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“To me Indigenous research is recovering culture and decolonizing by incorporating indigenous beliefs traditions knowledge into western methodology”

IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELLNESS USING ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL HEALTHCARE PRACTICES: HEALTH CIRCLES

Introduction

Aboriginal traditional healing has been used by Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years. Many traditional healers are elders. They know the traditions and values, and guide and teach the next generation. Traditional healing is “holistic” in that it does not focus on symptoms and disease but rather deals with the total individual. Healing focuses on the person not the disease. There are critical distinctions between traditional Aboriginal and Western Science of how health, wellness, illness are defined. According to Webster’s New Dictionary College Edition health is: physical and mental wellbeing; soundness; freedom from defect or pain or disease; normality of mental and physical function. Also condition of body or mind as good or bad health. An aboriginal definition of health: the overall well-being of an animate object that includes not only the physical and mental aspects but also the spiritual and emotional. Well-being is associated with high self-esteem, a feeling of being at peace and being happy; it also includes education, employment, land claims, resource management. All of which lead back to wellness and well-being (Rhea Joseph, 1996). Cultural recovery, reconnection to community, its land base and traditions is understood as a form of healing among Aboriginal peoples. At the root of this is decolonization, a means to resist and counter the negative effects of colonization

and promote resiliency and recovery (George et al, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized traditional healthcare practices as being important for providing health care that is accessible, affordable, and culturally acceptable. According to the WHO, traditional medicine is: the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnoses, improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness. While there are many different types of traditional healthcare practices, this study focuses on the qualitative evidence regarding the use of traditional healers and health circles. This research investigates the questions: Does restoring the traditional healthcare practice of health circles based on traditional knowledge and teachings of the medicine wheel provide a more meaningful way of addressing health strategies for Aboriginal people? And how does participation in health circles impact the health of Aboriginals living in urban areas?

Context Before and After

Before the arrival of the Europeans the Indigenous people used their methods of health knowledge that were practiced in their traditional ways of knowing and being. The diseases and conflicts of colonization

devastated indigenous populations and systems of their health knowledge. First Nations, Inuit, and Metis continue to show a disproportionate burden of disease and health differences rooted in inequality. These health disparities have manifested from colonization, a long history of oppression, systemic racism, discrimination, displacement, loss of land, culture, identity and language, forced assimilations - Indian Residential School system, the Reserve system, and intergenerational trauma; these are linked to unequal access to resources of education, training, and employment, social and healthcare facilities and limited access to and control over lands and resources (Frolich et al, 2006). Intergenerational trauma happens when the psychological effects of trauma are not resolved in one generation. When trauma is ignored and there is no support for dealing with it, trauma will be passed on one generation to the next. This also includes lack of action on the hundreds of murdered and missing indigenous women. Unresolved historic trauma will continue to impact individuals, families, communities until the trauma has been addressed mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually.

Globally, Indigenous people have higher rates of suicide, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, illness and death compared with non-Indigenous people (McCormick, 1996). Statistics indicate that the suicide rate among Aboriginal people is twice that of Canadian population. Health problems among aboriginal people are continuing to progress at an alarming rate however recovery from these problems are inconsistent. These health disparities are multi-faceted. Life expectancy, infant mortality, birth weights, infectious disease, malnutrition and stunted growth, environmental contamination are just some of the indicators of health inequalities in Canada (Health Council of Canada, 2005). Chronic disease, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, renal disease, mental health issues, suicide, addiction and violence against aboriginal women is increasing significantly and neglected as a nationwide problem and should be prioritized. Aboriginal people living in urban settings lack access to finding mentors, elders, cultural services that are all important

for health. Statistics show that health inequities continue between aboriginal people and white people (Adelson, 2005). Despite these substantial health issues Aboriginals strive for wellness and approach health in a holistic way involving the medicine wheel.

The Western biomedical aspect of health concentrates on disease and infirmity, western science-based health care methodologies are minimally effective and need new innovation to improve Aboriginal health care. The biomedical model of treating disease or mental illness focuses on biological aspects. The biomedical model hypothesizes that mental disorders are brain diseases and stresses pharmacological treatment to target presumed biological abnormalities. The medicine wheel framework is holistic. You treat the whole person in achieving balance in their emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health.

