



The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, located in Cherokee, North Carolina, uses many ways to help people prevent or manage diabetes. Through a program called Cherokee Choices, the tribe offers many different activities including exercise classes, foot and kidney clinics and healthy eating classes.

But tribal diabetes program staff know that taking care of people's bodies alone will not win the battle against diabetes. A major step in preventing or managing diabetes is to reduce stress and increase joy. In other words, a happy person, someone who

A Giant Step to Joy

Understanding Historical Grief and Trauma



wakes up with a feeling of peace that continues throughout the day is more likely to not get diabetes, or more likely to be able to manage it well.

The tribe wants to increase the peaceful feelings of its tribal members, and reduce the incidence and affects of diabetes. One of the ways it is achieving this goal is to look at the reasons why some tribal members may not feel peace.

"I have lived most of my life being scared. I'm not exactly sure what I'm afraid of," says a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

"I feel a lot of anger. I think I'm mad at my parents. I think I'm angry

because life is not fair,” says another member.

Where do these stressful feelings come from? Understanding where they come from is leading to a tribal-wide understanding of how to lessen these negative feelings, and replace them with peace and joy.

What is historical grief and trauma?

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, as well as other tribes, is looking at a condition that causes much stress for some Indian people. It is called “historical grief and trauma.” This is grief and trauma that happens to not just one person or one family during a certain time period. It is grief and trauma that occurs over several generations.

“There has been wave after wave of trauma brought upon many Indian people,” says Patty Grant, a historical grief and trauma presenter.

“The diseases brought upon our people, the forbiddance of culture and language, the boarding schools—these were all major traumas that damaged huge groups of people,” she explains.

Once these traumas were inflicted, they created dysfunction inside many Indian communities. Now, generations after the trauma, the dysfunction inside some of the communities still exists.

It can get in the way of taking care of diabetes

If people have diabetes, historical grief and trauma can get in the way of taking care of themselves. Good diabetes management requires a positive attitude and energy. If people are affected by trauma,

they may feel negative, or may not have energy to take care of themselves. A lot of times, the reasons for these negative feelings are not clear.

“I have lived much of my life being self-destructive,” says one Muskogee (Creek) woman. “When I found out I had diabetes, I took care of myself for awhile, then I stopped. I became self-destructive again. I suddenly stopped checking my blood sugar, and quit exercising. It was as if I felt I had no worth.”

One Muckleshoot woman could not give up salty and sweet snacks for long. “I would stop eating cookies and chips for awhile. Then, I would get this feeling like I was depriving myself. When I started eating them again, I would eat even more than I wanted. I just hated not being able to give myself what I wanted.” Her feelings of not wanting to ever be deprived might have come from a history of being deprived.

For some people, historical grief and trauma clearly prevents

them from doing things that will help their diabetes.

“I know oatmeal is good for me,” says one Colville woman. “But I can’t eat it! It reminds me of boarding school.”

Understanding is first step towards joy

Of course, some tribal communities and some families are not as affected by historical grief and trauma. It is not a condition that affects every tribe and every person. But for some people, the affects are real, and appear as unexplainable feelings of anxiety, fear, anger and depression.

“There have been alcoholism, emotional abuse, obesity and diabetes in my family,” says Chenoa Gass (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians). “I’ve had a lot of anger, fear and self-hate,” she says.

Chenoa is one of many Cherokee tribal members

Patricia Grant (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) says, “Understanding historical grief and trauma is a first step. Understanding enables us to see clearly. It enables us to love.”





no alcoholism. There was no depression,” says Patty. “We had ways of handling problems. We had a contented, happy society.”

For many, just seeing beautiful pictures of Indian individuals, families and communities brimming with health brings peace. It helps people redefine themselves as good and worthy. It provides a beautiful goal to strive for.

Understanding can change your life

Taking the first step to look at historical grief and trauma can be hard. Some people may not feel a need to consider historical grief and trauma as a reason for any of their stressful feelings. Workshop presenters say that’s okay.

But, for the people who think understanding this trauma may be key to understanding some of their feelings and behaviors, attending a trauma workshop can be a huge, life-changing experience.

Says Patty, “When I first started learning about it, it was like a light came on inside of me. I began to understand my mother and the impact of boarding schools, poverty and alcoholism. It was scary and unsettling to think about these things. But I felt a need to know. I felt like it was my responsibility to find reasons for my feelings.”

Chenoa’s journey with understanding trauma began when she was a teenager. In high school she wondered why

she was always scared. She wondered why her father was often upset and guilt-ridden. In college, she found herself crying for no reason. She felt guilty about having the opportunity to go to college.

When Chenoa attended her first historical grief and trauma workshop, she was overwhelmed. “It seemed huge. But, for the first time, I could understand and I felt hope. I knew I had taken my first step to healing.”

Feel joy and pass it on

Almost everyone who attends a workshop does it for their children. People say they want to deal with their feelings of anger, fear, guilt and depression, so they won’t pass them on to their children. They know that they must become healthy in spirit, so they can teach their children ways to have healthy spirits. People say dealing with trauma is not just about studying a sad past. It is a way to find joy. “I feel happy, joyous, free,” says Patty.

Chenoa, who was recently married and is planning on having children, says, “I think I can change the course for my children’s lives. I want them to feel safe, to be happy without worries. I feel peaceful and want them to feel peaceful. I want them to feel joy. I don’t think we can go back in time and change things. But, we can learn from it. In this way, we can right the wrongs.”

Chenoa Gass (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) says that she has learned to have compassion for herself.

who have attended workshops on historical grief and trauma. During the workshops, people learn more about the history of American Indians. The workshop’s goal is to not point fingers or place blame. The intent is not to give people an excuse for negative behavior and feelings. The goal is to understand reasons for negative behavior as a first step towards positive behavior.

Not just “doom and gloom”

People attending the workshops learn about the traumas that their ancestors faced. They learn how these traumas not only caused grief, but damaged, or even destroyed healthy, functional social systems.

But the workshops are not all about “doom and gloom.” They paint a beautiful picture of traditional Indian tribes overflowing with health, devoid of emotional and physical disease and distress.

“There was no abuse of family members. There was

