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THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER IN THE RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING OF ALASKA NATIVE ELDERS

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Introduction

As an Alaska Native who grew up around family, friends, and Elders, I was raised around the sounds of laughter, being teased, having optimistic outlooks on life, and sharing stories of resilience and successful aging. I have fond memories of my Elders and family sitting around the kitchen table sharing stories over tea, smoked fish, and aqutak (Alaska Native ice cream), and laughing late into the night. As a child, my cousins and I would tease our moms because our parents would visit and laugh all night, but now as adults, we find ourselves at the kitchen table visiting and laughing late into the night. Looking back on those childhood evenings, I believe we teased our moms because they seemed to spend more time laughing than talking, acting like little kids who found everything funny. It did not make sense to us why you would visit only to laugh until you were crying. These visits taught me the importance of finding joy in life, the value of communication, the healing power of laughter, and nurturing relationships with your family and community.

Being raised in a commercial fishing family in Bristol Bay, Alaska, fishing nets are a critical tool to our way of life and livelihood. Periodically, nets needed to be repaired because a fish, or another object, tore through them, leaving a hole in the webbing. These holes allow fish to swim through and escape. Some Native Elders know the art of mending fishing nets and use new nylon string to pull together the webbing, creating a stronger net. They carefully examine the tear, think of how to mend it so it is a stronger net, and their hands work swiftly with the twine to mend the broken strands. The fishing net, as a metaphor, consists of different strands of nylon string that represent the characteristics and values that enable us to be resilient and healthy. For purposes of this chapter, these strands represent laughter, humility, optimism, humor, strength, and passion. All of these strands woven together create a foundation for healthy living and remaining resilient in times of stress or disruption. The holes in the net are the stressful events that damage our web of resilience, making us vulnerable to stress. With repairs from our community, we are able to mend our nets to become whole again, stronger, and more resilient. This chapter focuses on the "laughter" strand of our nets, which is a critical source of optimism, resilience, connection, and coping; when this strand breaks and we are not able to laugh, the surrounding net strands are loosened or damaged, and our ability to remain resilient and age successfully is weakened.

Laughter is a universal expression (Wood & Niedenthal, 2018) used to convey feelings of joy (Hofmann, Platt, & Ruch, 2017) and maintain relationships and connections (Dezecache & Dunbar, 2012), as well as serving as a protective factor for mental health and wellbeing (Kalai-vani & Rajkumar, 2017). Laughter is a common characteristic of Alaska Native and American Indian people, and one that portrays an image not always associated with Alaska Native or American Indian Peoples, families, or communities.

Based on a decade of research with Alaska Native Elders, this chapter explores the role of laughter in successful aging and how laughter is used to cope with challenges we face as we grow older and help us age successfully. The chapter concludes with a summary on the role of laughter among Indigenous populations and its role in their resilience and wellbeing.



Figure 14.1 Photograph of Dr. Elizabeth Fleagle, Iñupiat, of Fairbanks, Alaska, USA
Photographer: Sarah McConnell, of Fairbanks, Alaska, USA, 2020

The Alaska Native context

Alaska is the northernmost US state. It is disconnected from the US mainland and shares a border with British Columbia, Canada. Today, Alaska's diverse Native Peoples remain a strong presence and much of Native culture is still practiced across the state. In many areas of Alaska, especially rural villages, Alaska Natives hunt, fish, and gather plants for subsistence and continue their traditional cultural values, practices, and beliefs passed down to the younger generations through stories and leading by example. Alaska Natives living in cities, such as Anchorage or Fairbanks, have connections to relatives in villages who share Native foods. It is common to see celebrations and ceremonies practiced in communities and many of the Elders are making an effort to pass on knowledge of traditional activities (such as hunting, gathering, survival skills, ivory and wood carvings, beadwork, and kayak building) to younger generations.

