

Mental Health and Healing

Research by Dr. Suzanne L. Stewart, Yellowknife Dene First Nation, to understand health promotion, revealed four themes in mental health counselling for Indigenous peoples: community, cultural identity, holistic approach and inter-dependence. Indigenous counsellors who participated in the research concluded that:

Healing starts with community.

- The individual's healing must be done in the circle of community.
- The need to rebuild and heal at the community level from colonization.
- This need for community healing is part of the journey to mental health as wellness or healing.
- Community is part of the holistic balance of an individual's life.
- Promoting mental health grounded in local ways of knowing and being can differ from community to community.

With respect to cultural identity:

- Having a clear Native identity is part of attaining and maintaining mental health.
- Cultural identity gives Native peoples the strength and wherewithal to consider healing possibilities through personal self-growth, connections with family, community, and Indigenous cultures.
- Culture is a tool we [counsellors] can use to help people become who they want to be with an identity, a sense of purpose, an understanding of what it's like to be Aboriginal and proud of that.

A holistic approach to healing includes:

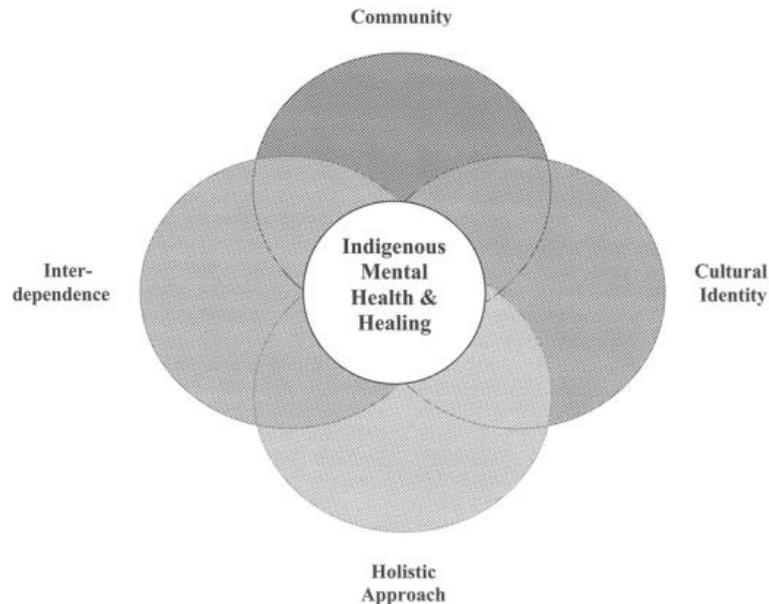
- For example, having food in their counselling sessions, integrating ceremony or prayer into their practice, including Elders or traditional healers in the process, and taking clients into nature or into their social community.
- Counsellors would make use of all four aspects of the self in order to address whatever problem or issue arose in a session – the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

With respect to interdependence:

- Relying on each other was an integral aspect of living within their worlds. This interdependence occurred in all relationships, including with clients, with co-workers, within family, within community, and from community to community.
- Interdependence within the therapeutic alliance - the relationship between clients and participants in their roles as professional helpers were key to finding and maintaining mental health in the context of the challenges clients faced on their healing journeys.
- In addition to forming the connection with clients within the counselling process, assisting clients make connections with family members, other helpers in the agency, Elders in the community, programmes in the community, and other people within the

Native community who were not family members or part of the client's pre-existing social connections, could be beneficial to the healing process for clients.¹

FIGURE 1: Model of Indigenous Mental Health and Healing



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The Canadian Breast Cancer Network provides descriptions of different methods using in healing.²

Healing circles are convened to discuss a problem or question. Members sit in a circle, and the leader, facilitator, or elder opens with a prayer. A talking stick is passed around the circle; only the person holding the stick can speak. The healing circle concludes when the talking stick has passed one time around the circle without anyone being interrupted. For cancer patients and their caregivers, the healing circle is a place to pour out their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and get support and healing.

Sweat lodges are dome-shaped structures used for purification and healing rites. Inside, stones are heated on a fire and water is poured on the stones to create steam. This steam

¹ Stewart, Suzanne L., Promoting Indigenous Mental Health: Cultural Perspectives on Healing from Native Counsellors in Canada, Journal of Health Promotion, 2008. [Promoting-Indigenous-Mental-Health-Stewart.pdf \(campusmentalhealth.ca\)](#). Accessed 5 April 2022

² [Indigenous Traditional Healing, Our Voices Blog - CBCN](#). Accessed 14 June 2022.

helps ceremony participants sweat out toxins and impurities and is thus thought to promote healing.

Smudging is a ceremony to cleanse a person or place of negative thoughts and feelings, to purify the soul, and to bring clarity to the mind. In a shell or small container, the four sacred plants (sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco) are ignited. The flames are blown out and the resulting smoke is wafted around a person or place with a hand or eagle feather. After the ceremony, the ashes are disposed of on the bare soil. These ashes are thought to contain the negative thoughts and feelings.

10 Indigenous Holistic Healing Practices

(Article in Psychology Today published on Feb. 24, 2019)³

Rupert Ross, retired Canadian Crown attorney, summarizes the characteristics of healing practices he learned about from First Nations in Canada. Ross gives thanks to members of the following First Nation groups for sharing their teachings.

Anishinaabe, Blackfeet Tribe, Small Robes Band of the Blood Indian Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Carrier Nation, Cherokee Nation, Cheyenne Tribe, Chickasaw Nation, Chippewa, Cree, Delaware First Nation, Eskasoni First Nation, Fisher River Cree, Gros Ventre, Kehewin Cree Nation, Mi'kmaq, Mohawk, Nehiowe-Metis Nahkawe, Oglala Lakota, Ojibway-Anishinaabe, Piikani First Nation, Salteaux (plains Ojibway), Skwah First Nation, Standing Rock Sioux, Tewa, Yankton Dakota, Yankton Sioux Tribe.