The Medicine Wheel

Different tribes interpret the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel is a circle which represents infinite life; with four quadrants that are separate but equal, with you in the center (See Figure 1). The number four is sacred to aboriginal cultures. It is also the process of healing, a ceremony, and teachings - a code for living (McCabe 2008). The parts of the medicine wheel represent the four directions: east south, west, north that are represented by the four colors black, red, yellow, white, which to some stand for the human races. There are four seasons known to some as: spring, summer, fall, and winter. The four sacred herbs used in traditional healing: tobacco, sweet grass, cedar, and sage. The four stages of life are present in the medicine wheel too are: birth, growth, maturity, death. The elements of nature: air, earth, fire, water. The four animals are brought to mind: eagle, wolf, buffalo, and bear. Most importantly the medicine wheel represents the four aspects of health: spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional. Health and wellness in a person's life are seen as outcomes of the balance and integration of these aspects. Strength and balance in all quadrants of the medicine wheel is essential to create a strong positive sense of wellbeing, but imbalance in

one or more quadrants can cause symptoms of illness.. Without the integration of the mind, body, emotions, and spirit the qualities to create significant experiences would be missing, therefore these essential components for a healing process are also missing.

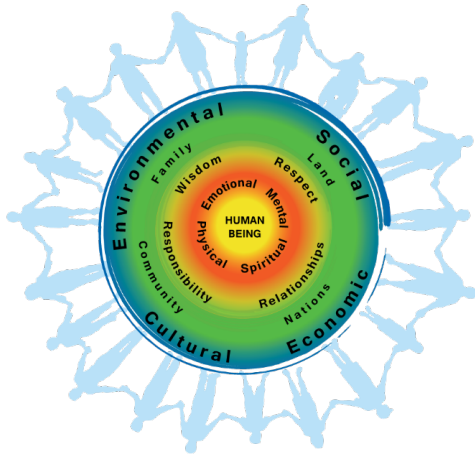


Figure 1. First Nations Health Authority

The Indigenous have long recognized that the health of the environment and the health of the individual are interconnected. The knowledge of the natural world (environment) - the land, plants, animals, seasons and cycles of nature play an important role in beliefs and worldviews of the indigenous (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2016). The natural world is viewed as an interconnectedness that implies a moral responsibility to care for, live in harmony with, and respect the natural world. Mother Earth nurtures and sustains life, provides us with food, clean water resources, materials for homes, food, clothes. She is considered the basis of who we are as human beings that include our languages, cultures, knowledge and wisdom to know how to carry ourselves in a good way. The Indigenous have a special relationship with the earth and all living things in it, a relationship based on spiritual connections to Mother Earth that guided them to practice respect, humility, take and give back. It is also based on the needs and values going back thousands of years - hunting, gathering, fishing, harvesting. Everything is taken and used with the understanding that we take only what we need and also make use of it all. Environmental degradation, pollutants, contaminants have negative consequences on not only Mother Earth but the Indigenous peoples culture,

language, and spiritual health and well-being (Assembly of First Nations). Ties to the land in one's home community are powerful for health and wellness "when your soul is sick, what you need is not a pill, it's to go back into that place of connection to family, homeland, to knowing who you are" (Elder Kyoon-Achan, 2019). Animals have great spiritual significance and have an interconnected relationship with the people as well. There are seven Sacred Laws or Teachings that act as a foundation for the relationship with the land. It is believed that these seven animals act as holders of these laws and deliver them to the people. The animal nation was given the responsibility from the Creator to give us these teachings (Elder Nii Gaani Aki Inini 2018). Each sacred teaching honors the seven basic virtues to help us to live good and healthy lives - love, respect, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility and truth. Each of these virtues is represented by a different animal: eagle (love), buffalo (respect), bigfoot (honesty), wolf (humility), beaver (wisdom), bear (courage), and turtle (truth). Living these virtues or gifts will define your identity and purpose in life. These gifts were given to help build a world connected to the laws they have brought, to bring peace and balance (Elder Nii Gaani Aki Inini). If you don't use these virtues it will affect your health and wellness. When you live in opposition to these sacred teachings you will be out of balance. Illness or disease is caused by ignoring sacred, natural laws.