Many of the cultural values and beliefs of Alaska Natives are similar to other Indigenous Peoples across the globe – for example, the value of caring for your Elders, teaching the youth, respect for the animals and land, respect for others, and sharing what you have. These values may be universal, but what makes Alaska Native cultures unique and distinct from others is the strong relationship to the land and the interdependent relationship between the people, family, community, spirituality/religion, and the land. Most of our traditional songs, dances, spiritual beliefs, creation stories, sources of food and wellbeing, and sense of identity originate from our relationship to the land. The relationship to the land is an important aspect of American Indian and other Indigenous people's identity and wellbeing, but Alaska Natives' relationship, I believe, is also survival-based, given the harsh environment of Alaska. A second distinction is the recent history of Alaska with the missionaries, boarding schools, and introduction of Western ways of being and living. The State of Alaska is a young state in comparison to the Lower 48 United States, and this history means many Alaska Native Elders are old enough to remember when they first met a non-Native person, were introduced to electricity and television, and witnessed the changes in community structures, governance, and ways of life as the Territory of Alaska became a state.

Alaska Native elders – achieving eldership

A particularly important distinction in the later life role for Alaska older adults – shared with many other American Indian groups – is that of Elder. In this chapter, "Elder" is capitalized to differentiate between these two roles. In Indigenous communities, community and family members respect their Elders, and this cultural convention distinguishes those who have lived traditionally, engaged in healthy behaviors, taught others, and served as an integral part of their community and as role models (Lewis, 2011).

The Indigenous conceptualizations of an Elder are not Western, nor based on chronological age, but rather based on lived experiences, Traditional Knowledge, and their commitment and passion to teach the future generations. Living in a society that is youth-oriented and fears growing older, the lessons passed down from the Elders I have visited differ from what US society teaches us. For example, I have learned they may not be conscious of their own aging until someone asks them about it or they realize their family and community refer to them as an Elder. I learned they do not fear growing older; they embrace Eldership because growing older is a gift that is denied to others.

Successful aging

Although the concept of successful aging goes back more than 50 years (Butler, 1974; Baker, 1958; Pressey & Simcoe, 1950), the term received only minimal use until popularized in a 1987

article in *Science* by John Rowe and Robert Kahn, who argued that what many viewed as effects of aging were, in fact, effects of disease. They proposed that people aging successfully would show little or no age-related decrements in physiologic function, whereas those aging normally would show disease-associated decrements, often interpreted as the effects of age (Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Cohen, 2002).

Rowe and Kahn's (1997) definition of successful aging is based on the biomedical model of aging and focused on three components: low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and an active engagement with life. This definition, which served as the basis for other research on successful aging, was criticized as being less focused on the entire person and the person's physical and social environments (Strawbridge et al., 2002). This definition has also been criticized for being overly biomedically deterministic, not taking into account the whole person (e.g., emotional, spiritual, cognitive dimensions). Even though Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model is the most widely used approach to successful aging by researchers and psychologists, it fails to address the implications of the fact that a disease-free older age is unrealistic for most people. Bowling and Dieppe (2005) state that while the biomedical model emphasizes absence of disease and the maintenance of physical and mental functioning as the keys to aging successfully, sociopsychological models emphasize life satisfaction, social participation and functioning, and psychological resources. In order to capture the complete picture of successful aging, all aspects of the individual's life need to be considered, including physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions.

There is very little research on American Indian/Alaska Native Elders and how they define a successful older age; nor is there a well-accepted definition or explanatory model of successful aging for racial and ethnic minorities. Developing a definition of successful aging that includes the perspective of older adults would be useful. "First, the perceptions of older adults may help researchers develop their own definitions of successful aging. Second, the knowledge of older adults' beliefs would improve the ability of providers to offer patient-centered care" (Phelan et al., 2004, p. 211). According to Jeste (2005), there are difficulties in studying successful aging. For example, there is no agreement on the nomenclature – let alone the definitions and criteria – for this concept. The terminology used includes not only successful or healthy aging but also productive aging, effective aging, aging well, robust aging, and positive aging. However, none of these terms is entirely satisfactory, because they all suggest that people who do not meet the specified criteria have somehow failed to age successfully. In addition to the absence of rigorous definitions of what it means to age successfully, there is very little research on Indigenous Elders and how they subjectively define a successful older age. The lack of a definition of successful aging for minorities risks labeling them as aging less successfully than their nonminority counterparts.

