

Supporting Military-Connected Youth in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Communities

A PARTNER IN
NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network



National American Indian and Alaska Native Childhood Trauma Treatment Center

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Developed by: Marianna G. M. Cota, MPH (Yoeme, member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona)

Displays of resilience can be found in the cultures of Indigenous Peoples and those who serve in the armed forces. While resilience takes root for different reasons, the seed of **resiliency** requires self-reliance and balance. Like migratory turtles and tortoises, those immersed in both cultures must develop honed navigation skills and engage in strategic defense.

Resiliency:

The capacity to **understand, adapt to and/or cope with, resist, and recover** from trauma, adversity, or challenge.

Simply affirming how resilient military-connected AI/AN youth and families are is a significant step forward. However, more robust resources and support are needed to unpack:

- *complex family dynamics*
- *past, current, and ongoing historical and intergenerational traumas, including [soul wounds](#)**
- *the multi-layered experience of being Native and in a military lifestyle, plus any other enduring layer of identity or culture*



Whether living on the land, in the sea, or somewhere in between, turtles embody the resiliency needed to navigate, survive, and thrive in the many places and stages of their life cycle. AI/AN youth and families experiencing a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move, deployment, or return of a service member may resonate with the lessons found in the lives and [migratory patterns of turtles and tortoises](#).*

[Memorial statue for WWII Navajo Code Talkers, at Window Rock, AZ*](#)



Why focus on a shell?

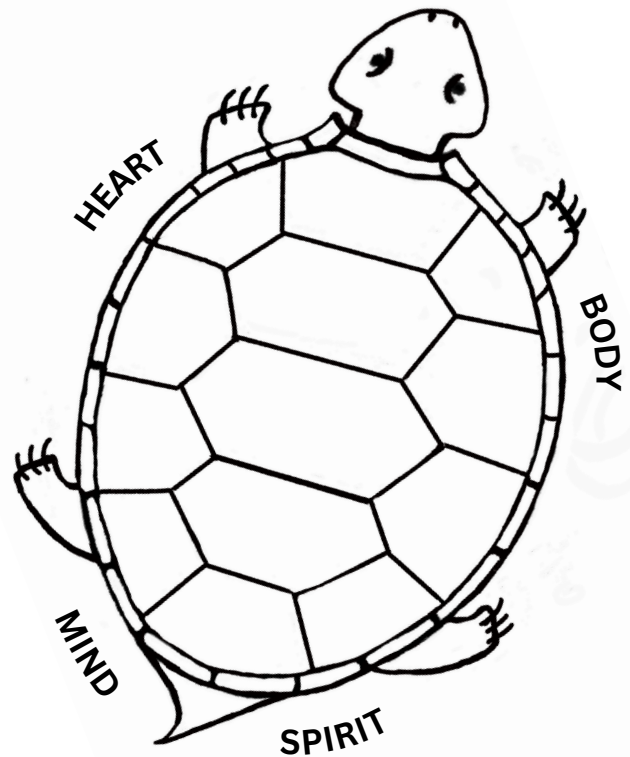
Turtle and tortoise shells demonstrate what it means to:

- have strong boundaries
- safely respond to and interact with the environment and others
- connect to and protect our center (true selves)



Healthy connections and choices centered in our traditional lifeways can help us regain the balance of our whole true selves within and beyond the shells we develop.

Balancing the well-being and safety of our mind, spirit, heart, and body is essential to having authentic and well-rounded shells.



Since shells are a living part of a turtle, they can help explain to youth how our comfort zones, characteristics, and circumstances may change as we grow. Still, no matter what changes occur, we can use our shells to authentically face uncomfortable feelings or situations.



Every person and shell is *unique*, patterned by the environments, cultures, and relationships in which we are rooted, raised, and grow.

This is My Shell

Suggested Age for Guided Activity: School-aged child (K-6) and up



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For some youth and families, the stress and uncertainty of military life can make it difficult to establish stable relationships, develop a sense of identity, and feel a sense of belonging. Yet, many youth can adapt to these challenges with emotional and social development.