Traditional knowledge is passed down through storytelling, ceremonies, dances, arts and crafts, hunting, trapping, food gathering, spirituality, innovations, medicines, and beliefs, ideologies, and teachings. Healing is derived from our ancestors through our spiritual connection to them (McCabe 2017). Traditional healing practices include sweat ceremonies, a cultural practice in a heated dome shaped lodge that uses heat and steam to cleanse toxins from the body, mind, spirit. Smudging and burning of the four sacred herbs in a small bowl helps to purify people and places and rid negativity. The use of ceremonial drums and songs as a way to connect with the Creator and spirit; sharing circles are a healing method where all participants are equal in information, stories, spirituality and emotionality are shared. The renewal and recovery of Aboriginal culture

and traditions of ways of knowing is essential for accomplishing major restorative impacts on health and well-being in an individual and in the community (Kirmayer et al, 2003).

Researchers and most aboriginals not only agree that the Canadian medical healthcare system reflects a colonial perspective but it creates culturally unsafe and unwelcoming environments for aboriginals, these healthcare services are enforced without considering or respecting indigenous knowledge of healing and wellness. Traditional healthcare practices are often disregarded in the Canadian medical system though research repeatedly supports their value (Hill 2009, McCabe 2007, McCormick, 1995). Colonization has caused a negative effect on aboriginal peoples health and deteriorations of traditional aboriginal health care systems. It is important to acknowledge the consequences of colonization and encourage the healing and wellness of Aboriginals.

Studies have demonstrated that Aboriginal communities and organizations want to integrate traditional healthcare practices into the larger healthcare system. The aboriginal perspective implies that a more inclusive holistic understanding is essential to acknowledge the four dimensions of one's being, extending beyond the individual to include family and community as well. Integrating a traditional approach to healthcare that includes the medicine wheel, and proactive commitment in wellness can significantly improve quality of life, reduce the risk of chronic disease, improve health results, and reduce healthcare costs (Howell et al, 2016). The medicine wheel is seen to be necessary for healing the damaged self due to colonization and oppression, as well as providing a respectful indigenous model for guiding and shaping people and communities in living good lives.

A Study of Healing

This research paper focused on understanding and describing Aboriginal healing methods of the medicine wheel to improve health care outcomes in the urban aboriginal community. The study investigated the questions: Do traditional Aboriginal health practices provide a more meaningful way of addressing health strategies for Aboriginal people? How does participating in health circles based on

aboriginal traditional knowledge impact the health of urban Aboriginal people? The goal was to create and provide a series of holistic health circles to Aboriginal community members to encourage learning about Aboriginal healthcare practices, facilitate a healthier life style, and work towards the prevention of risk factors for health issues (Howell et al, 2016).

Seven holistic health circles were developed, grounded in traditional teachings and practices. Elders were approached and experts would present each of the topics, created a schedule for the program, and recruited participants. The study used a seven-health-circle program twice, 6 months apart. The Musqueam Elders used the context of research in the Musqueam worldview of *náca?mat tə šx"q"eləwən ct* (one heart, one mind) and learning ways of respectful listening *x"na:mstəm* (witness) *tə slaxən* (medicines) (listen to the medicine). The principles of coming together as one heart, one mind, by listening to the medicine and ancestors through the cultural teachings, to each other and to all our relations would begin a return to being of good mind, good heart, good spirit, and good body. These principles provided the other topics introduced through the program and determined the order of the 7 health circles workshops and activities:

1. Protocols and Place (respect)
 - cleansing ceremonies, brushing activity, place names, relationship to water, cedar and wellness
2. Identity and Health (relationships, building identity, and health) - history of health review, importance of names, cultural concepts of wellness
3. Traditional Foods (food as medicine, relationships) - connection to land and holistic health, food and performance and energy, feast
4. Emotional Competence (emotional health, responsibility)
 - interactive and interpersonal activities, incorporating teachings into health and wellness strategies
5. Medicine Making (traditional medicines, relevance) - gathering at the UBC farm, medicine walks, learning about indigenous medicines, feast

6. Drumming Circle (smudging, singing, drumming, relevance)
7. Spirit and Ceremony (spiritual health and wellness, reciprocity) - witnessing, pipe ceremony, closing feast, honouring the participants

The teachings were based on land and procedures as the foundation, then cultural identity as crucial to healing (First Nations Health Society, 2010). The need for nurturing the body (food and medicines), heart (emotional competence), spirit (ceremony), and mind (knowledge of how to do the practices) are all necessary parts for providing a holistic knowledge experience. The aspects and goals are provided in Table 1.

Method

A different Elder facilitated each of the health circles. Some of the health circles were centred on talking circles, and some were experiential such as medicinal walk, using medicinal plants and making

tea blends for different health concerns (eg diabetes). The community members were recruited through various organizations, email contacts, and newsletters and were asked to contact the lead researcher. The criteria to participate included: those who self-identified as aboriginal, were interested in attending the holistic health circles, were over the age of 19, were able to communicate in English; and committed to participating in all stages of the research, including the health circles and follow up talking circles (example statements see in table 2 and table 3). Once the community members made contact, they were invited to a pre-workshop interview in which they were given information, details, and schedules of the project and were asked to sign the consent form. The health circles were presented in a workshop style, lasting four hours, on a weekly basis for seven weeks. During each session there were meals and time to socialize before and after the health circle. Locations may have changed with different topics (e.g. in a garden or health center). The participants were given transportation costs to

Table 1.
Holistic Health Circle Approach

Mental components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Increasing health knowledge › Knowledge dissemination in key disease areas, such as cancer arthritis, diabetes, cardiovascular disease › Validation of Aboriginal knowledge
Emotional components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Creating emotional competency in our communities › Learning how to identify, manage, and express emotions in a healthy manner › Connecting emotions to health issues › Developing emotional skills essential to health › Creating the emotional foundation to physical, mental, and spiritual health
Physical component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Nutrition/diet knowledge of Indigenous foods, herbs, and medicines (learning about healthy eating, diet, nutrition, and food preparation) › Garden project (sacred uses of tobacco and other medicines) › Importance of physical activity and exercise programs
Spiritual component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Creating spiritual, cultural awareness › Role of spirit in health › Importance of traditional teachings and ceremony in health › Knowledge transference with Elders

and from the circles and gift cards to honor their time. Across the two cohorts (male and female) that attended the health circles, there were thirty-five participants in this study which included age's adult to senior. Twenty were First Nations status, seven were First Nations non-status, six were Metis, and two identified as First Nations and Metis. Research methods included weekly feedback forms to assess new knowledge, skills, and areas for improvement; and a talking circle to discuss short term teachings (one week after the programs). There was also a talking circle to discuss intermediate outcomes (six months after the programs). At each of the talking circles, participants completed written surveys to measure changes in self-reported health and healthcare practices. The data from these talking circles were transcribed and thematically organized using the aspects in the Holistic Health Circle approach (shown in Table 1). The results were presented to the Aboriginal Health Working Group and in a community presentation for validation.

Results

The research resulted in participants speaking about the short term and longer term impacts that the health circles had on their approaches to their healthcare plans and ways. An immense amount of data was obtained, analysis of the qualitative data for both short term and intermediate outcomes, the themes that developed across the different age groups the youth, adults, seniors were similar; the findings presented below represent voices across the entire range of participants.

Short Term results

At the 1 week follow up after each program eleven major topics arose from the two talking circles (Table 2). Most commonly people spoke about traditional foods and medicines. They spoke about understanding their eating habits and the need to eat healthy foods. Participants discussed drinking more water, using traditional teas, learning about traditional medicine and sharing this knowledge along with learning about medicines in their traditional territory. A second theme involved emotional and mental health and wellness. Participants spoke about new communication skills, the ability to control and release anger, along with being able to identify and address emotional health needs.

Participants also spoke about the importance of evaluating the impact of their social networks on their emotional and mental wellness. A third theme included spiritual health and wellness. Participants spoke about the ceremony and spiritual teachings they gained from the health circles and the impacts on their health. The participants also commented on the connection between water, ceremony, and health; new interest in drumming groups for spiritual wellness, and the importance of connecting to spiritual leaders in their community. Community was a fourth theme. The importance of community healing, connecting with Aboriginal healers and Elders and having sense of community was also discussed. Participants also agreed that connection and belonging are important in an urban context. Other themes included were empowerment and identity, colonization, physical health and wellness, new knowledge, substance use, general health improvements, and language (See table 2).

