

## **Indigenous Relationality is the Heartbeat of Indigenous Existence during COVID-19**

Emma Elliott-Groves, Ph.D., MSW  
*University of Washington*

Dawn Hardison-Stevens, Ph.D.  
*University of Washington*

Jessica Ullrich, Ph.D.  
*University of Alaska Anchorage*

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### **Abstract**

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, this essay offers Indigenous knowledge systems that highlight strategies for survival. Indigenous peoples understand that human lives are interdependent with and contingent on living in ethical relations with other people, with our ancestors, with plants and animals, and with the natural world overall. Indigenous systems of relationality are the heartbeat of Indigenous existence. They help to illuminate approaches to physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health. Using the Medicine Wheel framework as an analytical tool, we indicate how Indigenous people can survive and thrive during these times. To create a just democracy and ensure our ecological and sociological future, we must consider the multidimensional needs of all beings. Although relational responsibilities are at the heart of many Indigenous worldviews, they extend to all of us. Responsible relations with the natural world sustain human livelihood everywhere, connecting us all in a vast web of life.

*My Ancestors...accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship, we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of relationships with others.*  
(Simpson, 2017, p. 77)

Around the world, people are experiencing a threat to their individual and collective livelihoods on account of the novel coronavirus, which can lead to COVID-19. The ongoing viral outbreak is now a global pandemic. In response, many countries have implemented public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Stay-at-home and physical distancing protocols

have resulted in the widespread closure of schools, the shuttering of workplaces, and the cancellation of family and community events. For many Indigenous peoples, physical distancing has prohibited traditional celebrations and ceremonies to mark seasonal changes and transitions in life stage, such as births or funerals. This is particularly distressing, because Indigenous identities are centered on the fulfillment of interdependent roles and relational responsibilities within social networks, as in local trade systems, cultural ceremonies, and hands-on social support (such as caring for elders).

The principal Indigenous groups in North America are American Indians, Alaska Natives, Canadian First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, and Pacific Islanders, including Native Hawaiians. In the US, American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) have been disproportionately infected by COVID-19 and are dying at higher rates than non-Indigenous peoples, particularly given pre-existing health, social, and economic inequalities (Artiga & Orgera, 2020). Although American Indians and Alaska Native People make up 11 percent of the Arizona population, they make up 18 percent of COVID-19 deaths and 11 percent of cases. In another example, AI/ANs make up 9 percent of the New Mexico population and approximate 57% of COVID-19 cases (Artiga & Orgera, 2020).

Yet despite the unique hazards of the current pandemic, challenges to individual and collective survival are nothing new for Indigenous peoples. Our ancestors survived many catastrophic events, including colonization, loss of land, and successive epidemics of novel diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, and influenza, to name a few. Past generations have passed along their strength and resilience to help us respond to widespread change. Embedded within Indigenous knowledge systems, therefore, are the solutions we need to ease the physical, intellectual, mental, and spiritual burden of physical distancing protocols on Indigenous peoples. The goal of this article is simply to draw on Indigenous systems of relationality to illuminate pathways to Indigenous health and wellbeing in a time of crisis and uncertainty.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Indigenous knowledge systems and their underlying ethical precepts are designed to promote and generate life: not just human life, but all life. Indigenous worldviews are shaped by a deep sense that all living things are interconnected (Cajete, 2000; Fernandez et al., 2020). These interconnections extend across time and space, subsuming past, present, and future generations,

and even crossing the boundaries between species. Thus, all ethical commitments are based on principles of “reciprocity, respect, noninterference, self-determination, and freedom” (Simpson, 2017, p. 8). Moreover, in Indigenous cultures, all relationships center on the land: “identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 17). Any threat to Indigenous relationality makes it difficult to form and sustain strong communal relations. Thus, a disruption in connectedness seriously challenges our continuing survival in the world.

One of the greatest menaces to Indigenous relationality has been, and continues to be, settler colonialism. This refers to the forcible acquisition of Indigenous land in the context of colonial imperialism, a process that has violently ruptured Indigenous relationships with their environment and each other (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Whyte, 2018). Research among the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island – a Canadian First Nation with cultural and linguistic ties to other Coast Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest of North America – foregrounds the fracture in Indigenous relationality that resulted from settler colonialism as the underlying cause of another ongoing pandemic: Indigenous suicide (Elliott-Groves, 2018). Cowichan members described the unequal distribution of power in the areas of education, politics, economics, and food systems, as well as in the ownership and management of traditional lands, as key factors in this tragic phenomenon (Elliott-Groves, 2018).