As an Alaska Native gerontologist and cross-cultural community psychologist, I have spent the past decade exploring Alaska Native Elders' understanding of successful aging (Brooks-Cleator & Lewis, 2019; Lewis, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b; Lewis & Allen, 2017), translating those lessons into programs and services to help others age successfully, and share with the youth to help ensure they will age successfully (2011, 2013a, 2014a).

My research with Elders across Alaska highlights the elements of successful aging among Alaska Natives, which consist of community engagement, physical health, spirituality, emotional wellbeing, family, and Native way of life, or engaging in subsistence activities, arts and crafts, and passing down cultural values and beliefs (Lewis, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Gerotranscendence, whereby a person shifts their "perspective from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction" (Tornstam, 2011, p. 143), is also a key element of successful aging for Alaska

Native Elders. One of the foundations of Alaska Native successful aging that supports the elements discussed earlier is laughter, which Elders described as being the most important because without this mindset, their ability to age well would not be possible.

The five strongest strands of the successful aging net

To provide more context on Alaska Native successful aging, the following section will briefly discuss the strands in the net of successful aging and provide direct quotes from Alaska Native Elders. These strands include emotional wellbeing, community engagement (generativity), physical health, spirituality, and Native ways of life (gerotranscendence).

Emotional wellbeing is a key element of successful aging. The wellbeing of elders is highly impacted by contextual factors, including their living environment, family, traditional foods, physical health, and religion. Being able to age in the place where elders were raised is highly associated with positive emotions. The importance of place was expressed by this Elder: "I love it here. I was born and raised here. I like the quietness. I love the clean air and the ocean. I love the birds."

Community engagement (generativity) is another element. Sharing, giving, and receiving support, and social engagement, was important for successful aging. Sharing includes giving away subsistence food, recipes, knowledge, skills, guidance, and comfort throughout challenging times. An Elder shared, "Passing on what I know, being able to share this and not holding it back. If we hold everything back, we won't age well; we won't be healthy."

Physical health is also important. A holistic approach to health was expressed by many elders. This includes "exercise, maintaining, keeping healthy mentally, physically, [and] spiritually."

Another important strand is spirituality. Religious or spiritual beliefs were helpful in accepting and managing health challenges. One Elder shared, "you've got to believe, whether it's God or a higher power, or in other people."

The fifth strand is Native ways of life (gerotranscendence). These traditional ways were being passed down by Elders to family and community. One participant shared, "They pass down things to you and you've got to pass it on down to your kids, everything you learned. Where you learn is your home. That's where you first start, from you, your parents, grandparents, elders. You pass that on." Laughter is woven throughout each of these strands of successful aging and without its presence, each of these strands would be weakened. The following section will discuss laughter, its impact on health and wellbeing, and its role in helping Elders age successfully.

Laughter

People use laughter to communicate positive emotion and signal friendliness and playful intentions (Mora-Ripoll, 2011). Laughter also indicates that one is in a nonserious frame of mind, and not taking oneself too seriously. More recently, researchers have suggested the purpose of laughter is not just to communicate that one is in a playful state, but to actually encourage others to laugh, as well (Owren & Bachorowski, 2003). Laughter is infectious, and when you are surrounded by others engaging in laughter and humor, it is difficult not to join in, or find a smile spreading across your face as you listen to their stories and remember your own funny stories.

Some scholars have found that Native humor is considered a spiritual tradition by certain Indigenous Peoples (Garrett, Garrett, Torres-Rivera, Wilbur, & Roberts-Wilbur, 2005), meaning laughter has a healing force in their lives. The many forms of laughter and Native humor are situation dependent, including teasing, stories, songs, dance, art, and cultural symbols (Garrett

et al., 2005) – for example, laughing with your cousins while they tease you about your childhood nickname, laughing during storytelling because the story is both funny and instructional, and laughing alongside Elders as they perform silly songs and dances. These forms of laughter assist with healing, bringing family and community together, and teaching everyone to find the humor during difficult situations as a coping strategy.

Alaska Natives, and other Indigenous Peoples across the globe, have experienced a history of trauma, abuse, exploitation, and violence at the hands of others (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998). When these topics arise in conversations, they may bring up feelings of pain, trauma, and deep sadness. In some situations, these topics may be met with discomfort and further discussion halted with an awkward laugh or joke to redirect and change the topic from one of embarrassment or discomfort to one of healing and sharing. Despite atrocities and losses, Elders maintain an optimistic outlook on life and continue laughing (Lewis, 2013; Lewis & Allen, 2017), which is a testament to their resilience (Garrett et al., 2005).

A conversation about boarding school trauma provides an example that illustrates the use of laughter to shift the focus to healing. One Elder shared the atrocities they experienced during their time at a boarding school; the sexual abuse, mental and physical abuse, and disconnect from their family, Native language, and foods. These stories are punctuated with laughs and jokes to either ease the trauma to the listener or reduce the impact of the trauma on their own lives. After sharing their story, the Elder shifted their conversation to the unforeseen benefits of their experiences: the friends they have maintained since boarding school and the government efforts to bring awareness and resources to the survivors, as well as the funny stories from the boarding school that made the day-to-day trauma bearable. Despite the trauma and abuse, the Elder's ability to use humor to cope during times they did not think they would survive enabled them to begin their healing journey and be able to share these stories without breaking down.

Elders continue to experience challenges and losses. Laughter helps them cope with stress, recover from illness, decrease their feelings of anxiety and discomfort, and overcome disappointment or loss (Garrett et al., 2005). Laughter is one of the fundamental character strengths and virtues proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), which makes the human condition more bearable by sustaining good cheer in the face of stress and adversity, fostering and strengthening social bonds and interactions – all of which enable people to remain resilient (Radomska, 2011). By modeling the ability to continue laughing, family and community are learning how to use humor and/or laughter when faced with difficult situations. They do not forget or reduce the impact of what happened, but focus on the lighter side of the situation, laugh about it, reduce any negative feelings, and process the situation later.

While Alaska Native Elders do not directly report that laughter contributes to their health and ability to age successfully, studies have found that laughter positively impacts physical health across the lifespan. For example, different physiological effects of laughter have been reported, such as decreasing pain, strengthening immune function, mitigating stress, and improving social support (Bennett & Lengacher, 2006; Mora-Ripoll, 2011). Laughter can also decrease levels of stress hormones, and is theorized to buffer the effects of stress on the immune system, resulting in improved bodily functions, a stronger immune system, and an elevated mood (Bennett & Lengacher, 2006). Individuals with a greater sense of humor report less depression, exhibit better immune functioning, and experience fewer respiratory illnesses (Mora-Ripoll, 2011), which contribute to their ability to age successfully. For example, I visited with an Elder who has physical limitations that impact her ability to walk long distances or engage in many subsistence activities like berry picking. When she is not able to walk the distance to her favorite berry patch, she gets frustrated when she has to stop and rest, but then laughs because she notices she

sat in the middle of a large berry patch and fills her bucket while sitting there. Her ability to laugh reduces her frustration with the physical limitations she experiences, as well as improving her mental health.

A few studies within the successful aging literature have discussed laughter as one of the contributing factors to a person's ability to age successfully (e.g., Baskin & Davey, 2015; Pace, 2013). Several studies have demonstrated laughter's impact on mental and physical health for older adults (Mora-Ripoll, 2011; Penson et al., 2005; Savage, Lujan, Thipparthi, & DiCarlo, 2017; Yim, 2016), which may contribute to their ability to buffer the impact of aging-related changes to their health (Marziali, McDonald, & Donahue, 2008), thus enabling them to age successfully in their own terms.

The positive psychological impacts of laughter include decreased levels of depression and negative emotions, and increased positive emotions. Laughter reduces feelings of tension, anxiety, hatred, and anger (Bains et al., 2015; Ko & Youn, 2011; Takeda et al., 2010) among older adults. It also improves relationships and strengthens connections with family and community (Takeda et al., 2010), all of which are key elements of successful aging (Lewis, 2011). Alaska Natives have varying traditional practices and ceremonies around death or passing on. During these times of mourning and loss, family and community come together to support the family and share food and stories, as well as laughter. During these difficult times, laughter can be heard, and funny stories shared. The sharing of a laugh brings family and community together, remembering the happy times, reducing the sadness and negative emotions for that moment, and celebrating life.

The use of laughter by Alaska Native Elders is distinct from other ages, and I would argue there are generational differences in the use of laughter. Laughter is also an attachment behavior for babies and young children, creating a bond with their parents (Nelson, 2008), and youth engage in laughter when they are silly, tell jokes, spend time with friends and family, and have fun (Nelson, 2008). As we grow older, the use of laughter for joy and happiness remains the same, but laughter may take on new functions, such as relieving tension and stress (Kuru & Kublay, 2017). Laughter in adulthood may be a result of having fun, spending time with family and friends, joking with others, and coping during stressful times (Kuhn, Nichols, & Belew, 2010), especially when they step into the role of new parents or experience a loss, divorce, or trauma. Laughter may also be a result of positive life changes, such as birth of a child, starting a new relationship, or career milestones. In addition, as we age, the reasons we laugh and what we find funny changes, so our patterns and reasons for laughing change across the lifespan (Rothbart, 1973).

Laughter has been used by Alaska Native Elders and has supported their ability to age successfully and remain resilient. Over the years, I have learned how Alaska Native Elders use laughter in conversation to protect themselves, including redirecting conversations, practicing humility, taking away the power of stressful topics, and sharing happiness and laughter with others. These laughter types are the different strands in the fishing net, and when they are woven together, they create a strong net that withstands adversities and stress and can be repaired by others in our lives who weave in a new strand and strengthen our net. These types of laughter are not exhaustive and not representative of all of populations, but can provide insight that can assist with future work on laughter, resilience, and successful aging.

Laughter and redirecting conversation

When asked personal or invasive questions that may elicit unpleasant memories, Elders may laugh uncomfortably to redirect the conversation, to make light of the question, or to avoid

giving an answer. This type of laughter differs from other types of laughter in that it may be quieter and less jovial and bubbly. It may not always be recognized as a laugh because it is short and quickly followed up by a comment that the question is not a good one, or they look away and have no follow-up comments.

When sharing stories of successful aging and bringing up events in their life that have shaped their journey, follow-up questions about their life story may result in a laugh and no answer. In these situations, Elders may not feel comfortable sharing more details, they may feel shame or fear, or they may not be ready to share their story until they have healed. They will typically provide a short answer and not provide additional details that might lead to follow-up questions. Laughter can be used as a healthy way of placing distance between themselves and the problem or topic being discussed (Garrett et al., 2005).

Laughter may also be a polite and indirect way of redirecting the conversation because they do not feel the question or conversation topic is important or relevant to their experiences. Following their laughter will be a short discussion about their current physical ailments and past poor health behaviors (e.g., smoking, drugs and alcohol, not eating a traditional diet) to discredit themselves.

Laughter may also be used throughout a conversation to ease tension when they experience stress. They may not wish to stop or distract from the conversation, but laughing during a stressful discussion reduces the physical arousal and takes the power away from the situation, reducing their stress (Yim, 2016). When you can laugh at an event or topic, you are not reducing its importance in your life, but rather encouraging others to laugh with you. Being able to reduce the impact of an event decreases the feelings of stress and anxiety, enabling you to create distance and have time to process the event at a later time. This use of laughter prevents Elders from being controlled by their physiological response to stress and helps them gain mastery of their feelings in the moment (Freud, 1928). The use of laughter also enables people to look at the stressful event from a different perspective, and when sharing their experiences, they are able to reframe the situation, making it less threatening.

Sharing negative events experienced earlier in life brings healing to Alaska Native Elders, and may also help others avoid similar experiences. While these experiences may be difficult to say out loud to another person, sharing it brings people together and the laughter woven throughout the difficult story is a teachable moment. These Elders are also modeling how they use the power of laughter and finding the silver lining – to heal and become resilient as they age.

Laughter and humility

As mentioned previously, in my research, we work with Elders nominated by the community as respected Elders, and when they learn they have been nominated to share about successful aging, they laugh it off because they do not identify as an Elder. One of the key characteristics of an Alaska Native Elder is humility and not talking about oneself and one's accomplishments. Part of this humility is the commitment to lifelong learning and realizing that we never stop learning. Therefore, they do not consider themselves an Elder because they are still learning. Elders are those people older than us who have a lifetime of knowledge, cultural values, language, and commitment to sharing with others; every Elder has a role model who they look up to as their Elder, so when Elders hear this title, they laugh and refer me to someone else with more knowledge because they do not view themselves as an Elder.

When I asked for their advice on successful aging as someone viewed as an Elder, they laugh because they do not want to acknowledge they have stepped into this role for their family and community. For some, this acknowledgment forced them to think about their changing role

and responsibilities now that they have achieved this status. They reflect on the Elders they knew growing up and what was expected of them, and they model their behaviors after them. They also do not believe they have the lived experiences, Traditional Knowledge, or cultural values necessary to pass down. They do not believe they have lived with the same integrity and knowledge their Elders had when growing up.

Laughter and stress

There is the saying, “have a sense of humor,” indicating that making jokes of current circumstances may help individuals overcome stressful situations (Leist & Muller, 2013). Many Alaska Native Elders have endured stress, anxiety, abuse, and trauma in their lifetime, and some have adapted and learned to cope through different strategies. For many Elders, the ability to age successfully is possible because they have been able to manage stress with healthy behaviors, including laughter, spirituality, social support and connections, and reconnecting to cultural beliefs and practices (Lewis & Allen, 2017).

Elders share stories of strength and resilience, but also stories of trauma and abuse that pushed them to their limits and placed doubt in their ability to parent or be a productive and respected community member. These stories of hardship included struggles with addiction, domestic violence, homelessness, or trauma related to boarding schools, culture and language loss, and family loss (Hamby, Schultz, & Elm, 2020; Reinschmidt, Attakai, Kahn, Whitewater, & Teufel-Shone, 2016). They laugh out of fear of the changes they have witnessed that differ from the lives their Elders lived, including technology, dietary changes, climate change, increase in mental health and substance abuse challenges, and more community members adopting Western lifestyle behaviors. One Elder I have known for several years shared a story about the food preferences of his grown children and grandchildren. One fall, he harvested a moose and told his son to come pick up his share of the meat. To his surprise, his son passed on this generous offer and let his father know his family was purchasing beef at the grocery store, which his own children preferred. While disappointed and worried about the health of his family in eating store-bought meat, after the initial shock, he laughed and let me know there was now more moose for him and his wife.

Another Elder shared with me the lack of understanding of history and Native ways of life by the young children in his community. He spoke of a time he spent with his granddaughter and they were talking about four-wheelers and snow machines, and that she wanted one when she was older. The Elder shared that he used a dog sled as transportation when he was younger, and his granddaughter was unfamiliar with them, so they used his smartphone to look at photos of sled dog teams. These two stories illustrate rapid socio-cultural changes, the concern among the Elders, and the importance of these topics of conversation in many Alaska Native communities. While Elders wish to maintain connections to traditional ways of life, they are recognizing the need to weave together the traditional with modern cultures and embrace these changes. When these topics came up in discussions, they would laugh to defuse the tension in the conversation, but also to highlight the fact they had survived these adverse events. These stories stay with me long after my visit; they haunt me, but they also fill me with awe and admiration as I think of the Elders’ strength and will power to heal to become leaders and healthy Elders.

In some situations, the events being shared may still threaten their wellbeing. Using laughter and making light of the situations turns them into something less threatening that can be laughed at, alone or with others (Martin & Ford, 2018). This does not prevent them from facing the event, or remove its power; rather, it enables them to address it when they are ready. The

use of laughter shifts perspectives by placing the event in a different, or neutral, context, and provides time to determine the best course of action to process and begin the healing journey. Using laughter in these situations promotes self-efficacy and gives the Elder control over the situation, as well as the ability to manage stress (Marziali et al., 2008).

Laughter and connection

While laughter can be used to manage stress and assist in the healing process, it is also a social lubricant and brings people together. The birth of a grandchild, marriage of their children, college graduations, a high school basketball team winning a game, or a fruitful subsistence season are all reasons to be happy and celebrate with family and community. The previously discussed forms of laughter are more forced or less genuine, used as a coping or avoidance strategy, whereas this form of laughter comes from the pit of the stomach, echoes across the room, and dances in the soul.

Literature highlights laughter's numerous benefits, and when shared among others, it creates an atmosphere of sharing and coming together as a community (Martin & Ford, 2018). Whether you have known each other your entire lives, or are meeting for the first time, laughter creates a way to break the ice and establish a bond. Laughter and feeling connected strengthens our desire and commitment to making contributions to the community, participating in activities, and helping others in the community (Shah & Marks, 2004; Yim, 2016). We laugh and feel connected.

When Alaska Native communities host gatherings and celebrations, the sound of laughter fills the room. As a participant, I always had an overwhelming feeling that I would soon be a part of the community, immersed in a story filled with laughter and teasing. As a newcomer to one of these gatherings, you may experience teasing, but only because they "tease the ones they love" – and this is their way of showing you respect and acceptance into their family and community. When you are sitting in the gymnasium for a basketball game or a community feast and you catch the twinkling eyes of an Elder who is laughing, you feel the connection; you are drawn to the laughter, and while you hesitate to smile back, the Elder waves you over to join them and introduce yourself.

One of Interior Alaska's respected Native leaders was a very traditional man who was raised on the river by his mother, hunted and fished his entire life, and was a supporter of Western and traditional education. He was a guest in our home a few years before he passed. While we were enjoying a cup of tea, we gave him a colored sugar crystal stick to sweeten and stir his tea, which turned his Lipton tea blue. Before we could explain why it happened, a huge smile spread across his face, he let out a hearty laugh with twinkles in his eyes, and he turned to my partner and said, "See, like I always say, 'white men are good for something.'" This was his way of teasing my partner, as well as approving of the tea and the new ways things are done, such as using sugar crystals. My partner took this as a compliment and also felt accepted by the Elder and part of his family.

Laughter removes some barriers, judgments, and differences that exist between people, and soon the room is filled with people who have shared a laugh and swapped stories. For example, when I was conducting research in my home region of Bristol Bay, I was required to present to our Native Health Corporation Research Ethics Board. Several board members were friends with my family. They knew I had left Alaska for education and work, and had only spent summers commercial fishing in Alaska, so they teased me about not really being from the region. Initially, I was defensive and justified my connections, but also felt hurt. After sitting there a few seconds, they laughed and shared their feelings of pride to have someone from the region

doing this work. This experience has stayed with me, and when I am back in the region and see a board member, we remember the teasing and know we are proud members of the region.

Conclusion

Laughter helps people restore their happiness by healing their body and soul, resulting in improved quality of life and higher levels of self-esteem (Mora-Ripoll, 2011). Laughter has long been seen as a particularly healthy and effective coping strategy for people who have experienced hardships (Samson & Gross, 2012). Laughter is also a protective factor against negative emotions (Freud, 1928, as cited in Samson & Gross, 2012), because it re-focuses attention away from the negative or stressful emotions to positive emotions and the immediate feelings of laughter.

As I have learned from Alaska Native Elders over the past decade, the use and benefits of laughter are similar to what is found in the literature. For example, it helped people endure stressful events, re-evaluate their problems objectively, and realize that laughing with others is therapeutic and a way to bring everyone together. Laughter is a key element of Alaska Native successful aging, and a character strength and value that contributes to their ability to find meaning and purpose in life through relationships with family and community (Arminen & Halonen, 2007; Yim, 2016), and remain resilient as they age. The laughter at the kitchen table is their way of connecting, sharing the pain of loss and stress together, as well as celebrating good news and focusing on the joys in life. These moments strengthen family systems, create and enforce community connections, and create a unified vision that everyone will survive and thrive through shared laughter.

This chapter discussed how laughter enabled Elders to remain resilient and age successfully. Laughter was used to avoid difficult topics, relieve painful events, and engage in humility, but also share happy events and reflect on life's blessings with others. Laughter has served as a protective mechanism for Alaska Native Elders, enabling them to remain resilient during difficult times and accept what has happened in their lives. Elders shared lessons with others with a smile on their face and remind us to find the silver lining in all situations. Feelings of agency, or having control over one's actions (Moore, 2016), are strengthened through laughter by enabling Elders to process their experiences and control their reactions and feelings. Old age is often associated with a reduced sense of agency (Moore, 2016), so it is important to maintain a sense of agency to be considered aging successfully, or resilient, which Elders in my research have been able to do through laughter. Feelings of communion are also created by sharing laughter with others (Leist & Muller, 2013), strengthening their bond with family and community members, which increases their support network and feeling that they will have support when needed. All of these activities and experiences contribute to Elders' resilience. Elders remind us that sharing your story of healing helps others, but also supports their own journey of healing and remaining resilient.

Alaska Native Elders remind us of the importance of reflecting back on our lives and seeing where our fishing net was repaired. Reflecting on the Elder repairing the fishing net at the beginning of the chapter, the Elder holds our net in their hands, thoughtfully observing the broken strands that represent our trauma(s) and difficult life experiences. When they are ready, the Elder selects new, stronger twine and begins the repairs, introducing the new twine to the net, reinforcing the existing net, and repairing the tear to make the net whole again. The currently existing net represents our behaviors and characteristics that keep us healthy, and the new twine represents the new knowledge we acquire from our Elders' teachings. As we go through life, our net will continue to experience tears. The wisdom needed to repair our net is the same

knowledge our Elders share with us to improve our lives, be healthy, find the silver lining, and adopt healthy behaviors. The Elders remind us how fragile each strand of the net can be, but also how strong we can be when the strands work together.

As I remember my childhood and the importance of laughter in my own life, images of my great grandparents, grandparents, and mom flood my memories. Memories of my mom and aunt laughing at the table all night are now accompanied with memories of my cousins and I laughing at the kitchen table all night, feeling like kids and strengthening our bond. Today, I reflect on my fishing net, where I have made repairs or had the support of my family and community to make repairs. Laughter is a universal emotional experience, but as we have learned from Alaska Native Elders, it has different functions that enable us to be resilient and age successfully, surrounded by family and community.

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