

Webinar Transcript - Providing Culturally Sensitive Support To Families Of Missing Or Abducted Children

Welcome to the National Criminal Justice Training Center webinar, Providing Culturally Sensitive Support to Families of Missing or Abducted Children presented, by Dr. Maegan Rides At The Door. My name is Valerie Bribiescas, and I will be moderating for you today.

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In conjunction with our mission, our webinar series works to bring together state, local, and tribal subject matter experts to present and discuss critical issues related to missing, abducted, and exploited children. I am pleased to introduce today's presenter, Dr. Maegan Rides At The Door.

Dr. Maegan Rides At The Door is an enrolled member of the Assiniboine Sioux tribe of the Fort Peck Reservation and a descendant of the Absentee Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. Dr. Rides At The Door has served as a National Native Children's Trauma Center's director since 2015.

She has been central to the design and implementation of a range of training and technical assistance initiatives in tribal communities, including projects focusing on the development of trauma responsive systems of care with tribal, private, federal, and state partners, the implementation of cross-system youth suicide prevention programming, and the expansion of child advocacy centers' capacity to meet the needs of the tribal communities. Dr. Rides At The Door, thank you for being here with us today. The time is now yours.

Thank you for having me to speak on this important topic. It's a challenging topic. It's a hard one to sit with. So I'd ask you all to take care of yourselves however that might look like for you during our time together. We have a presentation pathway laid out for us over our hour together that we will have.

We're going to be talking about cultural considerations when providing services, enhancing our understanding of the impact of trauma in the families that we're encountering, and hopefully, also, having an awareness of trauma's impact on us as helpers, and as we seek to be helpers, what we can do to aid in the healing process. And it is a healing process, not instant. It just takes a lot of time to recover from. And we'll talk a lot about what recovery might look like and how it's really different for everybody who encounters such an event.

And I think any time when we talk about surveying American Indian and Alaska Native populations, we have to recognize the diversity that exists amongst all of our communities. Every community is so different that it's sometimes difficult to speak about every one and make generalizations about information that we might hear.

And so it's really contextual information to really think about, but we'll always have to partner with our local communities to learn more about the specific culture that we're working with and the tribal customs and traditions that exist within where we work. So we'll always be seeking to learn more in terms of seeking to support families while honoring their cultural identities.

So experiencing a missing or abducted child can be very traumatic. It can be a very traumatic experience for caregivers, for that of other family members, or even people close to the family. And hoping for reunification can cause people to have difficulty just living every day and developing healthy coping strategies.

Each event is different and unique for each individual that experiences the same event. Even though it's the same event, people are different in how they respond to that event. We'll talk about that in a moment about what are all the factors that make experiencing a trauma different for different people.

And it can be, the experience of this event can be really added on to by other things, such as if they witnessed the abduction or knowing the abductor or other cumulative stresses after the event that occurs, such as having negative interactions with those that are trying to help or not receiving responses back in a timely manner or other kinds of stresses going on if it's financial or whatever may be happening with the family. So a lot can be happening during this time.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines a traumatic separation as a condition in which people develop trauma symptoms related to familial separation. And trauma symptoms are commonly things like re-experiencing, having hypervigilance, or experiencing disassociation or avoidance of trauma reminders or loss or change reminders, which we're going to talk about next.

So trauma and loss reminders can be really anything, peoples, places, objects, situations, feelings, memories, anything that we take in through our senses, sights, smells, touch. A lot of things can be a trauma reminder. And some people call these trauma triggers, but a lot of people have started to use trauma or loss reminders since triggers is violent in the word being used itself.

So being more trauma informed, I guess, we're using the term "trauma reminders". And these are things that can happen through every day, seeing photos of the person or walking by the child's room. This can happen in everyday occurrences and are constant reminders of the loss or that that child is isn't there.

And there's also change reminders. So these are things that is a change in the person's daily life resulting from this loss. For example, in the morning, normally, that person would drive this child to school. But now, that's changed, and that reminder of this time reminds them that this child is missing. Or cooking, cooking for them at dinnertime or other kinds of events that change, not setting out that plate for that child. So those are all examples of change reminders. A lot of reminders can happen throughout the day.

And our support in helping them deal with that is helping them find coping strategies, help them understand what these are and that it's normal for them to be experiencing these things. I feel like that's what we do for a lot of the time as what you're experiencing is a normal response to an abnormal event. So really validating their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and what they're experiencing is common to what people experience and helping them understand what are reminders for them more specifically and what are ways that they can cope when these events happen.

