

# A Guide to Cultural Awareness of Minnesota



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No. (SMA) 08-4351 by  
Naadamaadiwin American  
Indian Resource team



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## References

Adapted from Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., and Isaacs, M. (1989). Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care Volume I. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

# American Indian Culture Guide

## About This Guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide basic information for professionals who may be working with and/or providing services to American Indian communities in Minnesota. For more than three decades, people who self-identify as American Indian have made up 1.2 percent of the population of Minnesota.

This guide is intended to serve as a general briefing to enhance cultural competence in the provision of services to American Indian communities. (Cultural competence is defined as the ability to function effectively in the context of cultural differences.) A more specific orientation or training should be provided by a member of the particular American Indian community being served.

Service providers should use this guide to ensure the following five elements of cultural competence are being addressed:

- Awareness, acceptance and valuing of cultural differences
- Awareness of one's own culture and values
- Understanding the range of dynamics that are possible from the interaction between people of different cultures
- Developing cultural knowledge of the particular community served or to access persons from that community who may have that knowledge
- Ability to adapt specific individual interventions, programs, and policies to fit the cultural context of the individual, family, or community

# Myths and Facts

**Myth:** American Indian people are spiritual and live in harmony with nature.

**Fact:** The idea of all American Indians having a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization. This romantic stereotype can be just as damaging as other more negative stereotypes and impairs one's ability to provide services to American Indians as real people.

**Myth:** American Indian people have distinguishing physical characteristics, and you can identify them by how they look.

**Fact:** Due to Tribal diversity, as well as hundreds of years of inter-Tribal and inter-racial marriages, there is no single distinguishing "look" for American Indians.

**Myth:** Casinos have made American Indians rich.

**Fact:** Minnesota has 11 federally recognized tribes; while many of them have gaming operations, not all distribute direct payments, (sometimes called "per capita" checks) to enrolled members, whose numbers vary widely from tribe to tribe. In addition, not all casinos generate the same volume of income, so the amount of dispersals also varies widely.

**Myth:** The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) are the only agencies responsible for working with tribes.

**Fact:** The U.S. Constitution, Executive Orders, and presidential memos outline policy requiring that ALL executive departments have the responsibility to consult with and respect tribal sovereignty. In Minnesota many Department of Human Services and Department of Health programs interface with and provide services to Indian people living on and off reservation soil.



**Myth:** American Indians have the highest rate of alcoholism.

**Fact:** While many tribes do experience the negative effects of alcohol abuse, what is less known is that American Indians also have the highest rate of complete abstinence. When socioeconomic level is accounted for in a comparison group, alcoholism rates are no different for American Indians than for other ethnic or racial groups.

**Myth:** American Indian people all get “Indian money” and don’t pay taxes.

**Fact:** Few Tribal members receive payments from the BIA for land held in trust and most do not get significant “Indian money.” American Indians pay income tax and sales tax like any other citizen of the state in which they reside.

## Tribal Sovereignty:

There are 11 federally recognized American Indian tribes in Minnesota; seven are Ojibwe and four are Dakota;

**Red Lake Nation** ..... <http://www.redlakenation.org>

**White Earth Nation** ..... <http://www.whiteearth.com/home.html>

**Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe**

..... <http://www.llojibwe.org/index.html>

**Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe** ..... [www.millelacsband.com/](http://www.millelacsband.com/)

**Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa**

..... <http://www.fdlrez.com/>

**Bois Forte Band of Chippewa** ..... <http://www.boisforte.com/>

**Grand Portage** ..... <http://www.grandportage.com/heritage.php>

**Minnesota Chippewa Tribe**

(an administrative compilation of six Ojibwe tribes)

..... <http://www.mnchippewatribe.org/>

**Prairie Island Indian Community**

..... <http://www.prairieisland.org/>

**Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community**

..... <http://www.shakopeedakota.org/>

**Upper Sioux Community (Pezihutazizi Oyate)**

..... <http://www.uppersiouxcommunity-nsn.gov/>

**Lower Sioux Indian Community**..... <http://www.lower Sioux.com/>

# **There is a unique legal and political relationship between the Federal government and Indian tribes**

The U.S. Constitution (Article 1 Section 8, and Article 6), treaties, Supreme Court decisions, federal laws, and Executive Orders provide authority to the federal government for conducting Indian affairs with federally recognized tribes.

As sovereign nations, tribal governments have the right to hold elections, determine their own citizenship (enrollment), and to consult directly with the U.S. government on policy, regulations, legislation and funding.

Tribal governments can create and enforce laws that are stricter or more lenient than state laws, but they are not subservient to state law. State laws cannot be applied where they interfere with the right of a tribe to make its own laws protecting the health and welfare of its citizens or where it would interfere with any federal interest.

