



RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS FOOD RELATIONSHIPS:

IMPROVING HEALTH WITH CULTURE



Purpose of the Framework

Recognize and honor Indigenous foods as being central to life and a valuable resource to connect cultural practices with health.

Reclaiming Indigenous Food Relationships was created and organized for Native American organizations, tribal communities and individuals. By exploring the traditional teachings that connect all parts of life to food and health, it is designed to support Indigenous people in achieving their best health. The framework is based on the traditional medicine wheel with food at the center, surrounded by the stages of life, the changing seasons and the various aspects of individual and community health.

Framework Guide

The Reclaiming Indigenous Food Relationships framework is designed to support integrating cultural traditions into healthy eating initiatives for prevention of chronic disease. It was created in collaboration with partners engaged in food sovereignty work, academic experts and the American Indian Cancer Foundation.

The framework is organized into four foundations that make up the root system:

- Cultural practices
- Resources
- Planting seeds/knowledge
- Eating Indigenous

Within these foundations are several different but connected layers:

- Stages of Life
- Changing Seasons
- Aspects of Health
- *Mitakuye Oyasin* “All Are Related”

Together, the foundations and layers provide strategies that connect food and health.

Recognizing that there are over 500 tribes with unique languages and practices, apply this framework in a way that is relevant to your community. Discussion questions are presented to encourage thoughtful conversation while engaging with the framework. It is important that there is an open and honest discussion on how normalizing healthy eating can improve individual and community life.

culture

This framework defines culture as “The learned and shared values, beliefs, norms, language and lifetime practices of a particular group that guides thinking, decisions and actions in patterned ways and is transmitted to succeeding generations.”

Historical Trauma Impacted Indigenous Food Ways

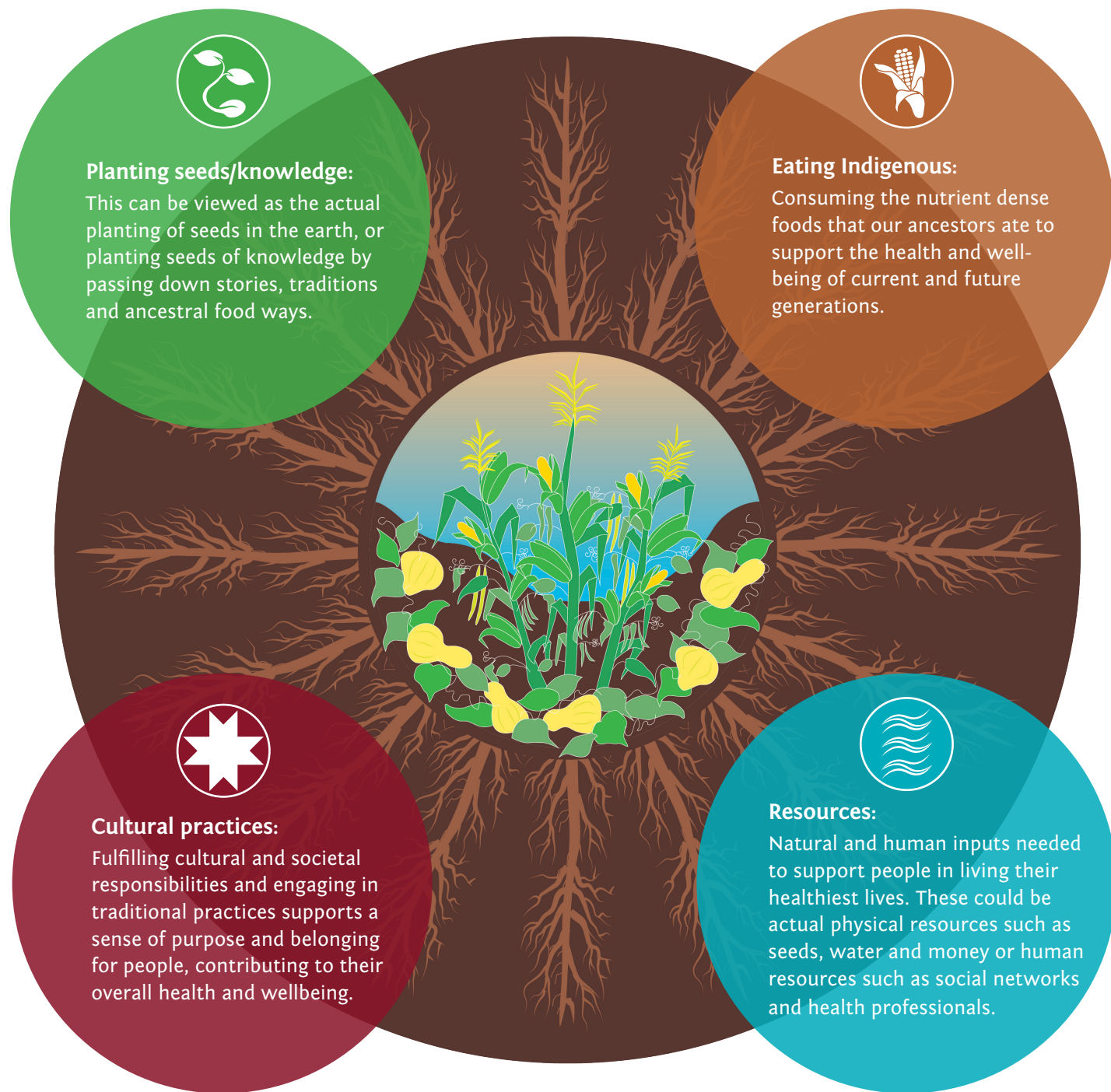
Revitalizing Indigenous food and culture is important for restoring health across Indian Country. Prior to colonization, Indigenous communities were healthy and thriving. Historical trauma interrupted the culture, language, ability to hunt and gather Indigenous foods and medicines and maintain connectedness to Mother Earth and one another.