So there's a great diversity among tribes, as I mentioned before. Each tribe has different protocols for responding to such an event. Culturally speaking, we always have to consider, what are tribe's understanding of a trauma like this? Is there a word in the tribal language to describe a traumatic experience? Is there traditional understandings of how someone should take care of oneself when something like this happens? What are ways of dealing with this?

And so culture is always changing over time. People have different ways in which they practice things of their culture. And so we're always wanting to be mindful of how do they connect with this aspect of themselves and how can we always consider that. If that's something that they want to be used, how can we encourage that in their healing?

There's a lot of different reactions to trauma. We have those core things that happen, those similar things that I mentioned before. But it really does have a holistic impact on our wellbeing, our mind, body, emotions, and spirit. And we can think about it in terms of developmentally.

How it impacts people at their developmental stage, you can look at short-term impacts and long-term impacts. There's different ways of looking at the impacts of trauma. And there are so many different ways that it impacts people. There's a lot of examples that we can give, but each person will be impacted uniquely. But these are some common ones. I think you probably will resonate with a lot of these.

In terms of our physical reaction to trauma, someone can start to have somatic complaints, maybe that they're not feeling well but not really have an explanation for the illness; feeling hypervigilant or on alert; have difficulty sleeping, and that can look like a lot of different things-- difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, insomnia, a lot of sleeping way too much. It can impact sleep in a variety of ways. Avoidance of trauma reminders-- because it brings up negative feelings and reactions, some people might be engaging in avoidance behaviors as a way to cope with what they've experienced.

In our thoughts, it can have us think a lot of different things, have a lot of intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating. And because it's so difficult to think about, a lot of people experience not recalling details of what happened. And so that's a common experience that people have. And so it's important to be aware of that.

Having unhelpful thoughts or not thinking that they're safe or having thoughts about themselves like they're blaming themselves or blaming someone else, having negative thoughts about themselves or others or the world in general, that this world is an unsafe place because of what's happened. And reliving the experience, or people can not wanting to think about it or talk about it all the time and be talking about it constantly. So again, a variety of different reactions people might have.

Emotionally, a lot of different feelings. As you can imagine, pretty much every feeling, mixed emotions can come up, just having difficulty regulating emotions and expressing those emotions, especially if people already have had a harder time expressing emotions with others or talking about emotions or labeling emotions. Some people might even have a hard time identifying and saying how they feel, might just have a harder time expressing that.

And spiritually is a realm that we don't often talk about, but spiritually, it can have us question a higher power. How can such a horrible event happen and a higher power continue to exist? So it can start to have people question their own beliefs or avoiding gatherings as they figure this out for themselves of how can this happen.

And could even be anger, not just questioning but anger at a higher power. And it could result in not engaging in, attending these gatherings or these spiritual practices because of the loss of belief in a time where maybe before it was a great strength for them. So it's important to think about this realm of things as we think about.

Even if the person isn't religious, it's like, what is their purpose? Why are they here? What is this purpose? What is their purpose now? What is their hope for the future? How does this impact who they are as a person and thinking about all these things in that sense.

So as I said, everyone responds differently. That's a common question that we get is, how can one person experience something and cope relatively well? It's always hard no matter the trauma or the type of trauma that was experienced versus somebody else who just really experienced something similar but really struggled.

And there's quite a lot of diversity of factors that go into how someone copes or experiences an event, including their own prior trauma history, if they've experienced trauma in their lives before or other hardships or stressors, if they experience a lot of changes after the event-- so if they have to move communities or if they're having to change workplaces, communities, and there's a lot of change because as somebody experiences trauma, we're seeking stabilization. And so the more changes make it harder for a person to recover and have that stability during this period of time.

Their age at the time that they experience this event, if they're a sibling versus a caregiver, their understanding and how they're able to contextualize this event based on their developmental stage in life. Sources of support before, during, and after-- so the quality of connections that they have, the people they have around them to support them in instances like these.

And a whole host of risk and protective factors-- are they living in poverty, or are they unemployed? Or do they have a lot of community connections? Do they have a strong cultural identity? Are they proud of who they are as a Native person? There are a lot of risk and protective factors that can make it unique from person to person. So there's a whole host of things here. This is why people experience events very differently. We're always seeking to understand their unique experience.

