



Ethno Med: Health and Healthcare of American Indian Older Adults

## Examples of American Indian Explanatory Models for Dementia

**In American Indian elderly, it is anticipated that as Indians' life expectancy increases, so will the incidence of dementia. Explanatory models vary from tribe to tribe, and individual to individual. These are only several reported examples –**

- 1 Each person is put on the earth for a short time for a purpose. When that purpose is accomplished the person is ready to leave this world. Death and illness are not caused by others, and prolonged grieving prevents the spirit from crossing over to the next world where there is no pain, but peacefulness. Appropriate medical treatment and death are discussed openly (Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico).
- 2 Dementia is a part of the Creator's plan for that person's ultimate learning and may not require intervention or help-seeking ("naturalization" of cognitive impairment and dementing behavior, with greater "tolerance" for a wide range of behavior than white communities). (Cherokee)
- 3 Dementia and illness are caused by an imbalance in the patient's spiritual, emotional, and social environment. Speaking of negative consequences (prognosis) to an illness can bring those events to pass as thought and language have power to shape reality (Bennahum, 1998). Dementia may be caused by breaking a cultural taboo (e.g., a male speaking directly to his mother-in-law, touching a dead person) .Treatment may require the services of traditional Indian medicine and not necessarily western medicine (Navajo).
- 4 Dementia is a condition in which the person's spirit has already crossed over into the next world, but the body remains behind as it prepares to leave. The caregiver's job is to take care of the body until it is ready to leave, and this is sacred work. The person is communicating in the spirit world, which is why language and behavior appear to us as if overhearing one side of a telephone conversation. In some Indian communities this is a mark of elevated spiritual status for the family. (Oklahoma Choctaw)
- 5 Dementia is caused by the stress on Indians of trying to live in two worlds at one time. Especially, the stress of a rigid Christian belief system of traditionally reservation-raised elderly, and the stress, over time, of urban Indian living and family life. The lack of a collective consciousness in Indian spiritual belief dilutes the power of the Indian spiritual community and allows stress to develop illness, of which dementia is one form. Evidence is cited that dementia has been very rare in elderly Indians in the past. (Urban Lakota Sioux)

**References:** Correa, 1998; Henderson, 1998; Hendrix, 2001