

Buffalo Hide Academy: January / February 2019

BHA Core Beliefs:

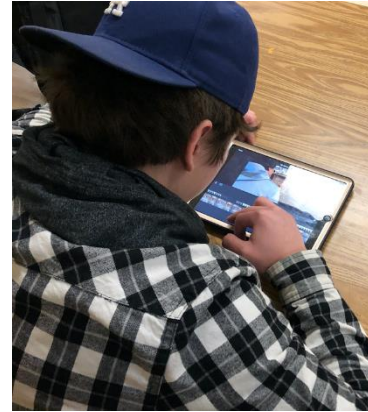
Trauma Informed Environment - We screen for and address symptoms of toxic stress within our restorative framework.

Student Centered Model - Unconditional positive regard, congruence and authenticity, and empathic understanding serve as the foundation for interpersonal communication.

Solution focused - we search for protective, strength based factors within our student population. Our instinct is to normalize stress and emphasize internal resilience factors, rather than pathologize stress.

Self-care - Vicarious trauma is real, and providing opportunities for repair is critical for mental health of BHA community.

Recapitulate the School Experience - many of our students have had stressful, negative experiences in school throughout life. We correct that through our empathic, compassionate climate to realign student perceptions of western education with healthy outcomes.



Weekly Mental Health Seminar: Charlie Speicher

This is a weekly mental health focused seminar aimed at forming and norming our culture at BHA. Not only is this time critical at shaping our expectations for day to day life at BHA but it also provides a “family meeting” format to educate our students in topics that affect their lives

and well-being. The broader studies and implications of bullying as well as creating a compassionate and empathetic school climate are the launchpad for deeper dives into topics such as:

- Brain Evolution and overview of our intellectual, emotional neurological systems; brain wiring and learning, and the phenomenon of neuroplasticity;
- Our executive neural network and related anatomical, chemical components, and how they evolved to current functions over time;
- ACE study and survey (in order to address the symptoms of toxic stress, we first must screen for it);
- Fight or Flight (how do we each individually respond to adversity? What is our “default” defense mechanism when it comes to dealing with conflict?);
- Mental Health disparities in Indian country (historical, epigenetic trauma);
- Suicidality, and abnormal psychology in Indian country;
- Traumatic Experiences and Grief related issues and how they impact our lives;
- The dangers of colonialism, and decolonizing our minds in an evidence based framework to retrain our nervous systems to positively respond to adverse stimuli;
- Mindfulness, and other neural restructuring strategies to offset emotional numbing;
- Healthy sleep, diet, exercises, lifestyle to foster healthy brain development.

Tamarack Interface and Activities:
Charlie Speicher

In addition to providing ongoing support for grieving students on an individual and group level via the Honor Group (an 8-week grief and loss group designed to provide a healing space and strategies to effectively cope with loss), we also embark on quarterly “Honor Retreats.” These retreats are conducted in partnership with the Tamarack Grief Resource Center, and aim to provide a healthy framework for dealing with



death. These retreats have a physical component (cross country skiing or hiking) as well as an emotional processing component (arts and crafts, creating honor flags, expressive arts).

The purpose of the retreat is to facilitate healing and emotional processing in the face of loss. By traveling to an inspiring location and facilitating the transformative work involved with coping with death, we have normalized the difficult emotions, thoughts, and feelings connected to grief and loss thus creating opportunities where young people can have the strength and support to develop their own grieving processes.

Student demographic snapshot:

126 Students have been served thus far in 2018/19:

101 currently enrolled (64 Seniors, 28 Juniors, 6 Sophomores, 3 Freshmen)

17 teen parents

7 graduates so far

3 transfers

2 incarcerations

13 drops

73 students currently on wait list

It's About the Journey: Chris Lewis

Over the course of this academic year, I've had the fortunate opportunity to teach an advisory class as a part of our counseling curriculum. The goal of the advisory class is to promote self-awareness using a variety of social-emotional curriculums and strategies (YMHFA, Circle Forward, QPR). This quarter, the advisory class is focusing on using the expressive arts as a vehicle for creating change and promoting healthy coping skills. So, "What is expressive art?"

Unlike traditional art classes that often focus on the finished product, the expressive arts places emphasis on the individual's journey and the emotions that are associated with the process. This is done by implementing artistic mediums (painting, drawing, collaging, music, dance, and drama) that organically promote self-discovery. Often times, the artistic mediums being utilized



are blended together in order to honor every student's interests and strengths.

Thus far, the class has been very successful and a lot of fun. I've had several students say, "Art is a nice way to start the day because it helps to relieve some of my stress and anxiety." Other students have said, "I never knew that I liked making art." Probably one of the most beautiful aspects of the expressive arts is that you don't have to be a "great" artist to reap the therapeutic benefits of self-expression.

Grant Information: Charlie Speicher

In the face of an overwhelming epidemic of anxiety and toxic stress in Indian country, as well as rising suicide rates across the board, BHA has taken a proactive approach to respond to these issues. We know that trauma affected individuals lack an functional threshold to deal with conflict, adversity, and stress. This is because we are anatomically designed for stress that lasts seconds, not lifetimes. People that have experienced multiple traumatic events, especially during childhood, typically have difficulty regulating emotions as well as a struggle to develop internal coping strategies in response to life's many stressors.

In addition, we know more about suicidality today than we did even several years ago. While many packaged "Zero Suicide" curriculums focus on warning signs of suicide as a means of prevention, we have listened to the experts and pioneers at the forefront of suicide research to filter through conflicting information. Suicides are inherently unpredictable, which is why they happen, and many of the programs designed to prevent suicide (SOS, QPR) actually further sow confusion and pain by placing so much emphasis on warning signs of suicide, and the notion that if we are paying attention we should be able to recognize suicidal people.

That is not accurate information, and it is harmful. Even here in Browning, we are seeing completed suicides that defy that logic. At Buffalo Hide Academy, we have sought workshops and seminars conducted by the leaders in this field to address this growing problem.

Simply put, we decided we needed to do something. Our initiative has led us to apply for and secure funding to address the issue of suicidality in Indian country. Research has shown that contrary to the majority opinion, suicide is rarely connected to a known mental disorder. In addition, the characteristics that most often lead to suicide have shown to be impulsivity connected to social isolation. Suicidal people often experience tunnel vision in terms of problem solving, which ultimately results in "emotional numbing." This cognitive phenomenon is particularly dangerous when coupled with an individual's personal history of trauma. Emotional numbing typically means people "shut down" and no longer possess the ability to navigate through complex emotional pain.

The most effective means of counteracting this dangerous problem is the practice of Mindfulness. We contacted the leader in the field of Indigenous Focused Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (Dr. Michael YellowBird - North Dakota State University) and created a plan to

conduct a three-day workshop where we will learn how to create our Mindfulness program at BHA. The term neuro-decolonization, which essentially involves retraining our nervous systems to remain balanced and calm while experiencing stress, is the critical space that could prevent someone from experiencing the emotional numbing that may lead to increased suicidal ideation.

We were awarded \$10,000.00 through Montana State University to create this program, and we begin this very important work in the fall of 2019.