The systems of communal relationships that ensure individual and collective livelihoods are called collective capacities (Whyte, 2018). Settler colonialism continues to infringe on Indigenous collective capacities, thus threatening Indigenous survival. To respond to catastrophic change, whether caused by colonization or a novel contagion, Indigenous communities must exercise self-determination (Whyte, 2018). Taking control of our own future will facilitate our communities’ adaptive capacity, which is essential to secure our livelihoods.

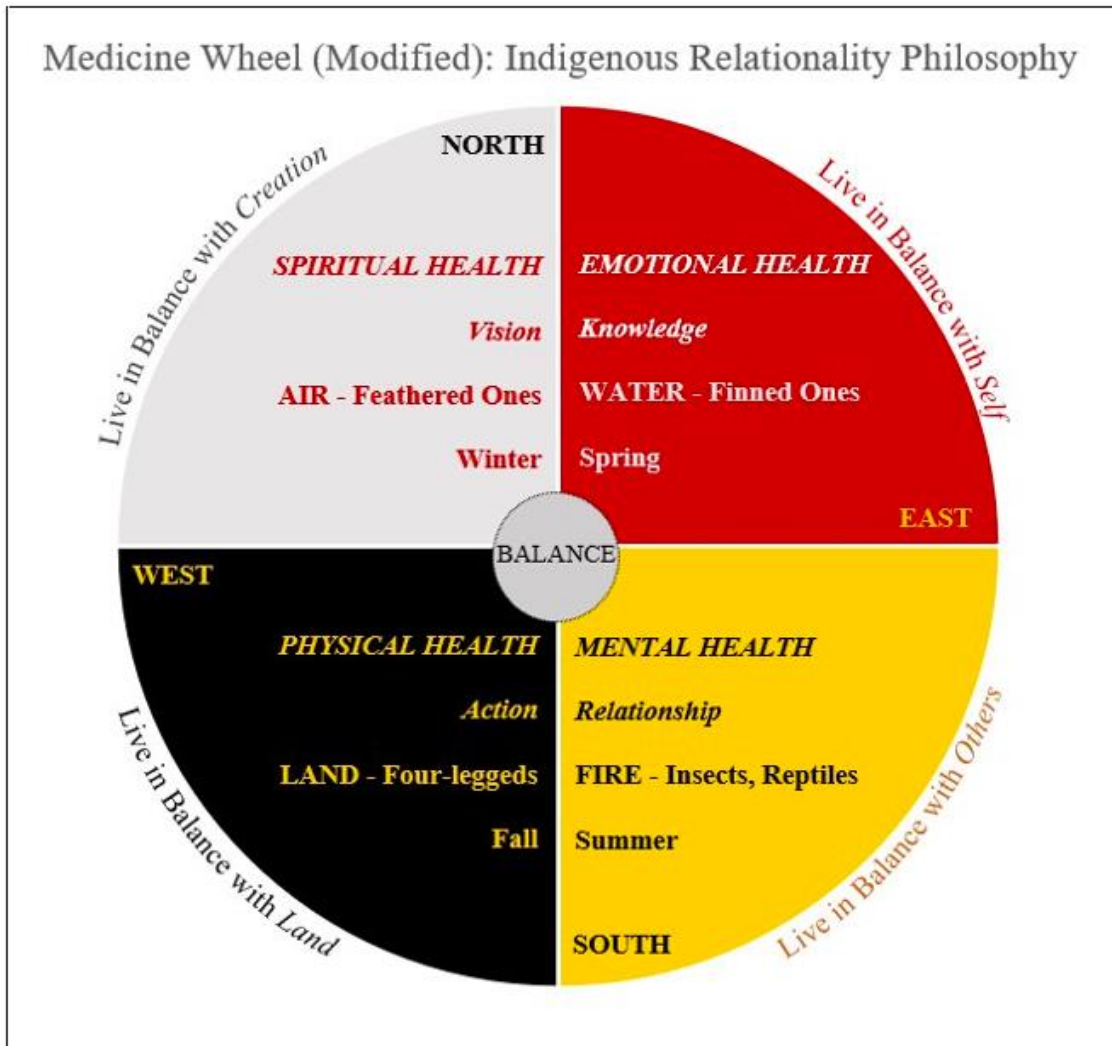
The Medicine Wheel conceptualizes an Indigenous philosophy of using the circle, a symbol of sacredness, showing interconnectedness between human development and our adaptations to the natural world. A custom for generations amongst various Indigenous peoples, the Native Nations of the Plains peoples’ Medicine Wheel framework identified by second Hardison-Stevens (2014) draws on Indigenous knowledge systems. We have visited the traditional Medicine Wheel

