

Interview Between Susan Gay and Jeremy Fields

Susan Gay is the program coordinator for the *Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys in the U.S.* grant at the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board Tribal Epidemiology Center. The grant is funded by Movember Foundation and coordinated by Prevention Institute.

Jeremy Fields is the founder and director of Thrive.Unltd, a leadership company owned and operated by Native Americans. It is committed to providing innovative, culturally relevant training for Native American communities, that focuses on proactive solutions for mental, emotional, and psychological wellbeing.

[**Susan Gay**]: So, Jeremy, welcome. June is Men's Health Month. So, happy Men's Health Month to you! The reason for doing this interview with you is twofold. First, we want men to know that they're extremely important to their families, their communities, workplaces, and the larger society. We want men to know that we appreciate and are proud of the sacrifices and contributions men make. **Men**, this world just wouldn't be the same without you. So, thank you for all you do. Second, since ours is a tribal-serving organization and the program I manage focuses on male mental health and well-being, we'll be chatting about ways we can empower American Indian men and boys to a healthy mind, body, and spirit. So, to begin, **many males are raised to believe that being a man means not showing emotion that doing so is a sign of weakness. What would you say to Native American men to change that mindset?**

[**Jeremy Fields**]: I would say that one thing that I've learned throughout my years of work in Native communities and coming face to face with cultural solutions, has been that the opposite is true of that statement. You know, we have some of the most powerful male leaders within our communities [that] are the embodiment of the opposite; meaning, that they're full of compassion and they love fearlessly, you know. So, being able to express emotion is actually going to exemplify and, you know, it exemplifies a great strength, because I think one of the things that we've come to understand is that not feeling is actually avoidance or escapism; it's kind of taking the easy way out. It takes a lot of strength and a lot of stability to be able to sit with your emotions and allow yourself space to feel them and to be able to process through them and to be able to overcome, you know. That, that even in itself is a space of healing. So, it's important to be able to feel emotions and it's one of the most empowering things that you can do, not only for yourself but for your family and your community. And I think it's important that we normalize that conversation just between us as males, that we encourage that within one

another, because that in itself is an example of what this warrior spirit, you know, that as indigenous males we cling so closely to.

And I actually recently had a conversation with a young man two days ago about this very question, more or less, and helping him to understand what a healthy Indigenous man looks like in terms of cultural identity and those types of things. And that was one of the things that we focused on because he was transitioning in and out of the juvenile justice system, and he was trying to understand, you know, “where do I stand? And I'm confused because, you know, my father is this way. But at the same time when I become an embodiment of what he is, then I find myself getting in trouble,” you know. So being able to help him to understand that, you know, you have to pay attention to the emotions that you're feeling. It takes a lot of strength and stability to be able to sit and feel those things and, you know, in that, that's the embodiment of that warrior spirit because it's about, it's not about being reckless or it's not about being unfeeling or uncaring. It's about being one of those individuals who's willing to care at all costs, you know, and to be able to hold yourself to that accountability, that no matter, no matter what I'm going to be the one that has an ability to feel what even maybe other people aren't able to, so that in that way, I can protect them, in that way I can help them, I can support my family.

[Susan Gay]: Very Good, very good. Thank you. **Though men are less likely to see a doctor than women for their physical health, in general, people find it easier to talk about and seek help for physical health issues than for mental health issues. There is a stigma as we know that is associated with mental health. What do you think can be done to help remove the stigma and get people, especially men, to see that mental and physical health are connected and equally important?**

[Jeremy Fields]: Ok. Again, I think making a conscious effort to normalize that conversation within our communities and within our families is important. Within my own family, one of the things that we do is at the end of the day, we take just a few moments of time to sit out and name at least five things that we're grateful for and then followed by, “Is there anything different that you would have done today if you had the chance?” or maybe even just asking the question, “What was one of the difficult parts of your day or a low point?” So that we're all opening those lines of communication, we're taking care of our relationship with one another. But we're also allowing an opportunity for those difficult conversations to come to the table and to be taken care of.

