

CENTERING COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Recognizing Healing-Centered Community Practices as a Complement to Trauma-Informed Interventions and Services

BACKGROUND

There has been increasing attention towards the need for interventions to address and mitigate the role of trauma in individual and community wellbeing. The list of trauma-informed services and interventions seems to grow by the day. While these service developments are a welcome change from previous methods to improve community health and wellbeing, discussions with basebuilding community partners in 2018 have uplifted community-centered healing practices that have helped our communities to endure and survive over time. In 2020, with the unveiling of inequities by COVID-19, continuation of Black Lives Matter protests, and ongoing trauma caused by systemic bias and racism, these community-centered findings need to be (re)introduced. **The purpose of this brief is to showcase the importance of addressing community trauma through identifying and making space for healing-centered practices that communities have evolved over time, acknowledging and understanding the roots of trauma, and addressing the persistent, structural causes of trauma.** From Praxis' intentional dialogues with basebuilding and frontline community organizers, we describe how trauma shows up in our communities and institutions, how it can be addressed through community-centered healing, and the role that trusted partners can take in supporting community healing.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

As stated by Resmaa Menakem, “trauma is ancient.”¹ Trauma has existed in society since the dawn of civilization, and is **caused and perpetuated on a population level through oppression, enslavement, fear, and white supremacy.** Community trauma is caused by people, entities, or systems in power with the ability to cause harm to others for their own gain. This cultivation of trauma harms everyone, not just those directly experiencing trauma through oppression. Trauma can be experienced physically in addition to emotionally. Thus, to heal from trauma requires more than facilitated trainings or discussion but deep, intentional work that integrates the body, mind, and greater environment.

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Over-burdened and overextended, stress is the body’s response to carrying more than it can bear. When we are trying to do more than we can, confront more than we could possibly cope with in several lifetimes, we end up feeling that our lives are out of control, that we can only “keep a hold on life” by managing and controlling.”

– bell hooks²

¹ Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother’s hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies.* Central Recovery Press.

² hooks, b. (1993). *Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery.* South End Press.

WHAT IS “TRAUMA-INFORMED” VS “HEALING-CENTERED”?

Trauma-informed care or systems describes an organizational approach to understanding and addressing the effects of all types of trauma.³ In addition to recognizing that trauma and chronic stress are issues that harm our communities and workforce, trauma-informed approaches seek to shift organizational and service-delivery practices from being trauma-inducing to being trauma-reducing.⁴ Various mental health experts and service providers have identified gaps with the trauma-informed model, such as its focus on individual-level trauma rather than collective trauma, environmental and societal causes and systems of oppression, and the cultivation of wellbeing.⁵ Further, trauma-informed practices often require individuals to re-live their trauma in order to gain access to necessary health and mental health services. We propose expanding the trauma-informed lens to also recognize community-centered healing practices as more holistic supports of resistance, strength, and most importantly—healing. This means shifting from asking “What happened to you?” to “Who are you? What is right with you? And what is right with your community?”⁵

PROCESS

In May 2018, the Praxis Project convened 55 base-building community partners from across the United States to participate in a **Learning Circle** in Milwaukee, WI with the intention of understanding the role of healing and trauma in community led efforts to improve health justice and racial equity. The group discussion used a modified focus group process that incorporated Freirean popular education methods to develop shared understandings, explore meaning, and identify how community-centered healing practices relate to trauma-informed approaches designed to improve programs and services for community.

While The Praxis Project and community organizers participated in this discussion in 2018, these findings are being released in 2020. Trauma and its perpetuating force of systemic oppression and racism have always existed; now there is a greater awareness and recognition among broader society. During this historical moment of global dialogue and reckoning, the following findings are relevant, timeless, and invaluable insights from our network.

Dr. Shawn Ginwright describes **healing-centered** engagement as a holistic view to approach trauma using the following four elements:⁵

- 1.) Healing-centered engagement is explicitly political, rather than clinical.
- 2.) Healing-centered engagement is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity.
- 3.) Healing-centered engagement is asset driven and focuses on well-being we want, rather than symptoms we want to suppress.
- 4.) Healing-centered engagement supports providers with their own healing.

The findings from in-depth discussions with basebuilding organizers are aligned with and support these four elements of healing-centered engagement as a complement to trauma-informed interventions and services.