as the guiding framework for our discussion of Indigenous health and healing practices during COVID-19.

Interpretations of the Medicine Wheel's values vary across Indigenous communities. However, it is most often depicted as a circle, both to highlight the cyclical nature of human existence and to conceptualize the balance of healing and wellbeing. We have created a modified version of the Medicine Wheel that depicts four interconnected quadrants representing balance across the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health of all living beings (Figure 1) where all things live in a harmony, righteous relationship, appropriate relations, and healthful relations. In each area, we have represented the relational responsibility of living in right relations with land = physicality, others = intellect, self = emotions, and spirit = creation. The modified Medicine Wheel begins with land and moves counterclockwise with intention, depicting times for reflection, transformation, replenishing spirits, and renewal. With such an orientation in mind, we can use this tool to integrate elements of action, relationship, knowledge, and vision (Styres, 2017) in relation with current events.

Figure 1

*Medicine Wheel (Modified): Indigenous Relationality Philosophy*



*Note:* This modified medicine wheel depicts a balance across physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health of all living beings.

### Brief Discussion

For many Indigenous peoples in the US, illness or disease is often considered a result of imbalance within our relationships across both physical and spiritual realms. Although the coronavirus epidemic is caused by a virus, an imbalance of power within systems of relationships has resulted in widespread health disparities for tribal and other communities of color. Indigenous health and wellbeing are nurtured when traditional systems of relationality remain intact. Strong support networks strengthen our sense of connectedness and purpose and contribute to the overall

health of our people and communities. To explore a holistic interpretation of health during COVID-19, the authors asked members on the Elliott-Groves' Facebook page to consider how they are strengthening and maintaining their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health during a time of physical distancing; their responses are recorded on Table 1. Respondents included tribal community members, academic researchers, students, and professional caregivers; all respondents identified as AI/AN from the US or First Nations' from Canada.

### **Physical health: Living in balance with the land**

As the heartbeat of Indigenous existence is relational, the sustenance of all life is predicated on human relationships with the land. Physical health is thus contingent on the healthy coexistence of human beings and nature, which is expressed in terms the elements of fire, water, air, and land (see Figure 1). In this symbiotic relationship, natural elements play a symbolic as well as a physical role in health and healing (Cajete, 1994). In fact, many Indigenous peoples understand human health as a function of the health of Mother Earth. After all, the land gives us food and nourishment, fibers for clothing, and materials for artistic expression and making tools, all things that facilitate human livelihoods (Cajete, 1994).

To maintain individual physical health, members of our social network have shared that they are walking, hiking, and spending time outdoors. Many people have lost their jobs, which has resulted in a concern for food production; food insecurity has inspired Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike to invest in respectful approaches to food sovereignty and sustainability. For example, as part of their project to address food insecurity, the Flower Hill Institute, a Native-owned, community-directed non-profit organization offered packets of food seeds to community members in the Pacific Northwest to grow their own food, while others are learning how to harvest, can, hunt, or gather food and medicines. Some adaptations that people have made to ensure public safety include reorganizing classroom instruction to offer hybrid and/or online instruction; hosting virtual meetings; or visiting through doorways, windows, and in backyards (see Table 1). During a time of physical distancing, the land remains committed to facilitating human existence, including our thinking, acting, and knowing through interdependent daily interactions. The land recognizes the role she plays in Indigenous intergenerational healing processes, and she remains willing to facilitate human livelihoods.