Along with that, I think a large part of it comes back to the cultural aspect of our lives and taking a look at spirituality and trying to remove that stigma. I think one of the things is, is because one of the reasons that it sits there is that that understanding of spirituality for a lot of our individuals has kind of gone off the table. Or maybe has gone out of context and it puts it in a place where, if that's not in place, it creates a very difficult space for you to be able to deal with or overcome a lot of the things that you're facing emotionally, because you don't have that absolute foundation, that intrinsic foundation that teaches you who it is that you are, what's your, what your intrinsic worth is, that, that nothing can change. And, you know, when you don't have that to turn back to, that foundation to stand upon, it makes it very difficult for us to be able to address maybe some of the things that are going on in our mind or in our, our psyche. So again, normalizing the conversation and at the same time being able to look at holistic well-being. I think too many times it's, it's one of those things where we don't look at our whole being in an understanding that we have to take care of our physical, our mental, and our spiritual or our emotional; all in the same things, there has to be some balance there, so....

[Susan Gay]: Right. Very good, very good. Very good point! **What can Native American men do to support each other to be physically and mentally healthy?**

[Jeremy Fields]: Ok. I think being supportive is one of those things where I know within, within our native communities as men we have a tendency to not be so vocal in a personal sense as to what goes on with us. You know, we all face the majority of the same issues and adversities, you know, circumstances, situations to different degrees, but very rarely do we open up and actually express what it is that we go through because we do have that kind of misguided warrior mentality that you don't ever let anybody see you cry. You don't ever allow emotion to be seen, because you don't want to be seen as weak. You know, like there's even a cultural expectation that's kind of been miscommunicated that give, that puts that pressure on us. So, I think in that that degree of being supportive it's being able to, to open up and speak more openly about those things even in public spaces. You know, when we have our powwows and things or our community gatherings, to be able to take a few moments to be able to just open up that conversation a little bit and mention those things or I know....

[Susan Gay]: As men? Among men?

[Jeremy Fields]: As men, yeah, yeah. And even just, I guess, in front of the communities at large to be able, because it's not a conversation that has to exist

just among men. You know, it's, it's one of those things that needs to be, you know, there between fathers and daughters, husbands and wives, all the way across the board so that we don't, we don't feel so alone in what it is that we're facing, that, that our counterparts or our children, our families can understand the kind of support that we're needing, and maybe they'll be the ones to open up the conversation for us, because maybe it's too difficult for us to speak about in our space. I guess likewise it would be... I guess kind of going back to the spirituality, as well. For a majority of our communities, a lot of the men hold most of the cultural spiritual leadership positions and so many times, we, we find ourselves praying and working to heal and to try and save our communities, our youth, our women, our elders, but very rarely do we turn the attention back to ourselves in an understanding that we need support, that we need healing. And very rarely do we have that opportunity to pray for ourselves. And us being the ones that have a tendency to carry those leadership positions a lot of times, the community itself really never turns that focus to be able to look back at the men and say, "How are you doing?" You know, and, and to pray for them, or to support them, or to try to encourage, you know.

I think within our communities, there's just an expectation that no matter what, you're supposed to be well, you have that responsibility. But I don't think it's ever really been understood that in large part, with things that happened through historical trauma, a lot of those means of being able to be that kind of person, to carry that role had been taken away from us, you know. And I think one of the most important things is, is being able to understand that even as warriors, one of the most important things traditionally that we understood was the importance of healing. You know, that there was always a time to be set apart, you know. In those times, when you went off to war, they understood that there were things that you came into contact with and you came back. And today we know it as PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] in a way that it manifests, you know, the way that those things can affect you. But before we were ever allowed to come back into our, our villages, a lot of times, we had to undergo multiple-day ceremonies to really put our spirits and our minds and our hearts back in balance before they would allow us to come back into the people, because they knew we could affect things in a negative manner if we didn't heal. So, you know, we also knew that we had to kind of rejuvenate and refresh ourselves because it was going to come a time when we'd have to do it again. And those kind of like, elements of personal maintenance: I think, emotional, mental, psychological maintenance, spiritual maintenance have kind of fallen by the wayside, and we don't pay attention to those things anymore, and we just allow ourselves to become inundated and overwhelmed by all of these negative or harsh influences that we just build up. You know, most of us are walking around with tremendous stress, tremendous

pressure and, you know, leading to anxiety and depression, suicide, all of these types of things.