And as we want to understand their unique experience is two concepts that I want to talk about, and that's scientific mindedness and dynamic sizing. So scientific mindedness is not assuming we know what is best for a caregiver even though we may have this experience of helping people a lot, many years now you might have been in this role.

But we want to ask about their experience and what they need and act based on the information that they give us. So it's really a stance that we take to that we need to find out what their perspective is on this and not really assume that we know based on what we've experienced through our helping role.

And dynamic sizing is that when we learn something about a group of people, that we don't automatically apply it, but we seek to find out whether it applies to this person or not. For example, you might hear that some American Indian communities aren't comfortable with direct prolonged eye contact.

Dynamic sizing is as we help this person that we don't just automatically assume that that's the case. As we talk to somebody, we notice how much they are looking at us and being aware of our eye contact towards this person. And we may directly ask about it maybe. But we're trying to uncover, does this apply or not? And that's dynamic sizing is as we help somebody, we're testing out our hypotheses and trying to figure out whether that's the case for this person. And that can be-- that's just an example, but that's what we're doing when we're in this role of helping is being a learner really to uncover this person's experience.

And then added element is realizing that American Indian Alaskan Native communities have had a lot of historical impacts, negative impacts with service systems that are trying to help. Regardless of how well-intentioned you are, even if you are an Indigenous person who is working within the system, we're still representing these systems. And so we still have to work at establishing trust, establishing a working relationship. And we learn that relationship is so important in the work that we do. We know that it's foundational.

But we're not starting from zero. We're starting from below zero. We're working to correct historical experiences. And sometimes, it can be helpful to think about it as every interaction with this person is a corrective experience, is a healing experience. If we look at it in that way and how we approach families and how we operate, we can bring that to our work. And it makes it more meaningful at every interaction.

And realizing that a lot of the services are built from a Western perspective, a lot of times when we're thinking, what's the best way to respond to this, we're often adapting existing things to serve communities. And it's always helpful to think, how would we build this response for our community with originality and with knowing the community, really thinking about it in new ways, having innovation in that area?

And because of the historical losses that our communities have experienced, if you're an outsider working in the community, you may be seeking out information about the cultural norms and cultural practices and just seeking knowledge in general. And because of the historical losses, people may not always have the answers that you may have or that you may not-- you can't just rely on one person in the community. You have to rely on multiple people to inform you about the local community.

And so this affects our ability to have this knowledge and to know that as we seek out information that we may not be in a position to have certain knowledge if the community is feeling fear that the information might be exploited somehow or if we're not entrusted to have information. So it's all part of working collaboratively with community.

And people may have fears of interacting with systems and not really be familiar with how processes work, what's supposed to happen. And it can be a new experience. And that can be fearful in and of itself. And there has been a history of inactivity when we think about justice systems in general.

And this specific event, this traumatic event of having a child who's missing or abducted is really close to home for people because it reignites this fear. Every single day is what's happening, is there something happening? And so it can really cause a lot of frustrations, as you all are probably aware already about it by families who have experienced this event.

And other things, I mean, there's a lot of the same, not just transportation, but there's a lot of same barriers that a lot of rural tribal communities face like geographical distance, shortage of service provision in the area, access to mental health, and access to a lot of things in the community. So we're working within these systems with limited resources sometimes. And so there's a lot of service impacts on trying to help someone recover from an event like this.

I think about what other impacts you can think of. There's definitely other impacts. We could talk about a lot of impacts on caregivers, siblings, other family members and all of the other factors that families have to deal with in coping with such an experience and our role in helping them. That's not everything. And so I imagine that you all have other examples that you could share as well.

So now we get to talk about what it means to try and recover from such an event. Healing can come in many different ways at many different times. If trauma impacts us holistically, then healing should be also happening holistically. We think about some core things that are a part of recovery. And first and foremost, establishing safety is really important to stabilization, feeling safe and stable physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. And how do people restore that sense of safety for themselves?

And people will have to process the question of the meaning-making of such an experience and process the question of, what does it mean to be a caregiver of a missing or abducted child? That may mean potentially working through guilt if they somehow feel responsible or blame if they feel that someone else was responsible when they were supposed to be caretaking for their child or depending on what happened.

