

COVID-19 Stories: Reconnecting with Indigenous Roots: Tradition and Breastfeeding during COVID-19 Pandemic

The first medicine

In August of 2019, Shashana Craft founded Nitamising Gimashkikinaan, bringing together a group of doulas able to provide culturally grounded lactation and pregnancy support to Indigenous mothers and their babies. In Ojibwe, Nitamising Gimashkikinaan means “first medicine,” paying homage to breast milk’s beneficial properties and acknowledging that it is the “first medicine” that is given to a baby upon birth. Craft founded the group after attending an Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor Training to help address low rates of breastfeeding among Indigenous mothers. The group meets twice a month and provides mothers confidential services ranging from pregnancy support and education to consultation on lactation issues that are grounded in Indigenous practices and history.

Supporting mothers through COVID-19

When COVID-19 hit, leaders of the group knew they needed to pivot their outreach and engagement to meet the needs of their mothers during this pandemic. Nitamising Gimashkikinaan received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Health to serve as a COVID-19 Community Contractor to continue providing culturally responsive lactation and pregnancy support to Indigenous mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nitamising Gimashkikinaan also took on an additional role to help address an information gap in the Indigenous community. It provided current information on potential COVID-19 effects and built an online community for Indigenous families to receive resources and support to ensure their physical, mental, and social well-being. It also worked to share information about testing, case investigation and contact tracing, and prevention methods with the broader American Indian community in Minnesota. Because of the group’s deep roots in community, they were able to share critical insights back to MDH about the emerging needs of community members.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, it brought with it a decrease in culturally relevant social support. By transitioning to virtual sessions, Nitamising Gimashkikinaan was able to help provide new mothers the social support they needed during this especially difficult time. Sigwan

Rendon, a peer mother in the group, said, “Nitamising Gimashkikinaan has been able to help support and meet my pregnancy and lactation needs during COVID-19 by creating a virtual space every two weeks for women to hear new information as well as ask any questions they might have.” Nitamising Gimashkikinaan has also gone a step further to support Indigenous mothers by creating a social media platform that participants can use any time for questions, including questions related to COVID-19 prevention and testing.

Nitamising Gimashkikinaan also started creating COVID-19 care bundles for families. The bundles contain information on COVID-19 prevention and locations of testing sites, as well as thermometers, acetaminophen, hand sanitizer, pulse oximeters, Clorox wipes, and other items to protect families and prevent COVID-19 transmission. The care bundles incorporate culturally grounded methods and current public health guidelines.

Since the start of COVID-19, Nitamising Gimashkikinaan has created over 160 COVID-19 care bundles and are in the process of creating more. They have also managed to expand their participant network, engaging close to 50 mothers biweekly from 15 different states and two countries. Pearl Walker-Swaney, a doula in the group, credits the virtual nature of these sessions for allowing an increase in their outreach. Despite the far-flung participants, the group is close-knit, as Rendon describes: “The most impactful moments that I've had as a peer mother participating in this group is the consistent closeness we've had with each other as mothers and watching each other grow and our children grow.”

Reclaiming their culture

Walker-Swaney also emphasized another part of Indigenous culture – storytelling, which has been able to stay alive despite moving to a virtual format. For her, “Storytelling is cultural in essence, approachable,” and very different from typical support programs for pregnant and lactating mothers. Having one foot in either world, she explains their team of doulas are grounded in both cultural and evidence-based practices. Many of their team have completed the Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor Training, an intensive 5-day breastfeeding training that is focused on the Indigenous narrative of breastfeeding practices. “The Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor Training accounts for relationship to the land, creation stories, and history of the people,” Walker-Swaney explained.

COVID-19 has impacted physical, emotional, and mental health. The virtual gatherings have been a vital resource to combat social isolation for families in a culturally relevant setting during the pandemic. Nitamising Gimashkikinaan has invited elders and guest speakers specializing in American Indian self-care and wellness to share stories about traditional breastfeeding practices and impart knowledge about herbs and medicines traditionally used in Indigenous culture to help with pregnancy, lactation and postpartum. There is a large focus on listening to the body and understanding the meaning behind actions taken during pregnancy and postpartum. For Walker-Swaney, the group helps answer questions such as “why we breastfeed and do certain things for our babies when they’re born, and why we do things during pregnancy to keep us healthy and safe.” For many mothers, Nitamising Gimashkikinaan is a support group and a safe space, allowing them the ability to reclaim Indigenous practices that were replaced by Western approaches through generations of colonization. As Walker-Swaney puts it, “It is healing to have pieces of [Indigenous] knowledge as a parent.”

Eyes on the horizon

As Nitamising Gimashkikinaan heads into its second year, there is much excitement on the horizon. The group hopes to continue expanding its reach and bringing in speakers to share stories and wisdom during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Walker-Swaney and the rest of the team are looking into bringing the Indigenous Breastfeeding Counselor Training to Minneapolis. They would like to offer it to moms in the group and doulas in Minnesota who are interested. The ultimate dream is transitioning Nitamising Gimashkikinaan to a non-profit. There is a continued need for community-rooted and experience-driven pregnancy and lactation support for Indigenous mothers and their babies. Nitamising Gimashkikinaan is here to stay and ready to bridge the cultural divide between traditional Indigenous breastfeeding and western breastfeeding.