positive
- Consistent with comments made in the chat box during sessions
- Most identified clear personal benefit from participating
- Non-Natives indicated improved cultural understanding in addition to personal benefits
- Most common suggestion for improvement: increase number of sessions per month and increase opportunities for participating

## Conclusions:

- VNTCs very positively received by those commenting on GPRA forms and those completing the online survey
- GPRA, online survey, and process data all point to large cadre of enthusiastic participants who:
  - Praised VNTCs as major benefit during pandemic
  - Participated frequently and enthusiastically
  - Wanted more opportunities to participate

The feedback and data collected and reviewed thus far suggest that important support and connectivity is afforded by those engaged in this type of virtual group.

## Recommendations/Implications:

- Consider potential health implications of the VNTC for both patients and practitioners during challenging and difficult times.
- Consider implementation of this type of event in the foreseeable future as ongoing stressors occur.
- Consider replication of this type of virtual event in a telehealth treatment, mental health, or behavioral health setting.

## References

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