

Gathering of Native Americans (GONA): A Culture-Based Intervention to Improve Mental Health and Well-Being Among Native Youth into Adulthood

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“HEALTH IS EMBEDDED IN OUR CULTURE” - JANET KING

Implementation and Population

The Gathering of Native Americans (GONA) is a community-defined, culturally grounded intervention designed to strengthen cultural connection.

- Developed by Indigenous people for Indigenous people
- **Manualized four day, overnight, community-based intervention**
- Conceptualizes the community as the “patient,” where community healing promotes the wellness of individuals and their families
- **Functions as both a community needs assessment and a community intervention**
- Adapted to SF Urban Indian community and maintained fidelity
- **Population included youth ages 12-17 who self-identified as Native American**
- Facilitated by trained community members
 - Many former Youth GONA participants
- **Implemented in partnership with local cultural and spiritual leaders**
- Participants were referred through community networks
 - Primarily from the San Francisco Bay Area
 - **Represented diverse tribal affiliations (10+) multiracial identities**

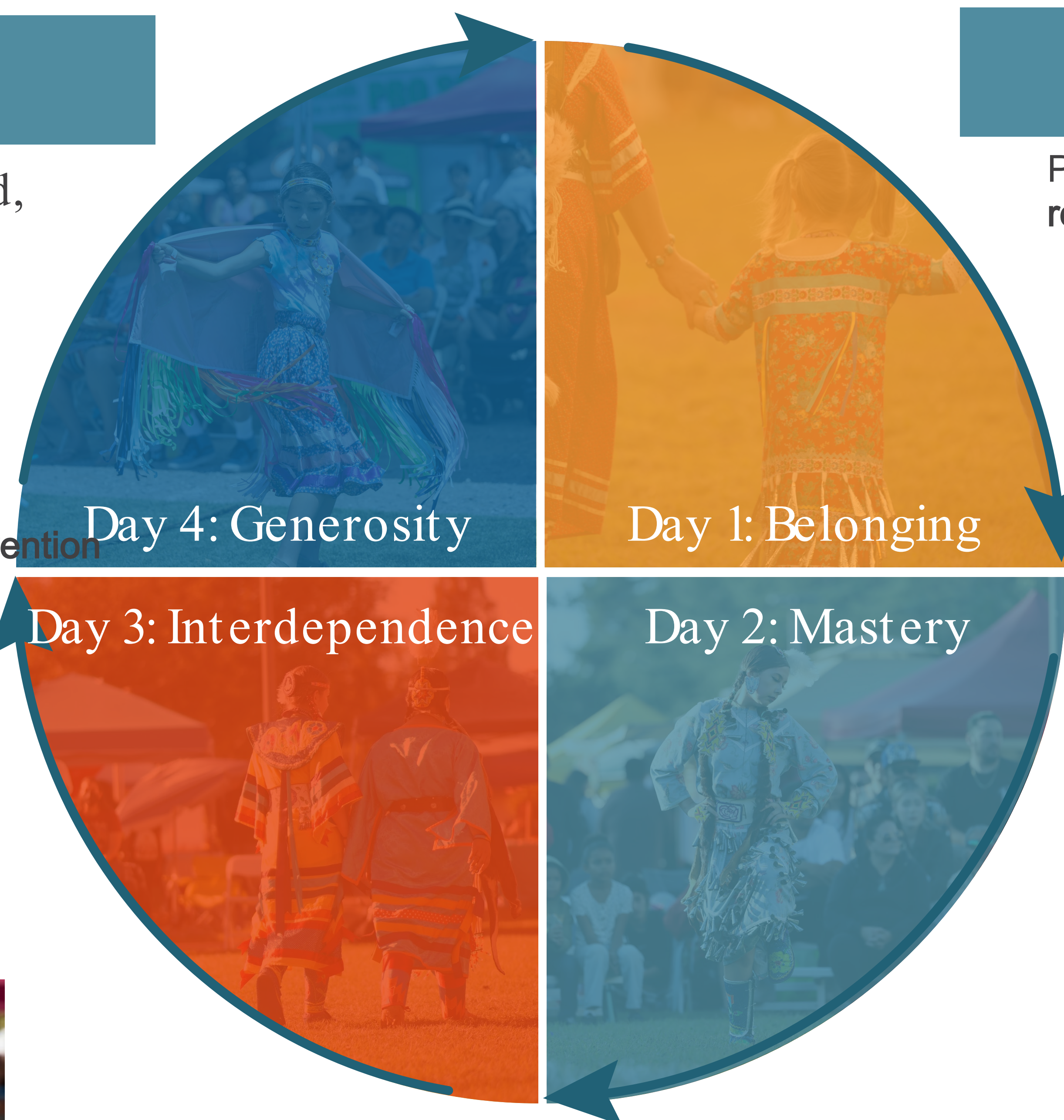


Figure 1. The GONA is a manualized curriculum that provides a framework for communities to address and heal from historical and intergenerational trauma, grief, and loss, organized around four main themes.

Results

Participants consistently reported positive experiences, strong feelings of belonging, and a desire to remain engaged with GONA and their peers.

- GONA participation was associated with significant increases in cultural connectedness immediately post-intervention and sustained at six months.
- Youth demonstrated improved mental health, hope, empowerment, and community engagement.
- Adult participants who attended a Youth GONA had significantly higher cultural connectedness and life satisfaction up to 10+ years later compared to non-participants.
- A positive dose-response was observed: more GONA participation was associated with higher cultural connectedness scores.
- Cost analyses suggest GONA is **cost-effective** compared to Western behavioral health modalities.

Outcomes of Adults (Age 18-30) Who Participated in Youth GONA (Age 12-18) Compared to Adults Who Did Not

Outcome	Difference between GONA Group (N=38) and Non-GONA (N=50) Group	p-value
Cultural Connectedness (CCS-CA)	+12.2 points	0.0002***