Criminal legal jurisdiction issues are very complex, depend on a variety of factors, and must be assessed based on the specific law as applied to a specific tribe. In general, federal laws apply.

The Indian Self-Determination Act (Public Law 93-638) gives the authority to tribal governments to contract to provide programs and services that are otherwise carried out by the federal government, such as services provided by the BIA or IHS.

## **Regional and cultural differences**

Prior to European contact, American Indian communities existed throughout various areas of North America. Federal policies led to voluntary and forced relocation from familiar territory to the current day reservation system.

When the reservation system was formed in the late 1800s, some bands and tribes were forced by the U.S. government to live together. In some instances, these groups were related linguistically and culturally; in others, they were not closely related and may even have been historic enemies.

On reservations where different American Indian groups were forced to co-exist, repercussions occurred that still can be experienced today in those communities. **Historic rivalries, family or clan conflicts, and tribal politics may present challenges for an outsider who is unaware of local dynamics and who is trying to interact with different groups in the community.**

While there is great diversity across and within tribes, there are within-region similarities based on adaptation to ecology, climate, and geography (including traditional foods); linguistic and cultural affiliations; and sharing of information for long periods of time.

Differences in cultural groups are closely related to regional differences and may be distinguished by their language or spiritual belief systems. They are also a result of the diversity of historic homelands across the nation and migration patterns of Tribal groups.

Cultures developed in adaptation to their natural environment and the influence of trade and interaction with non-Indians and other American Indian groups.

In Minnesota; the two largest groups are the Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) and the Dakota. The Ojibwe are “woodland” Indians and the Dakota are part of the seven council fires that include the Lakota and Nakota to the west.

**Urban Indian communities can be found in most major metropolitan areas, such as Little Earth in Minneapolis.** These populations are represented by members of a large number of different tribes and cultures that have different degrees of observation of traditional culture and of adaptation to Western cultural norms. They form a sense of community through social interaction and activities, but are often “invisible,” geographically disbursed, and multi-racial. Many of these concentrations of Native people were formed during the termination and re-location era. In 1954 the BIA instituted policies that moved American Indians from reservations to urban areas, creating the highest concentration of non-reservation based American Indians in Minnesota in the Little Earth Housing development and the Phillips area.

## Cultural customs

Cultural customs can be viewed as a particular group or individual’s preferred way of meeting their basic human needs and conducting daily activities as passed on through generations.

## Specific cultural customs among American Indian groups may vary significantly, even within a single community.

Customs are influenced by: ethnicity, origin, language, religious/spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, ancestry, history, gender identity, geography and so on.

Cultural customs are often seen explicitly through material culture such as food, dress, dance, ceremony, drumming, song, stories, symbols and other visible manifestations.

Such outward cultural customs are a reflection of a much more ingrained and implicit culture that is not easily seen or verbalized. **Deeply held values, general world view, patterns of communication, and interaction are often the differences that affect the helping relationship.**

A common practice of a group or individual that represents thoughts, core values, and beliefs may be described by community members as “the way we do things” in a particular tribe, community, clan, or family. This includes decision-making processes.

## Respectful questions about cultural customs are generally welcomed, yet not always answered directly.

Any questions about culture should be for the purpose of improving the service provider’s understanding related to the services being provided.

Many American Indian people have learned to “walk in two worlds” and will observe the cultural practices of their American Indian traditions when in those settings, and will observe other cultural practices when in dominant culture settings.

**Sharing food is a way of welcoming visitors, similar to offering a handshake.** Food is usually offered at community meetings and other gatherings as a way to build relationships. One should NOT refuse food or gifts.



# Spirituality

A strong respect for spirituality, whether traditional (prior to European contact), Christian (resulting from European contact), or a combination of both, is common among all American Indian communities and often forms a sense of group unity.

**Many American Indian communities have a strong church community and organized religion that is integrated within their culture.** Most of the Minnesota reservations will have traditional activities (sweat lodge, smudging) as well as having Christian churches.

**Traditional spirituality and practices are integrated into American Indian cultures and day-to-day living.**

Traditional spirituality and organized religions are usually community-oriented, rather than individual-oriented. A strong cultural norm could be expressed as “this is not about “I” and “me”, it is about “us” and “we” .

Spirituality, world view, and the meaning of life are very diverse concepts among regions, tribes, and individuals.

**Specific practices such as ceremonies, prayers, and religious protocols will vary among American Indian communities, both between tribes and members of each tribe.**

A blend of traditions, traditional spiritual practices, and mainstream faiths may coexist. It is best to inquire about an individual's faith or beliefs instead of making assumptions, but be aware that many American Indian spiritual beliefs and practices are considered sacred and are not to be shared publicly or with outsiders. Do not take offense at short responses or simply a statement that it is not to be talked about; they are simply practicing what they believe.

