

The first week of May is both Children's Mental Health week and Vermont Abenaki Recognition and Heritage Week. To acknowledge and support these two important weeks, this article focuses on the critical topic of connectedness and youth having a sense of belonging to the broader community.

A recent survey given to nearly 2,000 children receiving mental health services in Vermont found that out of 50 different areas of need, a perceived lack of community connection ranked #1, endorsed in 56% of the assessments. This question asks if the youth feels that there are people in their community, like those in their neighborhood, school, cultural, or faith organizations that they trust and feel comfortable going to for extra support. It also relates to a youth feeling like the community cares about them as a person.

Research tells us that feelings of connectedness and belonging are essential components of well-being and optimal mental health. A lack of connectedness combined with feelings of despair and hopelessness can lead to suicidal thoughts and feelings. At the same time, the ability to build a sense of belonging for a youth can provide an important path out of depression and loneliness.

The COVID pandemic has affected us in several different ways. For many of us, one of the hardest parts has been the increased isolation that we have had to endure to keep others and ourselves safe. While we have understood the need to do this, it comes at a price. Youth can be hit especially hard, as their brain in this stage of development has been primed to be interacting with peers while exploring the world around them. Impeding these natural tendencies can lead to anxiety, depression, and substance use.

So how do we now regain that sense of connection and belonging that we need to stay emotionally healthy?

There is no "right" way for everyone. For Indigenous youth, there are both extra challenges and opportunities when it comes to building connectedness. On the one hand, we must confront and acknowledge the painful reality that for too long there were organized efforts to strip and distance Indigenous people from their culture heritage, leading some youth to become unaware and even scornful of their rich history. Fortunately, some of the culture has survived, and Indigenous youth who are able to access it often find that these cultural traditions help to provide them with a sense of belonging to their community.

Taking part in ceremonies and cultural traditions is an important way for youth to feel pride in their identity and connect with other members of the community. When gathering for a meal of traditional foods, youth acquire healthy habits while learning stories and lessons from elders. These are important protective factors that give a sense

of value and well-being. They are more than simply “social” activities and should be perceived as vital components of Indigenous youth’s mental and physical health.

It is important that the dominant culture does not needlessly restrict these kinds of activities. At times, unfortunately, well-meaning laws can also cause harm if they inhibit participation in cultural ceremony. Tobacco is sacred to the Abenaki and yet in Vermont, it is illegal for youth to possess it even for ceremonial use. For ceremonies such as Shooting Fire, the tobacco is tied in a small red bundle with an individual’s prayers. The bundle is then burned in a fire from which an arrow is let and then shot into the sky to deliver the prayers. The dominant society’s view of what is “acceptable” conflicts with the indigenous culture’s traditions, and leaves the youth again struggling for acceptance.

No youth, indigenous or non-indigenous, is an island unto themselves, even if at times it can feel that way. Whether it be through family, friends, neighborhood, culture, race, religion, shared experience and interests, or some combination, we are all connected to people and things that are bigger and older. Whatever our roles are in society, we can contribute to the well-being of our youth by guiding them to their larger communities, standing with them, and celebrating their part in it.

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