3 Trauma Informed Care Project (2020). What is TIC? Retrieved from traumainformedcareproject.org

4 Trauma Transformed (2020). Retrieved from traumatransformed.org/about.

5 Ginwright, S. (2018). The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>

FINDINGS

Basebuilding community organizers and partners identified a range of definitions and manifestations of trauma, and strategies to support healing. These manifestations and strategies spanned from the individual to the community level. Further, participants made specific note that “trauma-informed” approaches are not the opposite of “healing-centered” practices, but that a healing-centered framework is often not valued in professional settings that also do not recognize the sometimes antiseptic and apolitical practices exhibited by the medical-industrial complex, the criminal-industrial complex, the process and impacts of colonization, and other sources of trauma in communities. An understanding of racism and other systemic oppressions is necessary to fully incorporate a healing-centered framework. Lastly, participants identified recommendations for community organizers, advocates, and those working in institutions to integrate community-centered healing practices.

COMMUNITY DEFINITIONS OF TRAUMA

During the learning circle, facilitators asked participants to share the words that they and others use to describe trauma:

- **Lack of words:** No words to explain, silence
- **Pain:** Pain and struggle, sick, tired, depressed, heartbreak, anger, helplessness, post-traumatic stress disorder, fear and vulnerability, internalization
- **Erasure, isolation and oppression:** Being the only person of color, feeling voiceless, being shut down, controlled, loss of language, dismissal of culture and traditions, gentrification
- **Betrayal by institutions:** Police, government, school to prison to deportation pipeline, “being caught in the system,” “my child is in prison,” distrust, images in the media, false narratives
- **Violence:** Threat of violence, ingrained racism, colonization, assimilation, genocide, gentrification

This first-person lens to describe trauma is palpable. At the root of each definition is a version of some kind of pain and rendering of invisibility.

ROOTS & REMEDIES IN RALEIGH, NC, JULY 2015

HOW TRAUMA, HEALING, AND RESISTANCE MANIFEST

But we also know that healing work has been present in our communities since before the recognition of the role of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. The facilitators and participants discussed the concrete ways in which trauma, healing and resistance show up in their work at various levels, from the personal to societal. This shifts from the traditional approach of trauma-informed care to look beyond just individual experiences, but collective, shared trauma and healing. The concepts identified by the group spanned across the levels of the **social ecological model** (personal, family, community, and society), including sexual trauma, poverty, struggle, resistance, and liberation. Participants shared that talking about trauma at all levels can be both painful and healing.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Power dynamics: The ways in which unequal distribution of power impacts social interactions between groups or individuals.

Resistance: An individual or community reaction against use or forms of power.

Healing: Through this learning circle, Praxis offers the following definition for healing: “community-centered love, connection, and restoration that cultivates communal power.”

Manifestation

PERSONAL

How Trauma Manifests

- Defensiveness
- Helplessness
- Substance abuse; addiction
- Internalizing “isms”
- Isolation
- Doubt
- Depression
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Feeling targeted
- Feeling triggered
- Stress
- Financial burdens
- Oppressing oneself

How Healing and Resistance Manifest

Mental and Emotional

- Self-love
- Connecting with each other
- Praying
- “Healer heal thyself”: Heal within oneself first, in order to go out and heal others
- Identity
- Honesty
- Empathy
- Compassion
- Self-inventory
- Advocacy
- Spirituality
- It’s a process
- Release
- Receiving
- Resiliency
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Understanding
- Forgiveness (or not)
- Trust
- Love
- Standing on your truth
- Acceptance
- Affirmation
- Self determination
- Respect
- Neuro-decolonization; decolonizing the mind
- Self-study for a more inclusive/expansive understanding of history and theories
- Prayer
- Creating community you feel you need



Physical

- Gaining a sense of identity through ceremony, art and expression/showing up for self as well as others in your circle
- Breathing
- Teaching
- Creating
- Crying
- Cats
- Massages
- Bubble baths
- Facials
- Tea time
- Traditional singing and drumming

FAMILY

How Trauma Manifests

- Preparing children for the outside world
- Power dynamics
- Cultural differences
- Generational dysfunction

How Healing and Resistance Manifest

- Gathering, cooking, sharing stories and revealing family secrets
- Existence as resistance
- Gender roles defined by the needs of family and supported by the community
- Never forgetting traditional ways
- Multi-generational expression
- Community wellness projects
- Elders
- Storytelling
- Navajo tradition of walking in beauty, beauty [all around me]
- In this future we are building our future ancestors