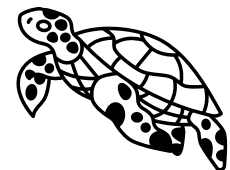
As a caregiver, you can help AI/AN youth navigate the military culture by identifying and modeling *characteristics, conditions, beliefs, or behaviors* (**aspects of one's Shell**) that protect against exposure to adversity or trauma and encourage resilience in the face of challenge. **These aspects of one's shell can also be called protective factors.**

Protective Factors:

Anything that contributes to health and well-being by helping a person, family, and/or community to...



- ***Have positive experiences, relationships, and opportunities***



- ***Maintain resiliency when in the face of trauma, adversity, or challenge***



On the next page is a poem to read aloud with the military-connected youth in your life. The poem serves as a bridge to discuss resiliency and protective factors within the various cultures they experience or identities they hold.

The poem encourages youth to use their shells, like turtles, to navigate discomfort and big feelings in ways that make them feel safe, strong, and protected.

You and the poem can help remind youth to lean into specific activities, people, and things about themselves that help them grow authentically, strong, and resilient.

What Does a Turtle Shell Do?



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BE SURE TO MAKE NOTE OF ANY INITIAL REACTIONS, THOUGHTS, SENSATIONS,
OR FEELINGS WHILE **READING OUT LOUD.**

As Turtle grew, its shell grew too, giving Turtle a clue that a shell can be safe,
but it is more than what you hide into.

In another worldview, their shell is sacred, holding both the masculine and the
feminine. Yes, it's true!

A blend of the two brought Turtle many breakthroughs each and every day.
Yet, sometimes fear and big feelings would come out to play, like an ongoing
game of peekaboo.

But Turtle's shell always reminded them of who and what to lean into. Their
shell, like Turtle's crew of family and friends — both old and new — helped
them face any issue. Yes, it's true!

So, even when Turtle swims too deep into waves of emotion — bright, dark, or
blue — Turtle's shell keeps them steady and afloat like a canoe.

Soon, with each wave of emotion that came through, Turtle knew there was
value in using your shell and reaching out, too. Yes, it's true!

And so, Turtle grew stronger and stronger with every bowl of warm stew, every
person they danced with or sang to, every ball they made flew, and all the crafts
they created out of paper and glue.

While what may work for one Turtle may not work for you, you can tap into what
a Turtle's shell can do! Yes, it's true!

Always remember, no matter what you or Turtle faces, even in brand-new
places, being strong means staying true to all that protects and supports the
authentic you.

This is My Shell



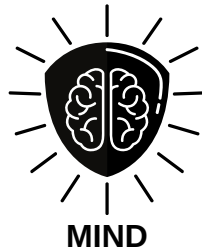
Suggested Age for Guided Activity: School-aged child (K-6) and up

Below are some questions to help you all identify the protective factors that make up your unique shells!

Remember, protective factors promote health and well-being through positive experiences, relationships, and opportunities!

What makes your mind safe & strong?

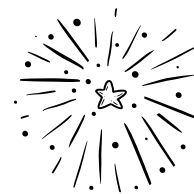
Examples: getting enough sleep, puzzles, games, reading, learning new things, going to an engaging school, watching documentaries, keeping an organized space, meditation, expressing thoughts (*can include journaling, therapy, or talking with someone you trust*)



MIND

What makes your spirit safe & strong?

Examples: singing, dancing, art, play, meditation, cooking or eating (*especially traditional foods*), attending social or ceremonial gatherings, connecting with animals or plants, joining a club focused on one of your passions, smudging, prayer



SPIRIT

What makes your heart safe & strong?

Examples: connecting with new friends, spending time with loved ones (*virtual or in-person*), watching a feel-good movie or reading a feel-good book, expressing creativity and feelings (*can include singing, dancing, drawing, writing songs/stories/poems, journaling, or talking with someone you trust*)



HEART

What makes your body safe & strong?

Examples: eating nourishing foods, drinking water, taking a bath, sleeping in a comfortable place, swimming, playing outdoors, running, hiking or taking walks, gardening, brushing teeth, exercising, stretching, sports, dancing



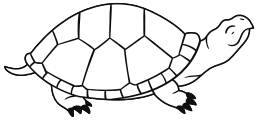
BODY

This is My Shell

Suggested Age for Guided Activity: School-aged child (K-6) and up



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My Shell includes....