He draws attention to the following:

“...notice how they are contrary to dominant (Western European) thinking that assumes as baselines for normality individualism, innate badness, a hierarchy of value of people (some more valuable than others), emphasis on verbal communication, and human separation from nature.”

Ross shares aspects of each practice, which are quotes are from his book, *Indigenous Healing*.

1. Focus on Spirit

First Nation communities emphasize connecting to forces larger than the self, often not visible but felt, as part of healing. “Within aboriginal thinking, we are all sacred beings, sharing an identical spirit with all other aspects of Creation. With hard work we can manifest that spirit to greater degrees, building stronger, more respectful relationships. It is a strength-based vision that emphasizes the spiritual gifts and responsibilities we were given, and our duty to honor both.” (p. 228)

³ [10 Indigenous Holistic Healing Practices | Psychology Today Canada](#). Accessed 14, June 2022.

He contrasts this approach with “Western therapy,” which he considers based on weakness—focusing on what is wrong with a person and a continual fear of failing. Western therapy also emphasizes the mind, not the heart or spirit, making it “not worth very much”.

2. Definition of a Healthy Person

Health involves establishing good relationships with everything in nature, accommodating with openness, humility, and respect. He quotes one therapist saying that within the First Nation world “power and status are measured not by the individual’s mastery of the environment but by his ability to calmly acquiesce and adjust to a shifting world. Dependency may be viewed as a sign of relatedness and acknowledgment of the importance of others from whom one draws self-worth. The value of the person lies not in his uniqueness or separateness but in his relatedness to a larger social entity.” (p. 213)

“Western therapies promoting individual self-definition, self-assertion and self-promotion will feel improper to Aboriginal people” (p. 230). Instead, the Aboriginal client feels that a person is “the sum of all their relationships within Creation, whether with other people, birds, animals, trees, rocks or rivers” (p. 229). A healthy person understands his nestedness, interconnectedness and interdependence, and the responsibilities he has to fulfill to the Whole. Whereas Western psychology perceives a set of “autonomous rights against all other life forms,” Aboriginal people perceive “life as an interconnected bundle of responsibilities” (p. 231)

Ross quotes native psychotherapist Dr. Joseph Couture saying: “Native mind is, therefore, a mind-in-relational activity, a mind-in-community” (p. 232)

3. Group Healing

Instead of a therapist meeting one-on-one with a client, First Nation healing practices are group practices. In the therapies mentioned above, people sit in a circle as equals with others suffering from the same abuse or abuse of others. People share personal stories as they will, passing the “talking stick” around the circle.

The process of sharing and being listened to, of listening to the unique journeys of recovery promotes healing and self-confidence. When offenders, who often do not realize the harm they have done, sit in a circle of those harmed by other offenders, they begin to let themselves start to understand and feel the suffering they have caused.

4. Individual Health Is Grounded in Social Healing

First Nation communities have been damaged as a whole and so it is vital that they recognize group trauma. Also, the community must participate in the healing of relations, providing a bedrock for recovery. Every person’s healing is socially situated, in the nest of relationships and responsibilities mentioned previously.

5. Restoring the Emotional

One's emotions are central to being human and for tuning into spiritual and relational responsibilities. Lee Brown describes "the heart" as the root of the mind. Healing comes through "heart learning," and having a pure heart is central to living properly, relationally connected and tuned to spirit.

For trauma that is intergenerational and extensive, healing will be a lifelong effort.

6. Ceremonies and Catharsis

For First Nation communities, there are many traditional ways for releasing emotion and for healing (e.g., sweat lodge) developed over thousands of years. These are complex sacred ceremonies that take many years to learn through experience and mentoring in the native language to which one must be invited.

7. First Nation Healers

Ross admits his ethnocentric reaction when he first encountered First Nation elders who talked about their own lives and choices—he thought they were egocentric because they did not offer an "objective" opinion. But in First Nation thinking, only an immature person would think he could understand the situation of others and tell them what they should do. Additionally, healing is primarily non-hierarchical though healers who are familiar with the local history, culture, and ceremonies and who can bring those to bear in the healing circles.

8. Respect for Everyone's Worth

First Nation communities separate the person from her acts. There is no diagnosing or labeling of people (e.g., alcoholic, offender, freak). Each person is considered "born into sacredness, goodness and kindness" (p. 253), with "the potential to be strong creators of harmony in our relations with all of Creation, though few of us will ever achieve anything close to full relational harmonies" (p. 252). The view is that "With hard work, we can nurture our spirit, learn to recognize our gifts and being to honor our responsibilities" (p. 252). Instead of trying to change the person, the focus is on helping the person change ways of relating.

9. Talking Is Not Always Necessary

The primary focus of healing is on emotional and relational discernment, not cognitive understanding. The direct way to do this is in concrete activities like berry picking, making art or storytelling. The indirect way would be through talking, which is considered less effective.

10. The Importance of Land for Healing

The best place to learn accommodation to all one's relations is on the land. You cannot defy the weather. One must compromise to survive and thrive. Experiencing the landscape helps one connect to something greater than the self, the more-than-human world, a "cathedral, full of life,

promise, openness, and blessedness” (p. 261). The largest lesson is that “humans are small, unskilled, dependent and blessed with everything they’ll ever need” (p. 260).

First Nation healing practices may bring us all back to Life.