Until passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, many traditional American Indian practices such as such as “inipi” (sweat lodge), medicine lodge, and the “wi yang waci” (sundance) were illegal and kept secret.

Social and health problems and their solutions are often seen as spiritually based and as part of a holistic world view of balance between mind, body, spirit, and the environment.

**It is a common practice to open and close meetings with a prayer or short ceremony.** Elders are often asked to offer such opening and closing words and are given a small gift as a sign of respect for sharing this offering.

## Communication Styles

### Nonverbal Messages

- **American Indian people communicate a great deal through non-verbal gestures.** Careful observation is necessary to avoid misinterpretation of non-verbal behavior.
- American Indian people may look down to show respect or deference to elders, or may ignore an individual to show disagreement or displeasure.
- A gentle handshake is often seen as a sign of respect, not weakness.

### Humor

- **American Indian people may convey truths or difficult messages through humor,** and might cover great pain with smiles or jokes. It is important to listen closely to humor, as it may be seen as invasive to ask for too much direct clarification about sensitive topics.

It is a common conception that “laughter is good medicine” and is a way to cope. The use of humor and teasing to show affection or offer corrective advice is also common.

### Indirect Communication

- **It is often considered unacceptable for an American Indian person to criticize another directly.** This is important to understand, especially when children and youth are asked to speak out against or testify against another person. It may be considered disloyal or disrespectful to speak negatively about the other person.
- There is a common belief that people who have acted wrongly will pay for their acts in one way or another, although the method may not be through the legal system.

### Storytelling

- **Getting messages across through telling a story (traditional teachings and personal stories) is very common** and sometimes in contrast with the “get to the point” frame of mind in non-American Indian society.

## Historic Distrust

Establishing trust with members of an American Indian community may be difficult. Many tribal communities were destroyed due to the introduction of European infectious illnesses and many, perhaps most treaties made by the U.S. government with tribal nations were broken.

From the 1800s through the 1960s, government military-style boarding schools and church-run boarding schools were used to assimilate American Indian people. Children were forcibly removed from their families to attend schools far from home where they were punished for speaking their language and practicing spiritual ways in a stated effort to “kill the Indian, save the child.” Many children died from infectious diseases, and in many schools physical and sexual abuse by the staff was rampant. Boarding school survivors were taught that their traditional cultures were inferior or shameful, which still affects many American Indian communities today.

The federal “Termination Policy” in the 1950s and 1960s ended the government-to-government relationship with more than 100 federally recognized tribes. The result was disastrous for those tribes due to discontinued federal support, loss of land held in trust, and loss of tribal identity. Most of the tribes terminated during this time were able to re-establish federal recognition through the congressional process in the 1980s and 1990s.

The federal “Relocation Policy” of the 1950s and 1960s sought to move American Indian families to urban areas, promising jobs, housing, and a “new life.” Those who struggled and stayed formed the core of the growing urban Indian populations, such as Little Earth Housing in Minneapolis. Ultimately, many families returned home to their reservation or home community. Today, many families and individuals travel between their home community and urban communities for periods of time to pursue education and job opportunities.

Churches and missionaries have a long history of converting American Indian people to their religions, and in the process often labeled traditional cultural practices such as songs, dances, dress, and artwork as “evil.” Today there is a diverse mix of Christian beliefs and traditional spirituality within each American Indian community.

**FACT:** Minnesota is the site of the largest mass execution of people in the history of the United States. Thirty-eight Dakota people were hung en masse in Mankato on December 26, 1862, effectively ending “the Dakota Uprising.”

## Cultural Identity

When interacting with individuals who identify themselves as American Indian, **it is important to understand that each person has experienced his or her cultural connection in a unique way.**

An individual’s own personal and family history will determine his or her cultural identity and practices, which may change throughout the lifespan as s/he is exposed to different experiences.

The variation of cultural identity in American Indian people can be viewed as a continuum that ranges between one who views himself or herself as “traditional” and lives traditional culture daily, to one who views himself or herself as “Indian” or “Native”, but has little knowledge or interest in traditional cultural practices.

Be mindful of differences in self identification with culture and avoid assumptions based on someone’s appearance, name, etc.

**Many American Indian families are multicultural and adapt to their surrounding culture.**

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the federal government, adoption agencies, state child welfare programs, and churches adopted out thousands of American Indian children to non-American Indian families. The Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978 to end this practice. There are many American Indian children, as well as adults, who were raised with little awareness or knowledge of their traditional culture; they may now be seeking a connection with their homelands, traditional culture, and unknown relatives.

When asked “Where are you from?” most American Indian people will identify the name of their tribe or the location of their traditional or family homeland. This is often a key to individual identity.