As a result, Indigenous people suffer some of the highest rates of chronic disease and have the lowest life expectancy in the United States. Indigenous communities remain resilient despite deliberate efforts to eradicate their ways of life.



The Root System of the Framework

There are four central underlying foundations, rooted in Indigenous culture, upon which this framework is built. When all four are present and in balance, people are able to achieve their best health possible. These four were identified, because they represent what is needed to reclaim our connection between food and health.



- Discussion:**
- Have you identified people in your community with the skills and resources to help?
 - What financial resources can you draw upon?
 - Are tribal leaders and community members of all ages invested in your ideas? If not, what needs to happen to get their support?
 - What cultural resources can you draw upon?

The Stages of Life

In Indigenous cultures, every person has a role and purpose, which gives meaning to life and contributes to a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Roles and responsibilities around food and culture are shared through intergenerational teachings, storytelling, experiential learning and mentoring. Stories and practices of Native wisdom uplift the seven generations mindset to guide thinking about the future while connecting to the past.



- Invite elders to share traditional teachings, customs and stories with younger generations.
- Teach youth to serve elders first at community feasts.



- Include elders in program planning to connect them to gardening.



- Recruit elders to teach traditional seed saving and stewardship practices.



- Share harvest with elders in the community and with the elders nutrition program.



- Provide harvested foods to babies and youth.



- Increase community access to nutritious food (e.g. community gardens, farmers markets, orchards).
- Take on a leadership role in the community (e.g. tribal council or teacher).



- Lead by example, pass on fall harvesting traditions, teachings and storytelling.




- Organize community events with speakers and food demos to familiarize people with healthy Indigenous foods.





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foundations key

 Cultural practices

 Resources


 Planting seeds/knowledge


 Eating Indigenous




• Offer healthy Indigenous foods at ceremonies. 

• Support breastfeeding mothers with lactation education from community consultants and doulas. 


• Encourage caregiver/child bonding and involvement in daily cultural practices. 

• Promote breastfeeding as the first Indigenous food and medicine. 

• Teach children traditional uses of food and medicinal plants. 

• Incorporate Indigenous food and wellness into school settings. 

• Teach children how to garden, forage, hunt, harvest and fish for food. 

• Introduce Indigenous foods at a young age at home, daycares, schools, community gatherings and ceremonies. 

- Discussion:**
- How can the food you eat contribute to health at each stage of life?
 - How does our relationship to the components of the root system change as we grow older?
 - What are the teachings we have about our roles related to food in each stage of life?
 - How does food availability and quality impact health throughout the ages?

The Changing Seasons

The second layer of the framework is made up of the changing seasons, which vary by location, but for the purpose of this framework spring, summer, fall and winter have been identified. Each season brings new opportunities. This layer guides users through recommended activities for connecting the seasons with the four foundations of the root system to improve health.



- Share food knowledge, tell stories and pass on oral history.
- Harvest traditional medicinal plants for community healing (e.g. red willow).



- Assess community needs (e.g. funding, personnel, natural resources).
- Document and report on evidence of what works well in programs that focus on food and health.



- Store and share seeds to prepare for spring.
- Ensure practices are sustainable before repeating them again in spring.



- Reflect on the year and aspire to learn new healthy food ways.



- Host a harvest feast for the community to thank our Creator and ancestors for providing us healthy food.



