

Pre-Contact Aboriginal Mental Health

In today's society, the awareness of the existence of mental or psychological problems is often lacking. Mental illness is often almost a *taboo* subject, in that people would much rather pretend it did not exist. This discomfort has existed throughout time. Discussions of the existence of mental illnesses in aboriginal peoples often fails to look at the possibility of their existence prior to colonization. (Waldram, 2004, p. 169).

It is a widely accepted notion that depression and suicide, along with many other diseases and social issues, were introduced to aboriginal peoples with the arrival of the Europeans, and, more specifically, their forced confinement of aboriginal peoples. (Waldram, 2004, p. 169) People generally seem to believe that aboriginal peoples only encountered psychological problems after the Europeans colonized the west. This of course was a drastic change in the way of life for the native peoples, and therefore the development of social problems is to be expected. "Simultaneously, and indeed throughout their encounter with Europeans, the Subartic peoples were exposed to diseases, especially smallpox, measles, and alcoholism[...]" (Lovisek, 2002, p. 100).

Though this is the widely accepted view, there is a large amount of evidence stating otherwise. There are references to depression and suicide in many different native languages. The existence of 'heartbreak' amongst the Mohave peoples has been described as a "traditional problem" that sometimes leads to suicide. Similarly, in Oglala Sioux, "wacinko syndrome" essentially referred to a form of depression occasionally accompanied by suicidal ideation. In Dakota, "tawatl ye sni" has been described as meaning "totally discouraged". (Waldram, 2004, p. 169)

In our local aboriginal community, the Anishinaabek language has many different words for depression, and "elders in northern Ontario described depression as a problem that existed in earlier times, often the result of shame." (Waldram, 2004, p. 169).

Even in the study of historical events, the people of today often try to gloss over the existence of mental illness within society.

References

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- Waldram, J. B. (2004). *Revenge of the Windigo*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated.