

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Adapting traditional healing practices

Traditional healing practices can be effectively adapted for use in HIV counselling and education.

Indigenous people in Canada (also called Aboriginal people) have experienced much discrimination, violence and abuse (including self-abuse through alcohol or drug addiction). This directly contributes to low self-esteem and therefore greater risk of HIV. Two traditional healing practices are being used effectively to help Aboriginal people avoid HIV infection, and to live more healthily and positively if they are infected.

The Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Wheel is a traditional model used to explain ideas. It is based on the understanding that any circle, as a whole, is more than just what it contains. In many Aboriginal cultures, this Wheel is used to represent the complex inter-relationship among all living things and shows how life itself is an ever-turning

cycle where endings become beginnings.

The Wheel is a circle divided into four quarters by North-South and East-West lines. Each quarter represents ideas which, when considered together, form an inter-dependent whole. For instance, starting at the right, each quarter in turn stands for: the four directions (East, South, West, North), the four seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter), the four races (yellow, red, black, white), the four stages of life (child, youth, adult, elder), and the inner parts of a person (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual).

Leonard Johnston, of the Cree Nation in Canada, adapted the Medicine Wheel to educate Aboriginal communities about HIV and the various stages of infection as they progress in a person (see illustration).

Many Aboriginal AIDS Organizations

are now using this 'AIDS Teaching Wheel' model. Counsellors and others use it to help people understand how their immune system is physically affected by their emotions and worries, and so how getting counselling can improve their physical health. Educators use it to deliver prevention information in a culturally-relevant way.

Sharing Circles

People seated in a circle have no leader; all have equal power. Traditional Sharing Circles give participants a sense of support and a means for expression without stigma or judgment. All can share how they feel without having to respond to other participants' problems. Some Circles are only for people with HIV, while others are for family or caregivers. Sometimes these are combined to provide a larger sense of 'community'.

Rules include talking as long as one wants, if one wants, but only in turn. People cannot interrupt; they only speak about themselves rather than addressing others' concerns. Whatever is heard inside the Circle is kept confidential.

Circles provide an environment where people feel safe to talk about HIV and to share their feelings and fears without having to worry about other people's reactions. Participants often discover other people with similar feelings and situations. They can find healing and empowerment in realizing they are not alone and in having their personal experiences witnessed and valued.

As a result, many people who attend HIV Circles begin to take better care of themselves (and others). Gaining confidence in communicating their needs and feelings leads to improved self-esteem, which in turn usually leads to safer behaviour practices and better self-care.

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