Intermediate Results

Data on the intermediate outcomes from the six month follow up talking circles revealed ten major themes (See Table 3). As with the short-term outcomes, participants spoke about changes in their healthcare practices in relation to traditional foods and medicinal teas, continued healthy eating, and a better understanding of the link between food and wellness and disease. Participants also spoke about increased efforts to find traditional medicine in the city. Spiritual health and wellness came up as a significant theme for the intermediate findings. Participants spoke about making time for ceremonies and participating in cultural activities. They noted that they were being gentle with themselves, less stressed, being present and grounded, and removing themselves from negativity and gossip. Some even noted that they experienced improved mental health outcomes of reduced depression and had less reliance on antidepressants. The fourth theme, empowerment and identity were significant in intermediate outcomes. Participants discussed having increased confidence, empowerments, and a stronger sense of identity as Aboriginal people. They also learned that they are not alone in their struggles with identity. One participant comprehended the connection between the

Table 2.
Changes in personal healthcare strategies and practices 1 week after health circle programs

Traditional foods and medicines	30	Increased awareness of eating habits and importance of healthy foods; having positive intention when preparing food; drinking more water; changed eating habits to include more nutrition-whole foods; cooking and eating more traditional foods; eating for your spirit
Emotional and mental health and wellness	27	Learning how to communicate with others-listening but not feeding into negativity; releasing or learning to control anger; paying more attention to emotional wellness – branching out from the focus on physical health; learning how to identify and address emotional health concerns; journaling emotions and dreams
Spiritual health and wellness	19	Awareness about the spiritual connection to water and health, and practicing ceremony; joined or would like to join a drumming group to address spiritual health; exploring spirituality, connecting with ceremonial leaders, and experiencing increased spiritual health; praying more and noticing positive benefits; generally applying spiritual practices in life
Community	19	The importance of community healing; being connected to first nations healers and elders – knowing that you can ask them questions and they will guide you; forming community through the weekly groups, sharing a journey of gaining knowledge and strengthening identities; understanding that connection and belonging are really important in an urban context
Empowerment and identity	14	Increased empowerment over health and choices in healthcare; evaluating and taking control over own social environment, removing negativity from life; empowerment through strengthened identity; paying more attention to self-care
Physical health and wellness	8	Feeling more in touch with their bodies; increased physical activity
Colonization	5	Awareness of the impacts of colonization on language, health, and culture; healing from impacts of attending residential school; lacking success to culture when living in an urban environment
New knowledge	5	Workshops were a reminder of past knowledge, teachings from childhood; bringing it forward; understanding the importance of traditional healing; importance of experiential learning
Substance use	4	Quit drinking alcohol completely; drinking less alcohol, understanding its impacts on health, making choices to spend money on other things; stopped smoking marijuana
General health improvement	3	More balanced – emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally; a lot of health issues cleared up over the process of taking the workshops
Language	1	Learning new words from the Elders and finding these words in own language
Total	N = 135	The 32 participants at the 1 week follow up talking circles reported a total of 125 ways in which their healthcare strategies and practices have changed.

Table 3.
Changes in personal healthcare strategies and practices 6 months after the health circle programs