[Susan Gay] Wow! Wow! Very powerful! So, **past traumatic experiences often lead to feelings like depression, aggression, anxiety, and anger, which, in turn, can lead to addictive or harmful behaviors like substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, and such like.** How...What would you advise Native American men...**How would you advise Native American men to deal with past traumatic experiences to help them avoid harmful and/or addictive behaviors?**

[Jeremy Fields]: Ok, I think again spirituality plays a large part in that. But even just being able to look to our culture, in terms of that, you know, being able to associate yourself with the positive functioning mechanisms of our culture whether it be song, dance, ceremony, all of those things, they have a way that they facilitate positive growth, healing, whether it be through exercise or through song. Sometimes even just that expression of dance, of movement, of singing, or even going and sitting in and praying those things become like catharsis for a lot of our past traumatic experiences, and sometimes those things, they have an ability to help us heal without even actually having to vocalize specifically what we've been through. But also, within those ceremonial environments. There is an opportunity spiritually for men to be able to come together and to communicate, even just objectively about the things that men in general go through, and have that opportunity to pray for one another, to find encouragement for one another, or to find leadership through other males that may be older that have been through that before and have been able to come through the other side.

So, relationship is key whether it be with your, with your wife, or your family, or other males within the community. But staying in close contact with those positive influences and communicating in one way or another, in whichever way that you can. But I think culture and spirituality definitely play a big role in helping us to process through those things, and it opens a door for us to be able to learn from other people because when you go through past traumatic experiences, most of the time you feel as if you're the only one that's been there before, and you don't want to speak about it because it is painful. You know, it has been traumatic, it has had a tremendous effect on you. But I know one of the things that I've learned through my work is when we have an ability to come together as, as, as a group and to be able to address a subject objectively and saying, you know, here's an issue that we face collectively as men, and, culturally, this is who we are and being able to make those comparisons, whether good or bad, it allows us to be able to process internally what it is that we've been through without us having to

pull out the specifics of our life and our pain and our trauma and set it in front of someone and say this is specifically what I've been through, this is what I'm going through. I don't know how it got to this place and this is how it affected me. But it gives us that safe space to be able to look and understand in our own place, to be able to learn and process. So, I think that's one of the ways that we have an ability to begin to redirect that energy away from substance abuse, away from depression and anxiety, away from domestic violence. You know, all of these things, they exist within our communities because of trauma and things that haven't been understood, the way that it's left pain, resentment, all of those types of things. But these are the ways that our people have always had an ability to process those things. But I know that in contemporary times, in modern society, most of us don't readily have access to a lot of those cultural means, or it's difficult. So, I think it's important for those of us that do, that, that have that understanding or that availability to it, to extend ourselves to be able to open that to the rest of our community and to try and help one another. So, I guess, I would say in addition to that, that relationship is very key within communities.

[Susan Gay]: Very good. Very good. Our final question: **There may be men out there who have been in prison or who are struggling right now to overcome addictions or negative behaviors and feel hopeless and ashamed of their past or present. What would you say to men who find themselves in these situations? How can Native American culture, traditions, and ceremonies help Native American men's recovery process?**

[Jeremy Fields]: Ok. What I would say to them is that...although as adults we have to be accountable to who it is that we are today, it's important that we understand that the choices that we make, the tendencies that we have or intentions that we have, they come from somewhere, they were learned behavior somewhere along the way and... one thing that's important, that's important for Native men to understand is that there is an aspect of historical trauma that is affecting you right now, regardless of how well that you may be. Each and every one of us are a product of it, we extend from it. And there are many things that exist within us because of things that were either taken or were absent in the way that we were raised. The majority of us did not come from healthy environments. We weren't raised in healthy homes, you know. And it's not something that that I say to sound shameful, but it's a reality that we have to acknowledge because that's the root of where all of these adversities come from. You know, each of us are trying to understand where our worth is, where our belonging sets, what our role really entails where...what is our purpose.