- Make community members aware of harvested foods available to them.



- Prepare garden grounds and greenhouses before winter.
- Use compost, fish or other natural fertilizers to prepare soil for next spring.
- Create a shared community vision and “plant seeds” for future generations.



- Offer classes to teach community members how to harvest, preserve and cook foods for winter/dry season.



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foundations key

-  Cultural practices
-  Resources
-  Planting seeds/knowledge
-  Eating Indigenous



• Offer traditional medicines to the Creator and pray for a bountiful harvest. 


• Identify new and manage existing tribal assets (e.g. partnerships, local experts and funding). 

• Build community interest in healthy Indigenous foods.
• Engage community members to plant and pass on teachings. 

• Nurture family and self by incorporating whole grains and vegetables into every meal. 

• Identify what is needed and make an action plan to reclaim tribal food sovereignty, with respect to our ancestors. 

• Engage tribal leadership to support community health and food initiatives. 

• Contribute to expanding local food economy (e.g. sell produce, start farmers market).
• Engage community members to plant Indigenous foods and pass on teachings. 

• Harvest and enjoy seasonal garden produce, wild berries, fruits and roots. 

Discussion:

- What are your community's seasonal traditions around food and storytelling?
- What food stories do you know, and what is being done to preserve and share them?
- How is food prepared in the community? How are these practices shared among people and through time?
- How can the community's relationship to food promote health in different seasons?

The Aspects of Health

In this layer the four parts of the medicine wheel are representative of the aspects of health: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. This layer guides users in connecting all aspects of health with cultural practices, resources, planting seeds/planting knowledge and eating Indigenous foods to improve health.



- Ask your elders to lead prayer at feasts and honor the role of traditional foods in making us healthy.



- Consult with spiritual leaders and community food experts to gain knowledge about healthy Indigenous foods.



- Ranch, farm, herd and garden to support connection to the spirit of the plants, animals and mother earth.
- Plant traditional medicines.



- Be grateful for the spirits who give life through food.



- Ask ancestors for guidance in practicing traditional food ways that sustained our people.



- Balance traditional food knowledge with Western food and nutrition guidelines.*
- Assess tribal community needs to guide change strategies.



- Learn and teach your Indigenous words and phrases for foods, plants and animals.



- Explore a deeper understanding of the nutritional properties of foods.



*Additional Resources: Native Nutrition Conference Report, Fertile Ground Report, Indigenous Food & Ag Initiative, AICAF website “Resources” tab.



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foundations key

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- Encourage physical activity through hunting, fishing, planting and harvesting activities.



- Make your physical health a priority, educate yourself and see health experts (e.g. doctors, dietitians and traditional healers).



- Interact with mother nature, prepare the soil, plant seeds, forage and hunt.
- Provide or seek education about these interactions.



- Eat nutritious, unprocessed foods as our ancestors did to stay in good health.



- Foster a healthy emotional connection to food.
- Teach respect and empathy for all living beings (plants and animals).



- Honor your emotional wellbeing by building a support network.
- Host and attend social gatherings with healthy foods.



- Nurture connections with the land and foster a sense of belonging by learning how to garden.



- Connect with others by cooking fun and healthy meals together.



- Discussion:**
- What does a healthy community look like to you?
 - What food resources exist in your community? How can they be used to create more positive change and normalize healthy eating?
 - What more do you need to make your vision of a healthy community a reality?
 - How can you ensure that your vision of a healthy community is designed to be sustainable?

Mitakuye Oyasin “All Are Related”

The Lakota teaching *Mitakuye Oyasin* means we are all connected. People, plants and animals are all related and we take care of each other. This teaching helps us understand that we can achieve health when we are in balance. If one aspect of health (mental, physical, emotional or spiritual) is off, others become out of balance. Like the *Mitakuye Oyasin* teaching, this framework is designed to connect the stages of life, changing seasons and aspects of health, in a holistic way to achieve good health through food. The framework reminds us that our culture reflects our values, qualities and abilities. If we take care of today, tomorrow will take care of itself.



Assessment: To determine if using this Framework is of value to your community, consider the following:

- Did this framework help people identify and share insights about your traditions or culture?
- Were all people who assembled around this framework able to share their thoughts?
- What connections between culture, food and health were shared?
- What changes do you expect to occur in response to engagement with this framework?

We gratefully acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the creation of this framework:

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Portions of this framework were inspired by the Cultural Wisdom Declaration from the National Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda. Funding to develop this framework was provided by the Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute, University of Minnesota. Design provided by We.ome.pe Designs - Jessica Rosemary Harjo, *Otoe-Missouria, Osage, Pawnee, Sac & Fox*