COMMUNITY

How Trauma Manifests

- Experiencing trauma while addressing trauma: how does a healer heal oneself?
- Burnout among organizers
- Alienation
- Internalized oppression at the community level
- Displacement
- Unemployment
- Survival interfering with being strategic

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How Healing and Resistance Manifest

- Taking action
- Creating spaces where one can name and heal
- Resist is to heal
- Go into offense
- Boycotts
- Solidarity
- Spirituality and interconnection
- Being connected to ancestral knowledge/past
- Heal and resist through art, music and celebration
- Herbal medicine
- Power and fortitude
- Demanding justice
- Engagement
- Expose the pain
- Sharing
- Regeneration
- Holding space
- Confronting
- Being raw and authentic
- Organizing to build community

SOCIETY

How Trauma Manifests

- Gentrification
- Human trafficking
- Capitalism
- Sexism
- Colonialism
- White supremacy
- Being divorced from indigenous roots
- Gaslighting
- Weaponizing culture
- Revisionist history

How Healing and Resistance Manifest

- Question the policy framework that divides the communities we're trying to unite
- Education
- Breaking silence as resistance
- Boycotting
- Advocacy
- Participation
- Systematic change
- Power of choice - choosing future

What Does it Take to Resist Trauma and Heal?

Participants recognized that we all have a role to play in resisting trauma and contributing towards collective healing. Whether we are a community advocate, or are a community resident, or work in a foundation, we can each foster healing within our respective spheres of influence. Findings from discussion participants aligned with Dr. Ginwright's four elements of healing-centered engagement: Healing-centered is political rather than clinical; it is culturally grounded and restores identity; it is asset-driven; and providers or those working with communities experiencing trauma need their own healing as well.³

ORGANIZER & COMMUNITY HEALING

For community organizers, advocates, and others working directly with community members, specific recommended strategies for healing include:





ROOTS & REMEDIES IN RALEIGH, NC JULY 2015

- Break cycles - working first with ourselves, then with families and societies
- Resist and heal at the personal level, enabling one to be embedded at all other levels of healing
- Build capacity to empower each other
- Recognize and address trauma in order to move forward
- Conduct support groups for previous trauma
- Take time doing this work; it can't be rushed
- Use tools that are most important for healing: organizing.
- Avoid dependence on outside resources
- Elevate people's expertise and skills, and allow communities to grow leaders and channel grassroots power
- Resist unnecessary external validation by those who are not true partners
- Take ownership of changing the narrative

INSTITUTIONAL HEALING (INCLUDING FOUNDATIONS & PUBLIC HEALTH)

For those working with or within institutions such as foundations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations or other related systems, specific recommended strategies for advancing community-centered healing include:

- Manage dysfunctional relationship with funding:
 - Collectively rethink our current form of currency (a tool of colonization) to decolonize.
 - Funders need to understand true organic change-making.
 - Funding should bring freedom and healing - not impose limits and patriarchy (on societies that are historically matrilineal in language, customs, interpretations, etc.).
 - Foundations can help by providing non-restricted funds.
 - Discontinue the "oppression Olympics," which results from organizations fighting for the same funding.
- Create Indigenous health systems.
- Research projects should be designed in authentic partnership with community groups to ensure that project methods or researchers will not harm the individuals or communities involved, even inadvertently.
- Resist policies that appear progressive but are actually neutral or have a negative impact in terms of social change.
- Express to funders the importance of lived experience rather than solely traditionally-defined professional or academic experience.
- Ensure that stakeholders being brought in to represent the community share the community's interests.
- Listen, learn, implement, and trust lived experience.

Putting these strategies into practice requires an honest reflection of current practices, and an investment in time, resources, and activities to truly value community leadership and lived experience. One tool to help guide these strategies is Praxis' **Working Principles for Health, Justice and Racial Equity**.



Senses of Healing

Lastly, we asked participants to describe what gave them a “sense of healing,” portrayed in the list below. Common themes include freedom of expression, creativity, food, music, nature, and community celebration.