You know, and I think even society has a lot of... maybe negative connotations affiliated with us that put pressure upon us, you know. We we've all grown up facing prejudice, racism, things of that nature, you know. So, we have all of these outside influences that have been affecting us and, for the most part, we weren't raised with... maybe a solid of enough grounding in who it is that we are as people intrinsically to be able to help us to be fortified against those influences. So, that being said, a lot of the things that we've done, maybe mistakes that we've made or trouble that we've gotten ourselves into, those types of things, as wrong or as unbalanced or messed up as it may seem, each of us were doing the best that we could with what we were given and in that, we have to forgive ourselves for, for not, for not knowing any better.

You know, that was something that, in effect, was taken from our great-grandparents and was never given back to be handed down to us. You know, a lot of us missed out on that kind of teaching or didn't have the privilege to be raised in that kind of a healthy environment. And that even in itself is something that we have to understand here in order for us to be able to heal, because most of us have been carrying this pressure or responsibility of how do I become responsible or accountable to fixing what is wrong with me or for understanding what it is that's missing. Where do I find this? Where do I get it? Because as an adult, this is the trouble that it's creating for myself, for my family. And not being able to understand that, you know, even just to the effect of, of how do I become responsible for loving myself? How do I learn to do that? Where do I get that? How do I give that to myself? So, I think that's a strong starting place for our population. That's, that's transitioning in and out of that because there's, there's a level of direction that it provides and an understanding for ourselves to be able to say, gaining clarity, I guess, of where we come from and why things may be the way that they are, so that we can begin to identify what we want to stay and what needs to go, in being able to move forward.

And, I guess, as far as the second part of the question you're asking about traditions and ceremony, there again, I think that's where we as men find those kind of support systems because, traditionally, in the way that our, our communities functioned, we had, I guess, what we would refer to like in modern times as societies. So, you would have doctors, people who understood herbs and healing. You had different warrior societies that that embodied different aspects of that type of culture, and then you had philosophers, and even just within that, there were smaller divisions, so you had these social groups where these men would come together, and they would operate, circulate together. And that was their livelihood, you know. So, they constantly had that kind of support system where they could relate to one another. They had a purpose, they had a function;

whereas today, most of us, we don't operate in those kinds of environments. We just kind of walk around on our own. We go to the job, bank, store, home, you know. And although we have to provide for all of those things, oftentimes, there are things that we as men need that aren't being contributed back to us, you know. But somehow, we have to find the means to continue moving forward. So, I think it's important that we look to tradition and culture, ceremonies, cultural activities because it does provide that environment. And at the same time, that's where our healthy leaders are sitting, you know, with an ability to teach something because each of us...one of the things that's missing, when we, when we are just kind of caught up in those singular roles, is that we don't feel as if maybe we belong to a community and our contribution isn't necessarily being valued. You know, even if we work for a company for 30 years, we could be in that building for 30 years and our contribution never really be valued, other than just us to be a number to a company or a paycheck, you know. And as human beings, that's one of the things that establishes your sense of self-value, self-worth, self-love. It allows you to appreciate yourself when you see your contribution being appreciated, you know. So, being able to give to those kinds of things, that only adds to the, to the well-being of the individual. So... I think there's, there's definitely a level of dignity that we have to begin to restore to those people rather than looking at them and saying that they're criminals, because all of them are extending from something. You know, and there's a purpose and a reason why maybe the dysfunction is sitting there; and all of it is rooted in trauma, and trauma isn't something that we choose, you know. So, a lot of them were, you know, I guess, you know maybe you could label them as victims, so to speak, of things that happened far before they were ever even born. But it was handed to them to be responsible for and nobody has ever taught them or given them the guidance to know anything different. So...

[**Susan Gay**]: You live what you learn!

[**Jeremy Fields**]: Exactly. Exactly. So, I think that's one of the things that we can begin to do to help our people that are in that kind of population, rather than just looking at them with a side eye and saying, "oh, there's something wrong with you. You're not a good person, you're a criminal, you're just a troublemaker." ...those kinds of things, you know. It's kind of like that was a path that was set for them that they didn't choose. But we have an ability to help them....

[**Susan Gay**]: Very true! Very good. Very good responses, Jeremy. Thank you so much for sharing, and we really value your input and what you're doing. You're making a difference in Indian Country and among your people, so we're very thankful for your, for your impact and for your contributions.