

PRESENTING AUTHOR'S NAME & RESEARCH TITLE

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Thriving Native Veterans: Translational Research for Health Promotion and Harm Reduction among Military Service Members

PURPOSE/BACKGROUND

Military service members face many challenges when returning to civilian life after leaving military service. These challenges can lead to feeling a sense of loss, confusion, purposelessness, and ultimately hopelessness. It is in this state of hopelessness that thoughts about ending one's life can emerge. This study focused on learning what might be relevant Native cultural features that could serve as protective factors against the risks of suicide. Native veterans with rich experiences living in their culture and practicing their traditions can be empowering and promote a sense of belonging. So much so that such connections to Native cultural identity and traditional practices can serve as protective factors against suicide. The focus of this research project was to explore how culture might influence Native service members' successful transition into civilian life.

MATERIALS & METHODS

To begin learning how cultural features may serve as protective factors for Native veterans, Native veterans located in the Interior or Alaska who considered themselves to have successfully made the transition from military service were purposefully recruited. Through the guidance of a community-based advisory board (CAB) consisting of Alaska Native leaders, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants to learn what challenges participants experienced and how their culture mitigated these challenges. Thematic analysis of the text generated five major themes, reflecting culturally relevant protective factors.

RESULTS

Five major themes were identified in the analysis of the interviews where individual participants discussed their observations and experiences during this transition: (a) navigating adjustment challenges, (b) strengthening resolve through culture and traditions, (c) validating cultural identity, (d) preparing for the transition, and (e) appreciating Native identity.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The CAB agreed with the analytical outcome and suggested that the findings be translated into measures to assist not only Native service members in making the transition from active duty but all service members. Protective mechanisms could be facilitated through active Native local veteran associations, communicating these findings to service component transition assistance programs, and informing community relations with local military installation leaders were some suggestions. These could reinforce Native culture and traditional practices while building relationships between communities and transitioning service members.