

# INCORPORATING CULTURAL HEALING PRACTICES INTO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Authors: Maria Jeremiason, MSW Candidate; Hailey Wilhelm, BSW, LSW, MSW Candidate; Yuriana Soto, BSW, LSW, MSW Candidate; Erin Sudbeck, BS, MSW Candidate

Department of Social Work, Minnesota State University — March 2023

## Issue Statement

Minnesota approaches mental health based on Western cultural traditions. This approach does not encompass the traditions of multicultural communities, many of whom have experienced deep generational trauma, oppression, and discrimination. We must address our treatment of people living with mental illness by incorporating and expanding holistic cultural traditions rooted in the cultural traditions of all Minnesotans. This will include honoring the work of cultural healers, cultural brokers, elders, and community health workers within all communities.



## The Need for Cultural Healing Practices

A cultural-based healing approach to health and mental health requires moving beyond Western medicine to invest in a holistic (mind, body, spirit) approach rooted in the cultural traditions of the more than [27 cultural communities](#) in Minnesota. The United States health care system is based on [Western cultural traditions](#) which include therapy and medication. The Western cultural view does not incorporate other cultural traditions, healing practices, and alternative understandings of mental and physical health and well-being.

**Historical trauma** can result in cumulative emotional and psychological wounds that are carried across generations. Communities with higher rates of [trauma exposure](#) experience higher rates of mental and physical illness, substance abuse, and breakdowns in families and communities.

People from culturally diverse communities seeking help for mental distress are more likely to receive culturally responsive help from [helpers who share their cultural background](#). Helpers include religious leaders, elders, and traditional healers.

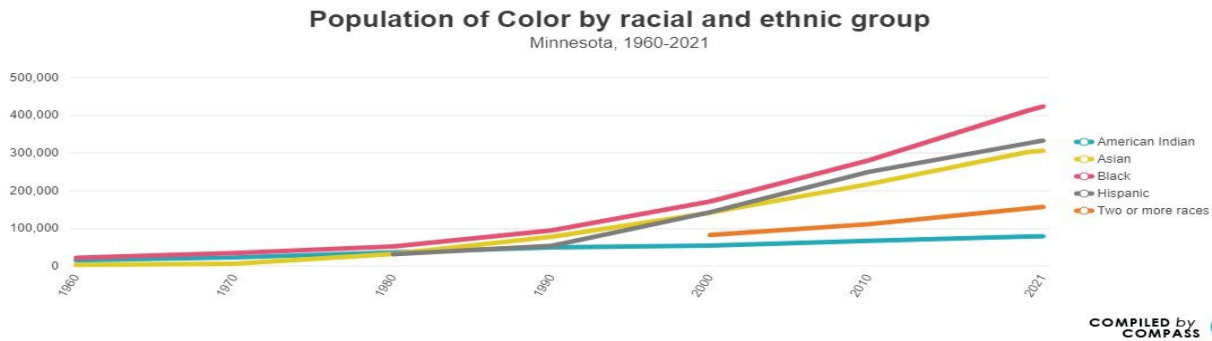
Examples of cultural healing practices include:

- [Acupuncture and Herbal Tea](#) are healing traditions of Chinese heritage.
- [Drum Assisted Recovery Therapy](#) and [Sweat Lodge Ceremonies](#) are Indigenous healing traditions.
- [Ayurvedic Medicine](#), including yoga, massage, and breathwork are healing traditions of Indian heritage.
- [Shamanism](#) is a healing tradition in the Hmong culture.
- [Traditional Dancing and Herbal Medicines](#) are healing traditions in the Somali community.
- [Theatre and Arts](#) including spoken word, music and dance for people have been shown to be healing practices for people who have experienced historical cultural trauma.

Refer to the [original policy advocacy brief](#) for a more detailed analysis.

## Changing Demographics in Minnesota

Minnesota's racial and ethnic profile is changing. By 2050, it is projected that more than [1 in 3 Minnesotans](#) will be BIPOC. The graph below, from [Minnesota Compass](#), shows an upward trend in our BIPOC population starting in the 1990s. These changing demographics make incorporating cultural healing practices into our mental health care system more urgent.



## Reform Efforts in Minnesota

The 2016 [Governor's Task Force on Mental Health](#) developed recommendations for improving Minnesota's mental health system, including recommendations for improving the mental health care system utilizing a cultural lens:

- Using cultural interpreters who can consult with providers who need more understanding of diverse cultural traditions to aid them in diagnosing and treating people with mental illnesses.
- Expanding the availability of cultural healers, cultural brokers, and elders to take on community health workers, mental health practitioners, certified peer specialists, peer recovery specialists, and family peer specialist roles and developing a culturally diverse mental health workforce.

The [Culturally Informed and Culturally Responsive Mental Health Task Force](#), authorized by the Minnesota Legislature in 2021, is working on making recommendations to improve the provision of culturally informed and culturally responsive mental health services throughout Minnesota.

## Policy Position Statement and Recommendations

Minnesota's mental health care system should reflect a broad array of healing practices representative of its many rich and diverse cultural communities. The experience of historical and generational trauma can only be healed by looking at health through a cultural lens. Minnesota's many cultural communities needs their understanding of health and their approaches to healing and wellness reflected in our mental health policies, training, and practices. We recommend:

- Reforming and expanding current mental health peer support and community health workers programs to include cultural healers ([HF 2058/SF 1891](#)). Ensuring policy, training, and practices reflect a diverse array of cultural traditions.
- Investing in peer support professionals and language interpreters from all cultural communities.
- Investing in training of mental health providers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including how to effectively work with peer support and language interpreters from culturally diverse communities.
- Developing a referral network of mental health providers from culturally diverse communities.