Table 1

*Suggestions for Cultivating Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual Health during COVID-19 (and beyond)*

| Area of health      | Suggestions for everyday practice  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>Physical</b>     | Walking, running, hiking, swimming, lifting weights/bodyweight exercises<br>Strengthening connection to mountains, land, water, plants, and animals<br>Hunting/gathering/growing/harvesting/preserving foods and medicines<br>Eating healthy, cooking for others, taking vitamin supplements, sleeping well<br>Knitting, crocheting, weaving, or other making activities, such as masks or care packages for others<br>Visiting or connecting outdoors<br>Working from home, spending more time with family  |
| <b>Intellectual</b> | Increasing knowledge of health and disease to inform decisions about virus<br>Reading or listening to books<br>Participating in social or civic life<br>Engaging in professional development or acquiring new skills virtually<br>Learning ancestral language or Indigenous survival techniques virtually<br>Writing poetry or a journal, playing board games, completing puzzles  |
| <b>Emotional</b>    | Visiting virtually (e.g., Zoom, video conferencing, social media)<br>Grieving (crying, laughing, praying, acknowledging loss), holding space for others<br>Working with mental health counselors, continuing your own healing journey<br>Holding self with compassion (e.g., lowering standards, delegating tasks, asking for help when you need it)<br>Adhering to a schedule<br>Singing, dancing, drumming, virtual storytelling<br>Writing letters or emails to loved ones or writing for yourself<br>Setting boundaries with self and others, taking a break when you need it (especially from news or social media) |
| <b>Spiritual</b>    | Praying (individually or virtually), smudging, meditating, deep breathing,<br>Cultivating gratitude, forest bathing<br>Learning how to process or weave nettle or cedar<br>Reconnecting self and children to land, plants and animals, and ancestral relations<br>Honoring loved ones who have crossed over<br>Retracing the steps of our ancestors<br>Reclaiming Indigeneity<br>Making financial or gift donations to worthy causes, activism   |

**Emotional health: Living in balance with self**

Emotional health hinges on a sense of connectedness and belonging (Elliott-Groves, 2018), which is gravely challenged during this time of physical distancing. Some members of our network have found emotional restoration through the connections provided by social media. One way of doing so is learning and listening to traditional stories shared virtually. For example, renowned storytellers Fern Naomi Renville (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) and Roger Fernandes (Lower Elwha Klallam) have been sharing traditional stories from many nations on Facebook Live daily. Other members of our social network have found emotional sustenance through more traditional channels, in some cases by giving to and caring for others (e.g., writing letters or leaving care packages on doorsteps) (see Table 1). One female respondent wrote, “For us, it is a mix of calling friends more than ever before and finding grounding feeding 150-200 elders every day” (personal communication). Her family has found healing by reconnecting with the land through walking and driving, observing seasonal change and weather patterns, and “watching the moon rise, making nettle rope and story-listening with [elders]” (personal communication).

**Intellectual health: Living in balance with others**

Physical distancing has led to the closure of schools, community centers, and other formal and informal learning spaces. Families have been tasked with homeschooling their children, often without appropriate resources to facilitate their success. To illuminate Indigenous teaching and learning strategies that may mitigate the stress of physical distancing, we draw on Megan Bang’s recent discussions of intellectual health (Bang, 2020). For Indigenous individuals and communities, intellectual health refers to the degree to which individuals and communities can draw on specifically Indigenous intellectual traditions. A large part of the work our ancestors did to ensure our existence was to live intentionally and creatively every single day in ways that reflected a relational and reciprocal understanding of the world (Bang, 2020).

Some members from our own social networks report that they are using this time to reconnect with their ancestral languages and their traditional healing practices. Others are using video technology to learn survival skills, such as trapping animals, building homes, making tools, and harvesting plant medicines. On a broader scale, leaders and policy makers are making knowledge accessible on the Internet through free webinars and increased access to scientific publications. In a contemporary context, intellectual health is about the ability to draw on our own



ancestral traditions, coupled with an ability to consider, complement, and respond to alien knowledge systems (e.g., western knowledge). To that end, we recommend designing teaching and learning practices in ways that reflect the axiological commitments of the community. For many Indigenous populations, this may mean engaging in practices that emerge from an understanding that our education emerges from the land, and ought to be intergenerational, collective, and centered on Indigenous relationality.