- Cooking/kitchen
- Dreaming
- Spiritual practices
- Oral history
- Good meal after hunger
- Water
- Jazz
- Peaceful silence
- Laughter
- Ascension
- Strength
- Essence festivals
- Bedroom
- Fresh rain hitting the dirt
- Clean laundry
- Garden
- Beating of drum
- Lightning breaking through
- Self expression of song
- Babies cooing
- Ocean breeze
- Innocence
- Cleansing
- Deep breath
- Shower after long day
- Playing in the dirt
- Community centers e.g. outdoor basketball court
- Dancing
- Artistic expression - music, painting, writing, etc.
- Fire and water - all of the elements
- Spaces for quiet meditation
- Healing from within
- Being around those you love
- Ceremonies
- School could be an escape/library - spaces of learning
- Parks and open spaces
- Friends and strangers at pubs and coffeehouses
- Sweat from hard work
- Spices while cooking
- Communal
- Support and comfort
- Presence of our elders and ancestors - including graveyards
- Cooperative spaces
- campfire/bonfire
- Markets
- Restaurants of our people
- Diverse
- Free expression
- Different languages in same space
- TLC
- Drumbeat
- Singing and dancing and drumming (hospital)
- Schools - kids able to learn their own language
- Creator-given spaces
- Harvesting, sharing and subsistence lifestyle e.g. young man’s first moose shared with grandparents
- Suspended judgement and honesty with family/ each other
- Acceptance
- Celebration
- Intuition of living in big city but internal conflict driving us back home to get reconnected



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, PHILANTHROPY, & ALLIED PROFESSIONS:

The rich discussion with basebuilding community organizers highlights that centering on a shared understanding of resistance and healing is necessary for addressing present and former trauma. Through this learning circle, Praxis offers the following definition for healing: “community-centered love, connection, and restoration that cultivates communal power.”

The evolution of trauma-informed approaches has made great progress, and the findings from this community-centered discussion pave the way for future development; in particular, the roles that trusted partners can take in supporting healing. The conversation topics resulted in two recommendations:

- 1.) Rethink the role that institutions and foundations play in advancing healing for health justice.** Many community organizers identified a clear relationship between traditional funding structures and trauma in their work. Assessing the current impact of funding structures on community organizing and revisiting those mechanisms is a step towards healing and resistance. Potential strategies include transparency in funding, participatory budgeting processes, and creating general funding opportunities.
- 2.) Ensure community involvement when pursuing institutional trauma-informed systems approaches.** “Listen, learn, implement, and trust lived experiences.” Many health departments and other agencies are recognizing the importance of integrating a trauma-informed lens or approach to their institutions. Community organizers and partners have a deep understanding of how trauma shows up in their lives, families, community and society, and what healing and resistance can counter that trauma. Recognizing community knowledge through intentional, authentic partnership and meaningful shifting of power to community can be a form of healing.

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Praxis Staff and participating organizations:

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- Black Organizing Project
- Black Women for Wellness
- Causa Justa :: Just Cause
- Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)
- Chainbreaker Collective
- City Life/Vida Urbana
- Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth
- Community to Community (C2C)
- Connect Your Community
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council
- Detroit Women of Color, Inc.
- Diné Community Advocacy Alliance
- Dine’ Citizens Against Ruining our Environment
- Dine’ Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment
- Empower DC
- Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)
- Freedom Inc
- Genesee County Hispanic Latino Collaborative-La Placita
- Grassroots Leadership
- Gwinnett SToPP
- Homes For All Nashville
- Housing Justice League
- InnerCity Struggle
- Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization
- Khmer Girls in Action



ROOTS & REMEDIES IN SEATTLE, WA JULY 2019

- La Plazita institute
- La Union del Pueblo Entero
- Martinez Street Women's Center
- Media Mobilizing Project
- Menikanaehkem
- Miami Children's Initiative (MCI)
- Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project
- New Mexico Acequia Association
- Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc.
- North Bay Organizing Project
- One Voice
- Padres & Jovenes Unidos
- Pan-African Community Development Initiative
- PODER, People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights
- Providence Student Union
- Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM)
- SAJE
- SEIRN
- Southern Echo Inc.
- Struggle for Miami's Affordable and Sustainable Housing, Inc.
- Take Back the Land Rochester
- Tenants Union of WA
- The Black Feminist Project
- United for Justice in care of Right to the City Boston
- US Federation of Worker Cooperatives





The Praxis Project is a values-driven, national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve justice and equity through partnerships to build community power. Praxis believes strongly that organized communities are critical partners in the struggle to create just and equitable communities.

Our mission is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and communities.

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK

Visit our website, www.thepraxisproject.org, to learn more about our initiatives and explore our multimedia resources.



CONTACT US


Email: info@thepraxisproject.org


Phone: (510) 652-5250

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