Usually, sometimes this processing is done with a counselor, but it doesn't solely have to happen there. We can be a listening ear for families when they talk about their experience. But a lot of people do refer people to mental health to have a trained person be ready to talk about this experience in more depth, to be able to keep the person safe while they're talking through such an experience.

And integration, it really involves answering the question, what does life look like now and into the future regardless of the outcome because these things may have different outcomes that may-- we don't know when. Even if there is a chance for-- even if reunification did happen, there's still work to be done after such an event. How can-- and regardless of the outcome, how can we let this not consume us?

There are a lot of other healing parts to recovery as well other than these things. There's a lot of things that we can do to support caregivers and families really helping them understand trauma and its impacts, their experience-- helping them be able to relax and feel safe, different relaxation strategies that they can do to calm their bodies and minds and spirits, everything.

Training the mind to think in more adaptive ways or having healthier thoughts in what they tell themselves about this and through their experience, and as we talked about before, talking to them about cultural or spiritual practices that they already engage in. There's a lot that we can do to help support them in their recovery, thinking about the supports in their lives and a lot of other things that are happening around them.

And thinking about holistic ways to support the person, but also thinking about the intention, the intentional ways in which they engage in activities that are rejuvenating and restoring and feel healing. And what is the intensity in which they engage in these things and the regularity in which they engage in these things? The more often, the better. And really finding what feels healing to them is going to be unique from person to person. And so again, we're trying to think about ways that are going to be healing for them and feel healing and knowing that this is a process.

In our world today, we all want instant gratification. We wish we had a magic wand to take this experience away from people and just make them feel better. Wouldn't that be nice to just have that all be done in a day? That would really make everyone's lives a lot easier. But unfortunately, it is a process, and it takes a long term for somebody to deal with something like this. And it will always be a part of their lives no matter what. They can't just forget about this experience.

So it's really about how can we not let it consume people and overtake them in a negative way. So helping them overcome this experience and walk through life with it somehow, that's our role to kind of be a support person in all of this. And we can't do it alone. There has to be a lot of people surrounding the person to help them through these challenging times.

So our best agenda is to not have one. Some don't talk directly about the experience with the person. Sometimes, people are afraid of what to say to the person. And if you think about it, a lot of times, it's not what we say, but it's a lot of active listening and being present and engaged and a listening ear that does a lot for supporting people in and of itself. But it's not always-- people don't always remember what we said all of the time. So it's not about saying the wrong thing.

But I think when we think about sitting with people, again, it's our positionality is we need to find out what are their thoughts. We don't want ourselves to think, I know what is best. If they just coped this way, they would do so much better. If they just did this, then their lives would be so much easier.

But even though we may have seen a lot of things in our lives and watched other people maybe cope with this event, we really have to treat people as having their own unique experience and trying to find out what are they needing right now from their perspective. And you're always uncovering that.

And we are always seeking to learn more knowledge. We want to understand family from that community's perspective, that cultural perspective. I think people tend to probably just support immediate family members, but there's a lot of-- we're close-knit communities, and a lot of people are impacted by such an event.

We rarely think about maybe community conversations or being able to support those close to the family or other family members who are experiencing this event. So I was thinking about who's connected and thinking about how others in the community might be affected by this.

It really is the whole community can start to feel unsafe when community traumatic events happen like this in a community. It's like, what is the community feeling, thinking about this? It can really ignite a conversation about preventing this in the future, how rift can prompt a community healing type of initiative.

It helps to know community stakeholders. It's really about immersing ourselves in the community as much as we can to be a helper. And we don't ever want to rely upon the family for everything, right? Being able to learn knowledge from other community members-- I think it's important when working with people that you realize that they're in this mode of fight, flight, freeze response, and they may not be always taking in all the information that we have to give them.

And making sure that they understand our messages that we want to give them. If we have resources, we probably need to give them to them. Thinking about their recall ability and where they're at, what's going to help them remember things, remember future appointments, remember when we're supposed to talk again, and thinking about how we help them get to other services.

How are we connecting them? Do we physically connect them with other people? How do we really partner with them in supporting them as much as possible? Being present, and being present helps them not feel alone in such an event like this. It's really important.

So broadening our conceptualization is, again, thinking about all of these issues. What are the most important issues to them? How are they thinking about these issues or challenges? What are their concerns? How have they been dealing with this so far? It's been probably-- if it's been days, it's like, oh, how did you get through these days?