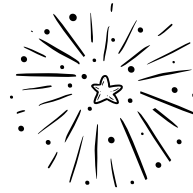
List at least TWO things for each part of your sacred shell.

What makes your mind safe & strong?



MIND

What makes your spirit safe & strong?



SPIRIT

What makes your heart safe & strong?



HEART

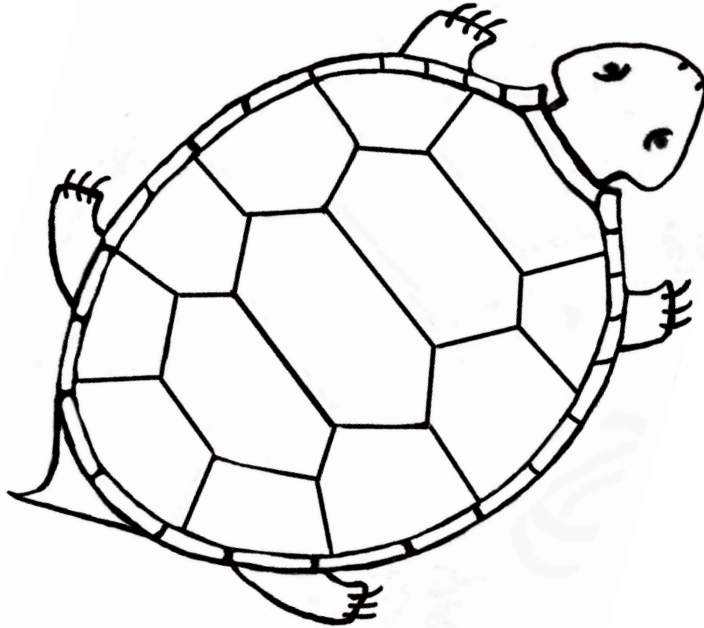
What makes your body safe & strong?



BODY

This is My Shell

Illustration © 2024 Marianna G. M. Cota.



What are the stories or teachings about turtles and tortoises in your family, culture, or community?

Wherever I am,

I am strong

I am sacred

I am _____
(Name)

I am _____
(Cultural Identity/Tribal Affiliation)