## Roles of Veterans and Elders

**Elders play a significant role in tribal communities.** The experience and wisdom they have gained throughout their lifetimes, along with their historical knowledge of the community, are considered valuable in decision-making processes.

**It is customary in many tribal communities to show respect by allowing elders to speak first,** not interrupting, and allowing time for opinions and thoughts to be expressed. It is disrespectful to openly argue or disagree with an elder.

**In group settings, people will often ask the elder's permission to speak publicly, or will first defer to an elder to offer an answer.**

Elders often offer their teaching or advice in ways that are indirect, such as through storytelling.

When in a social setting where food is served, elders are generally served first.

American Indian communities historically have high rates of enlistment in the military service. Often, both the community and the veteran display pride for military service.

Veterans are also given special respect similar to that of elders for having accepted the role of protector and experienced personal sacrifice. American Indian community members recognize publicly the service of the veteran in formal and informal settings.

American Indian community members who are veterans are honored at ceremonies and pow wows, and by special songs and dances. They have a special role in the community, so veterans and their families are shown respect by public acknowledgment and inclusion in public events. During pow wows veterans often carry flags for grand entry and exit each day.

The American Indian community's view of uniformed service members being deployed to an American Indian community in times of crisis or disaster (such as the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps or National Guard) will vary greatly. There may be respect for the uniform similar to that shown to a veteran, but there may also be feelings of distrust related to the U.S. government's and the military's historical role and presence in American Indian communities.

## Strengths in American Indian communities

It is easy to be challenged by the conditions in American Indian communities and to not see beyond the impact of the problems or crisis.

**Recognizing and identifying strengths in the community can provide insight for possible interventions.** Since each community is unique, look to the community itself for its own identified strengths, such as:

- extended family and kinship ties
- long-term natural support systems
- shared sense of collective community responsibility
- physical resources (e.g., food, plants, animals, water, land)
- indigenous generational knowledge/wisdom
- historical perspective and strong connection to the past
- survival skills and resiliency in the face of multiple challenges
- retention and reclamation of traditional language and cultural practices
- ability to “walk in two worlds” (mainstream culture and the American Indian cultures)
- community pride

## Health and Wellness Challenges.

Among American Indians, concepts of health and wellness are broad. The foundations of these concepts are living in a harmonious balance with all elements, as well as balance and harmony of spirit, mind, body, and the environment. Health and wellness may be all encompassing, not just one’s own physical body; it is holistic in nature. American Indians define what health and wellness is to them, which may be very different from how western medicine defines health and wellness.

Many health and wellness issues are not unique to American Indian communities, but are statistically higher than in the general population. It is important to learn about the key health issues in a particular community.

**Among most American Indian communities, 50 percent or more of the population is under 21 years of age.**

Health disparities exist with limited access to culturally appropriate health care in most American Indian communities.

**Only 55 percent of American Indian people rely on federally-funded IHS or Tribally-operated clinics and hospitals for care.**

In a Minnesota study of American Indian mortality from 2000-2007, the leading causes of death were (in order) ischemic heart disease, motor vehicle crashes and suicide. The average age of mortality for an American Indian in Minnesota is 55; the national average for all people of all racial/ethnic backgrounds is 77, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Nationally, suicide is the second leading cause of death among American Indian people ages 10-34. The highest rates are among males between the ages of 24 and 34, followed by males ages 15 to 24, respectively.

Following a death by suicide in the community, concern about suicide clusters, suicide contagion and the possibility of suicide pacts may be heightened. A response to a suicide or other traumatic occurrence requires a community-based and culturally competent strategy.

Prevention and intervention efforts must include supporting/enhancing strengths of the community resources as well as individual and family clinical interventions.

Service providers must take great care in the assessment process to consider cultural differences in symptoms and health concepts when making a specific diagnosis or drawing conclusions about the presenting problem or bio-psychological history.

**Every effort should be made to consult with local cultural advisors for questions about symptomology and treatment options.**



## Self Awareness and etiquette

Prior to making contact with a community, **examine your own beliefs** about American Indians.

You are being observed at all times, so **avoid making assumptions** and be conscious that you are laying the groundwork for others to follow.

You may experience people expressing their mistrust, frustration, or disappointment from other situations that are outside of your control. **Learn not to take it personally.**

If community members tease you, understand that this can indicate rapport-building and may be a form of guidance or an indirect way of correcting inappropriate behavior. You will be more easily accepted and forgiven for mistakes if you can **learn to laugh at yourself and listen to lessons being brought to you through humor.**

Remember that you are a guest; **observe, and ask questions humbly when necessary.** Careful observation and seeking guidance from a community member on appropriate behavior can help you to follow local customs and demonstrate cultural respect.

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