Life Changers Score	+4.7 points	0.0003***
Days Limited by Health	-5.4 days	0.021*
Life Satisfaction	+2.0 points	0.027*
Good Physical Health Days	-0.2 days	0.829
Good Mental Health Days	+0.8 days	0.624
Urgent Care Visits	-22.7%	0.527
ED Visits	-20.9%	0.512

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

Table 1. Adults who participated in a Youth GONA demonstrated significantly higher cultural connectedness, empowerment, life satisfaction, and fewer days of health-related limitations up to 10+ years later.



Evaluation Design and Methods

Study 1– Youth Prospective Study (Ages 12-17)
Mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation with data collected at baseline, post-GONA, and six-month follow-up. Measures included the Cultural Connectedness Scale (Short), Herth Hope Index, and Life Changers Instrument, along with qualitative feedback. NAHC developed and validated the Cultural Connectedness Scale (CCS-CA) a measurement tool created by, with and for Indigenous people.

Study 2– Youth GONA 2023 Cost Analysis
Prospective cost analysis conducted from the payer perspective to estimate total cost, cost per participant, and cost per participant per day. Sensitivity analyses were performed to evaluate costs under different variables.

Study 3–Retrospective Study of Adults (Ages 18-28) Who Participated in GONA as Youth (Ages 12-17)
Comparison of adults who participated in a GONA as a youth aged 12-17 (N=38) to a non-GONA control group (N=50) to assess long-term impacts on cultural connectedness, well-being, and healthcare utilization

Take Away Messages and Recommendations

GONA participation strengthens connection to culture for Native youth immediately and 10 years after into early adulthood. Evidence is clear that connection to culture is a protective factor and is a powerful Social Determinant of Health. Connection to culture is an important intervention objective and can be measured with the validated/ published Cultural Connectedness Scale-CA.

Community-defined, culture-based interventions and measurements, like GONA and the CCSCA, can address health inequities and complement healthcare systems. Community Defined Evidence Practices (CDEPs) like GONA can deliver and sustain individual, family, community, and system change.

Integrating CDEPs into health systems offers a promising pathway for sustainable, cost effective, and culturally inclusive care.



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