### **Spiritual health: Living in balance with creation**

One of our responsibilities as Indigenous people is to share what we know within a network of relationships. In Coast Salish tradition, for example, a large part of sharing knowledge occurs through the process of witnessing. Witnesses are called to be the keepers of tribal history and are asked to share what they have observed. However, some knowledge is considered to be a part of an intimate, spiritual relationship with creation, and thus ought to be protected, or shared only with great care and intention.

Indigenous concepts of spirit and spirituality have been described as an energy within and beyond the physical realm that connects us to something greater than ourselves (Cajete, 2000; Stonechild, 2016). When Indigenous members of our social network were informally asked what has helped them cope with physical distancing protocols, many examples of spiritual strength came up. For example, as prayer offerings for others, videos began to surface on social media of women and girls jingle dress dancing. An Ojibwe story tells how the rhythmic sound of bells was a healing mechanism during the 1918 influenza pandemic (Child, 2020). These practices are spiritual because the vibrational sounds and healing energy transmitted might not be logically understood or explained but can be spiritually known and felt.

As people are staying home in order to protect others from the threat of COVID-19, we have begun to observe some unanticipated benefits of physical distancing. From a global perspective, Earth continues to be our educator as natural environments heal themselves. In some cases, animals are returning to their traditional habitats; in other cases, smog and pollution have declined because people are driving less, and certain industrial processes have paused. Many people have embraced the concept of working from home. Although many parents struggle with the competing narratives of productivity and childcare, they are grateful for the time they get to

spend with their children. These hopeful silver linings remind us that we need to continue to strive for reciprocal, consensual, and respectful relationships with all other living beings.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to draw on Indigenous knowledge systems to illuminate Indigenous approaches to physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health during the current global pandemic. By providing examples of everyday survival, we provide actionable insights; by centering our discussion on Indigenous relationality, we hope to re-narrate and realign human priorities with Indigenous understandings of the world. By engaging Indigenous knowledge systems, we share information that has been transmitted across generations with hopes of expanding our collective possible futures.

Settler colonial processes disrupt necessary life-sustaining systems of relationships. Such a disruption makes it very difficult for Indigenous nations to make decisions for themselves, their children, or their futures. Without self-determination, Indigenous nations are limited in their ability to adapt to large-scale or catastrophic change. Without this adaptive capacity, Indigenous possible futures are threatened, and in some cases foreclosed. Indigenous knowledge systems push back against settler colonialism by re-creating beings guided and shaped by ethical commitments to live lives that promote the rebirth of life itself.

Indigenous education emerges from the land. Thus, Indigenous identity – what it means to be a person – is rooted in specific places and is informed by cultural systems of relationality. What would happen if we built or rebuilt our learning infrastructure based on our own knowledge systems? What if Indigenous children were raised in a community with elders and others who can teach them important cultural practices, ethical and moral responsibilities, and the language needed to put it all together? What if their entire sense of self was cultivated by family and social relationships? What if you could self-determine how you, your children, and your community responded to large-scale change? What if you could protect your land, and thus your future? As Indigenous people, our traditional knowledge systems have been put in place across generations to buffer us against challenges ranging from military invasions to novel contagions. What would it look like if we taught our children *with* and *through* a thriving Indigenous culture, rather than just *about* our culture as it once was? To regenerate our Indigenous political and educational structures, we collectively need to reimagine what it looks like to rehabilitate human relationships

with the natural world. We need to further consider what it means to dismantle the systems of power that continue to oppress Indigenous and other persons of color. By intentionally choosing Indigenous teaching and learning practices that have been passed on for generations, we hope to provide our children and communities with the tools necessary to respond to widespread challenges, whether a global pandemic or the malignant residue of colonization.

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### **Author Note**

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Emma Elliott-Groves, PhD, MSW (Corresponding author)  
Assistant Professor  
University of Washington  
College of Education  
Email: emmae@uw.edu

Dawn Hardison-Stevens, PhD  
Program Manager, Native Education Certificate Program  
University of Washington  
College of Education  
dawnes@uw.edu

Jessica Ullrich, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
University of Alaska Anchorage  
School of Social Work  
jsullrich@alaska.edu