



Resource Sharing Project

Rural Training & Technical Assistance

How Does Cultural Appropriation Affect Rural Sexual Assault Services?

Rural programs serving sexual assault survivors offer a variety of services to assist survivors as they heal from trauma. Many of these programs offer holistic healing services which seek to heal sexual trauma by including the mind, body, and spirit. For more information about holistic healing, [click here](#).

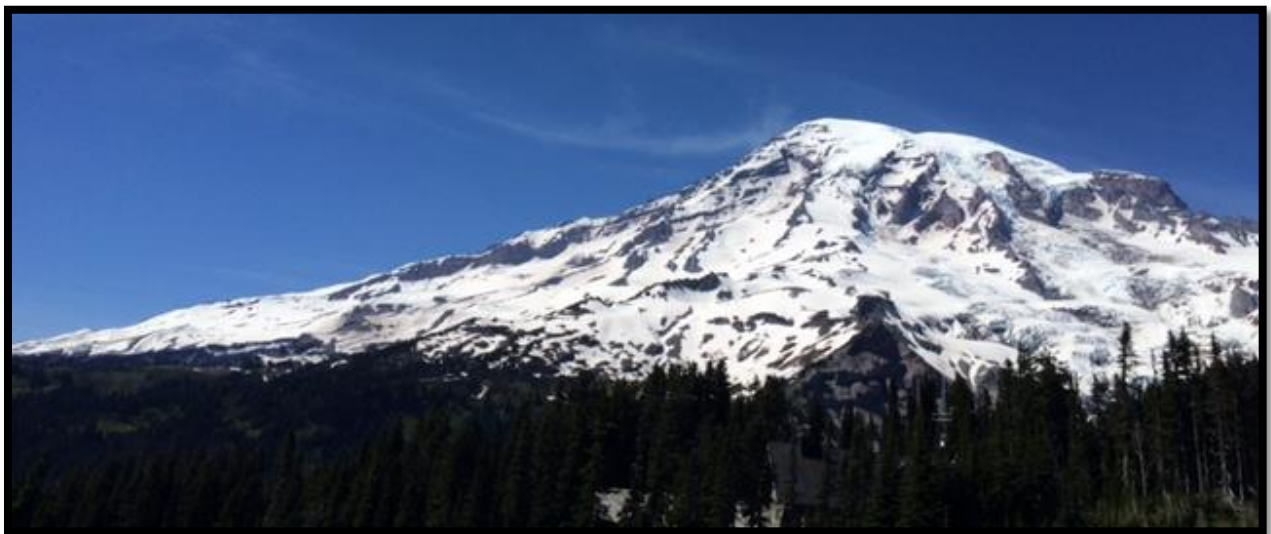
Holistic healing services will look different at each agency and for each survivor based on their needs. However, some holistic healing services can be culturally appropriative and disrespectful to other cultures. According to the Oxford dictionary, cultural appropriation is, “The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.”¹ Often cultural appropriation is mistaken for appreciating a culture; however they are very different concepts. To learn more about cultural appreciation, [click here](#).

Cultural appropriation can come in many forms. The most common examples usually include personal appearance such as clothing and accessories (saris, headscarves, tribal prints), hair styles (dreadlocks, cornrows), or cultural symbols (tribal tattoos, bindis, Native headdresses). However, cultural appropriation can also refer to the participation in religious or cultural practices (yoga or sweat lodges) or other parts of a culture.

¹ Cultural appropriation. (n.d.). In *Oxford Dictionary online*. Retrieved November 14, 2017 from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cultural_appropriation

Cultural appropriation happens when people from the dominant or privileged social norms adopt some of the customs or culture of a marginalized community. This power differential is an important component to understanding the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation is when people with less privilege, such as immigrants and people of color, are absorbed into the culture of a dominant society. For many people, cultural assimilation is not a time to celebrate a new culture but instead feels forced or required. For example, a Muslim woman who recently emigrated from Syria may feel forced to take off her headscarf to feel safe. And African American women may feel pressured to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards by changing their hair texture or style.

What makes cultural appropriation so harmful is that when dominant cultures pick and choose the pieces of a marginalized culture that they like the most, this erases the meaning of the custom or practice and removes the cultural significance. There is a lengthy history of white dominant cultures colonizing other countries and stealing, exploiting, and profiting off of the cultures they are invading. In order to be sensitive to current cultural appropriation, advocates who identify as white need to learn about and be aware of the history of colonization in the United States. If we choose to engage with a part of a culture that is not our own we need to take the time to learn about the nuances of that culture. We can't take the parts of a culture that we like but choose to turn away from the hardships that community faces.



So how do we incorporate holistic healing into our services without culturally appropriating?

- Many holistic healing methods incorporate concepts that cross all cultures. A key element of holistic healing is having a mind and body connection, and there are many ways to do this. Hiking, knitting, equine groups, and gardening are great examples of ways your agency can use holistic healing while not appropriating from any specific culture.
- Help survivors research or access parts of their own culture which can facilitate healing from trauma. When working with survivors from the Asian Pacific Islander community this may mean helping find or research yoga instructors, reiki practitioners, or acupuncturists. When working with survivors with European ancestry this may mean helping find or research saunas or baths, herbal remedies, or storytelling.
- If we do choose to offer services that include a piece of a culture that is not our own we need to do it as respectfully as possible. It is important that we take the time to learn about the history and complexity of the culture from which we are taking. There are many ways to learn about and enjoy a culture including reading books, listening to music, visiting a museum, and respectfully interacting with people from that culture. Consider finding a practitioner from the culture who can co-facilitate services, such as a trauma-informed yoga practitioner.
- Always acknowledge when you take something from a culture that is not your own. Be aware of the social and historical implications of your choices. Make sure that there is education on the cultural context provided along with the healing modality. Listen to marginalized communities and uplift the voices of those less privileged.

This tip sheet was prepared by Leah Green, RSP Rural TA Specialist, with input from many Rural Grantees. For more information, contact leah@iowacasa.org or visit www.resourcesharingproject.org/rural-training-and-technical-assistance.

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