Traditional foods and medicines	18	Using traditional teas for health; more conscious of eating food as medicine (links between food and diabetes/cancer); increased knowledge about value of traditional medicine; more knowledge of plants as medicines, finding places to access traditional medicines in the city
Spiritual health and wellness	16	Making time for ceremony, attending more ceremonies; smudging more (for reducing stress); participating in cultural activities (drum-making, drumming, beading, dancing)
Emotional and mental health and wellness	11	Being more gentle with myself; being more present, grounded – following the lead of Elders and traditional healers; mental health outcomes have improved (reduced depression, less reliance on anti-depressants); doing art more as therapy, removing self from negativity and gossip
Empowerment and identity	6	More confidence in self, wellness, and Aboriginal identity; revitalizing teachings and traditions from community, feeling powered to do this, overcoming the history of community relocation and ceremonial bans; not feeling alone in struggles with identity
Community	4	Noticed that people around me take care of themselves better too; understanding that people are medicine
Colonization	4	Understanding the impacts of colonization on health and ways of fighting back through revitalizing culture; understanding the general impacts of colonial mentalities – workshops were inspiring, but it is hard to continually find opportunity to uphold this
Access to traditional healthcare	4	Frustrations trying to get traditional healthcare – there is not enough out there/ not aligned with the system; circles were amazing but need more opportunities to practice culture as healing (more venues, programs); made more of an effort to seek out a traditional healer in the community to learn more about medicines and plants
Physical health and wellness	4	More physical activity – walking early morning, strength training
Elders and traditional healers	2	Have reached out to find Elders to learn from
Protocols	1	Increased knowledge of protocols for cultural activities (hunting and fishing in others' territory)
Total	N = 70	The 23 participants at the 6 months follow up talking circles reported a total 70 ways in which their healthcare practices have changed

Elders teachings, identity, and future generations and the connection to health. Other themes were community, colonization, access to traditional healthcare, physical health and wellness, working with Elders and traditional healers, and understanding protocols (See table 3).

Limitations

The program being offered for only 7 weeks and using self-reported data were the limitations of this study, but the research is a good introduction to Aboriginal health care, and most of the participants agreed that they would have benefited more from a longer program and continue progress to get the most for each of their health and healing processes. We also do not know whether these results would generalize to nonindigenous populations, which could be a study in future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how traditional healthcare practices can improve health outcomes in Aboriginal communities. The findings covered a range of themes and outcomes. Participants discussed the short term and intermediate impacts that the health circles had on their personal approaches to health care strategies and practices. Participants also spoke about how participating in the health circles improved their health from a holistic perspective. Most of what the participants shared was interconnected and does not point to just one thing that was effective, it was the combination of being able to have access to Elders and traditional teachers, being able to learn and participate in a holistic health care system, and being able to gain aboriginal knowledge that contributed to the positive results. By including Aboriginal knowledge and practices, programs like this are culturally meaningful and give a sense of community that could change some of the barriers and health inequities experienced by the Aboriginals in the urban community (Howell et al, 2016). Many participants expressed that they wanted to access more traditional health care practices, therefore more connections between primary health centers and traditional healers are needed. These findings indicate that participants benefited from attending the health circles and have incorporated these lessons into their daily lives.

Canada's Indigenous people have been profoundly affected by the adverse consequences of colonization having caused almost complete loss of traditional medicine. We have not only endured, run down and overcrowded housing, polluted water, inadequate schools, poverty and family breakdown at rates found in third world countries; but also the struggle to survive in a Western world while experiencing continual assimilation, residential schools, the reserves, and cultural oppression (Howell et al, 2016).

Integrating a traditional approach to healthcare that includes the medicine wheel, and consistent positive engagement in wellness; can significantly improve quality of life, reduce the risk of chronic disease, improve healthcare results, and reduce overall healthcare costs (Howell et al. 2016). Holistic healthcare programs developed with principles of Aboriginal guidance, traditional knowledge, and decolonizing relationships with Aboriginal people could start to repair the health inequalities that have incurred by colonial structures.

Health is seen as a balance and harmony within your mind, body, spirit, along with your community and environment. The medicine wheel has been used by generations of aboriginal tribes for health and healing. It represents the four directions, along with father sky, mother earth, and spirit tree, all which show the dimensions of health and the cycles of life.

Conclusion

The medicine wheel is a circle of awareness of the individual self, the circle of knowledge that provides the power we each have over our lives. These research results suggest that the traditional healing practice of using a health circle based on the teachings of the medicine wheel is beneficial to healing and wellness. There is evidence of a need to incorporate the health circle with Western healthcare and increased funding for culturally appropriate interventions (Auger et al, 2016). Further research is now needed on more specific practices of aboriginal traditional healing such as: healing drumming practice, sweat lodge ceremony, traditional plant use, and healing through nature and physical activity. Healing is a journey with as much focus on spiritual and emotional healing as there is on mental and physical healing.

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