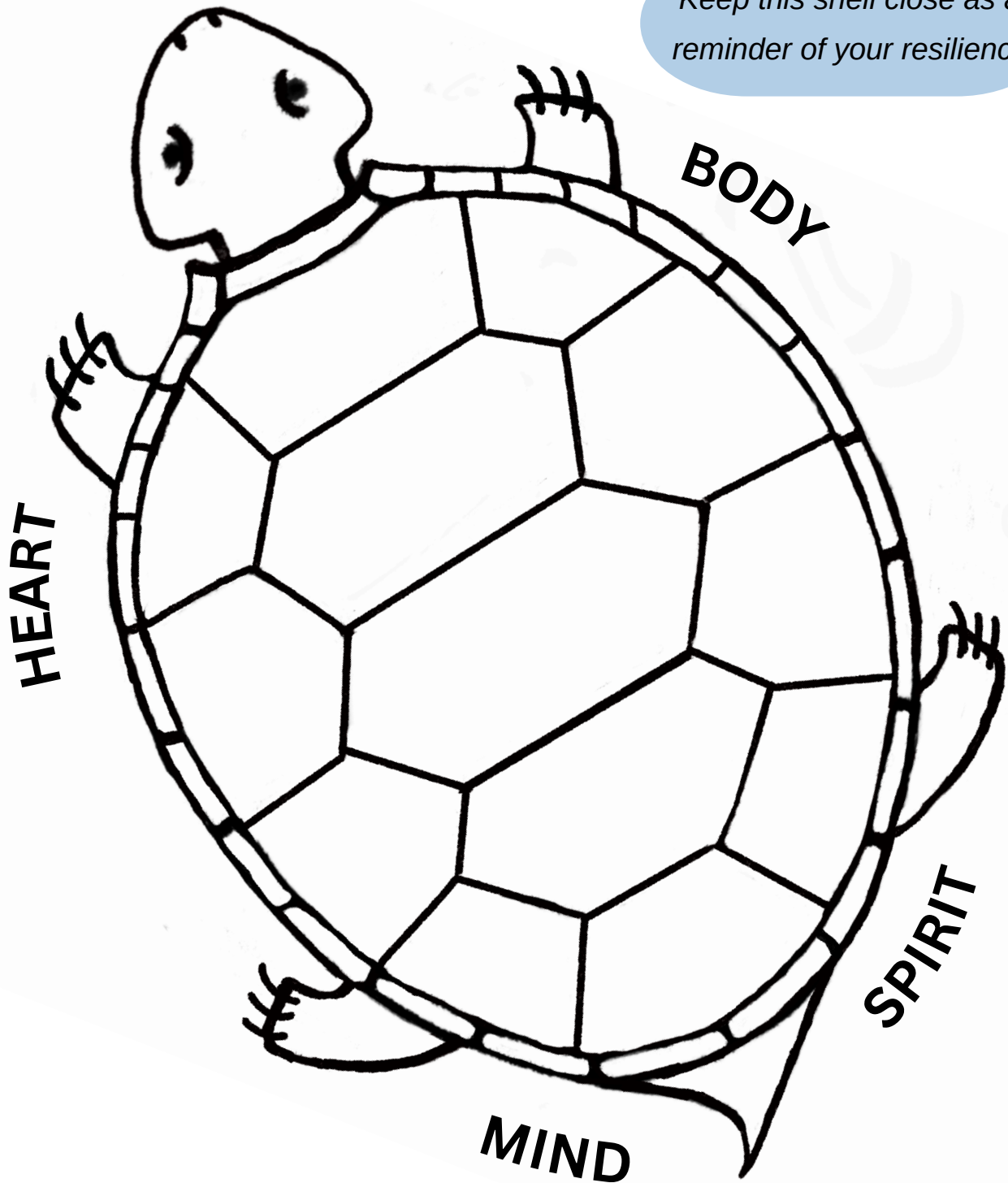
This is My Shell

WRITE OR DRAW: Use the Turtle's shell to showcase what protects and makes your mind, spirit, heart, and body strong.



Illustration © 2024 Marianna G. M. Cota.

Keep this shell close as a reminder of your resiliency



Honoring Military-Connected Youth and Families in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Communities



Did you know?

- [American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the Armed Forces at five times \(5X\) the national average*](#) and have served with distinction in every major conflict since the American Revolutionary War.

- Native American women serve at one of the highest per capita rates in the country, with [nearly 20% of American Indian and Alaska Native service members being women.*](#)



Honors for Valor

Click here to learn about the [three versions of Medal of Honor *](#) or visit www.defense.gov

- [Twenty-nine veterans \(25 Army; 3 Navy; 1 Marine\) of Native American heritage have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor,*](#) the highest military award of the United States for valor.

To learn more about Native representation in the U.S. Armed Forces, check out [*Native American in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life*](#) * by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University.

<https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1345&context=ivmf>

Children Book Recommendations

Featuring American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Youth, Families,
Authors, Illustrators, or Service Members

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Note: We do not own rights to any of these book covers. Please see the publishers for more information. **Click the book covers or type in links** to see purchasing options.



Remember

by Joy Harjo,
member of the Mvskoke
Nation

(Illustrator) Michaela Goade,
of the Tlingit and Haida tribes

<https://a.co/d/01Mtz8pU>

Representation Matters!

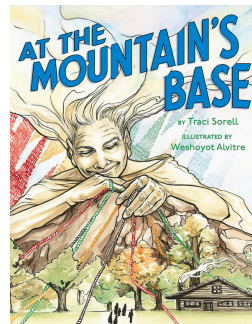
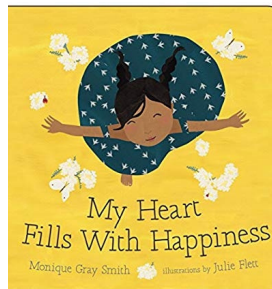
*We can heal through stories.
Representation of our identities
in media helps combat stigma
and promotes social
understanding that leads to
respect and curiosity.*