So there's something of strength here that we can draw upon. There's something-- you have some innate resiliency here to still be coping with this somehow, getting through each day. How are you managing to do this? What are the barriers that you feel like are barriers from your perspective?

How do you view my role and how I can help you? Do they fully understand our role and what it means for us to be in our role whatever role you might play in helping this family? And what do you believe will help improve things? What does healing for them look like over time? What do they need? And how can you support them over time with this? And really again, understanding all of this from their perspective so you can be the best helper that you can be to help them get there to that place.

And working with anybody, I would say that sometimes mistakes will be made. There might be ruptures in the relationship. There could be potential anger at us or at our agency or whatever for whatever reason. Or we might have said the wrong thing, or we might have done the wrong thing.

And it's important to think about it as not if a mistake is made, but when a mistake is made, what can we do to repair the relationship? What can we do when these things happen? And be ready for it. What can we do in these instances to repair this relationship and continue to build it over time?

And I always think about it as it's never too late to go back and say, this is what should have been done, and it didn't. And acknowledging it, just acknowledging it can go a long way in validating their experience and their experience of this mistake that was made and help them, help you work together through this.

So I'll say that because it is important to acknowledge when there's miscommunication or mishappenings that happen, and to not just let it go by, not acknowledge it. So it's helpful to think about these things or check in because we may be unaware that we have said the wrong thing. And really, being open to hearing that a mistake is made, or that we've said something or done something, and having, again, a good enough relationship for them to feel like they can give us this feedback and talk about it.

So I do want to say that we do have to acknowledge that it's difficult to heal in the face of ongoing grief, loss, trauma. If they've experienced this event like this and then they lose another family member or if things continue to happen in their lives, it's difficult for the healing process. And then, it's cumulative, and then we're not just healing this one thing. We're trying to heal from a lot of different things.

And I think this is why a lot of people more recently have shifted away. And some people with lived experience have been saying, I'm tired of being called resilient. I'm tired of not having my experience as validating-- validated. That it feels like, oh, all you have to do is just be resilient, and people can really struggle to be in a place to heal and have all the resources to heal.

And so it's important to think about families in this context of what they're experiencing, what they experienced before, during, and then after such an event takes place. It's often a lot of different things happening at the same time. And so we're helping, and we're helping by understanding and really validating all of this and that it is all connected. No wonder it's challenging, right? It's like, we have to deal with all those other things that are going on in their lives. So it's an important point to acknowledge.

And we're coming to the end of our time here, and we'll switch over to question and answer and some questions that you may have over hearing all of this. But it's really, we're on a journey of learning, and we're constantly trying to figure out how to be better helpers all of the time and be more effective at what we do.

And it can be a challenge. It's always a challenge, right? And if you're feeling like you're not making a difference, it probably is impact of secondary trauma. It's part of feeling like having to acknowledge your role. We're not totally responsible for another person's healing by ourselves, right?

And you have to be thinking about us as we get to be a part of another person's journey of healing for maybe a short time, or maybe it's a longer period of time depending on our role and our connection. But acknowledging that you served your role and your purpose for this period of time is honoring your own work that you do and restoring your sense of feeling effective and your ability to help.

So always thinking about not just you in your role, but it's always important to think about, what is our organization, our agency's connection to the community? What does that community-agency connection look like? How can we have a better overall relationship because when we work individually with people, that makes a difference in people's lives? What does that relationship look like? How do we have a healthier relationship overall supporting communication, feedback, enhancing what it is that we do?

So I think we'll end there. And say just thank you for being here today and being a resource in the communities that you work in. Your work is very important to what you do. And with that, we'll see if there are any questions.

Thank you so much for being a part of this webinar series, Dr. We really appreciate you for taking the time to be a part of AMBER Alert Indian country. And we learned a lot in just this little time. Believe it. I learned a lot. So thank you so much. We appreciate it. For additional information on general training and technical assistance services, links to featured offerings, and to request more training or technical assistance, please also visit our website. Finally, watch your email inbox for information for upcoming webinars and virtual opportunities that will be available for you in the upcoming months.

This course was developed by the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and its AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance program. This concludes our webinar today. Thank you again, Dr. Maegan Rides At The Door, for sharing your time and knowledge with us. And thank you to all our attendees for joining us today. We hope you can join us again in the future webinars. Have a wonderful and great day. And be safe. Take care of yourselves. Thank you.