My Heart Fills With Happiness

by Monique Gray Smith,
Cree/Lakota

(Illustrator) Julie Flett,
Cree-Metis

<https://a.co/d/0d7dQyZI>



At the Mountain's Base

by Traci Sorell, Cherokee
Nation citizen

(Illustrator) Weshoyot
Alvitre

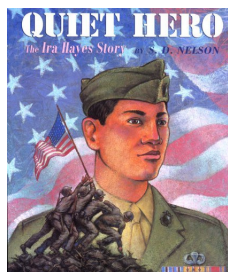
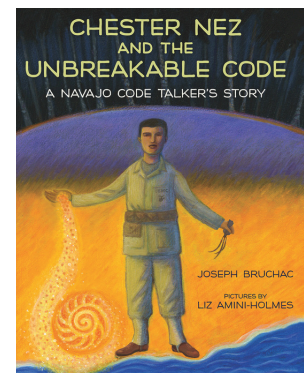
<https://a.co/d/06d1imPB>

Chester Nez and the Unbreakable Code

by Joseph Bruchac,
Abenaki

(Illustrator) Liz Amini-
Holmes

<https://a.co/d/0eU55Oh5>



Quiet Hero: The Ira Hayes Story

by SD Nelson

<https://a.co/d/05SccJMx>



Expanding Your Shell

Resources to develop skills and broaden perspectives

Click banners below or type in the MHFA link below to learn more about mental health first aid!



[Mental Health First Aid *](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/)

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>

F★O★C★U★S

[FOCUS Resilience Training 5 Key Skills *](https://focusproject.org/program-benefits/)

<https://focusproject.org/program-benefits/>

Click the logo or use the link below to find a FOCUS site training near you!

<https://focusproject.org/contact/>

"I need to find a way to shed light on the mental health issues plaguing my community... I want to show some of these talented kids and our culture. I want to do what I can to inspire, encourage, and motivate my peers to take back pride in who we are as Native Americans." ~ Daunnette Moniz-Reyome

Daunnette Moniz-Reyome



Voices of Lived Experience

[Hear From a Military Family: The Beck Family *](https://www.dvidshub.net/video/792759/month-military-child-spotlight-beck-family)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/792759/month-military-child-spotlight-beck-family>

[AGAINST THE CURRENT | A Short Documentary About the Culture of Indigenous People | BYkids *](https://youtu.be/BrIO1ZXmBK0?si=GD-tvcihM7Y_tzJC)

https://youtu.be/BrIO1ZXmBK0?si=GD-tvcihM7Y_tzJC



Family Resources for Military-Connected American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Communities

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[The Comfort Crew for Military Kids - Resources *](https://www.comfortcrew.org/militaryheroes.html)

<https://www.comfortcrew.org/militaryheroes.html>

[Our Smallest Warriors, Our Strongest Medicine: Overcoming COVID-19 *](https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-overcoming-covid-19/)

<https://cih.jhu.edu/programs/our-smallest-warriors-our-strongest-medicine-overcoming-covid-19/>



[Military OneSource Non-medical Counseling Sessions, ages 6-17 *](https://www.militaryonesource.mil/non-medical-counseling/military-onesource/non-medical-counseling-for-youth-teens/)

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/non-medical-counseling/military-onesource/non-medical-counseling-for-youth-teens/>

[Assistance to Help Children & Youth Manage Their Emotions Around Global Violence *](https://www.militaryonesource.mil/parenting/children-youth-teens/)

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/parenting/children-youth-teens/>



[Care for the Caregivers – From the Sesame Workshop *](https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/care-for-the-caregivers/)

<https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/care-for-the-caregivers/>

[Veterans – From the Sesame Workshop *](https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/veterans/)

<https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/veterans/>

[Elmo Explains How Life Can Change with a Veteran Family Member | Veterans *](https://youtu.be/FCMfxKLrGZ8)

<https://youtu.be/FCMfxKLrGZ8>



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The National Child
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Building Blocks Banner
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Contact for more information:

Anne Helene Skinstad, PhD
Director, Native Center for
Behavioral Health
anne-skinstad@uiowa.edu

Native Center for Behavioral Health
University of Iowa College of Public Health
145 N. Riverside Dr., Iowa City IA 52242

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