

# FASTING

Fasting is one of the many ceremonies that has been practiced in First Nations communities for thousands of years. In the past, the Elders of a community would take the young people out to fast in order to help them find their direction in life. Today, as our cultural traditions and ways of healing are being revived in our communities, more Native people are seeking answers through the ceremony of fasting.

## REASONS FOR GOING ON A FAST

When you choose to go on a fast, it is with a purpose in mind. You may go out to seek direction in your life or you may go out to learn more about our ways and about Creation. You may fast for your spirit name and colours. Healers may fast in order to find and gain permission to use a certain plant medicine. You may fast for many other reasons. Whatever the reason for your fast, you prepare yourself beforehand through prayer and tobacco.

It is said that when you fast you are sacrificing yourself for all, for your family and for your community, by denying yourself the basic comforts of shelter, water, nourishment and companionship.

## DIFFERENT PLACES AND WAYS FASTS ARE CONDUCTED

Fasts are conducted in many different ways and in many different places. You may be put out to fast deep in the woods,

in a field, on an island or a mountain.

Fasters may stay in a fasting lodge that they themselves have constructed of saplings and tarps, they may sit on a platform in a tree with a tarpaulin to keep them dry if it rains, or they may stay in a fasting hut. Wherever they spend their one, two, three or more days of fasting, they will bring with them the medicines - tobacco, cedar, sage, sweetgrass or other plant medicines that may be used in their region and their sacred items such as a drum, pipe, smudge bowl, feathers and ribbons of their colours.

Spring and fall are generally the times for fasting. Some teachings say that you fast in the fall to take away negative energy and you fast in the spring to replenish yourself with new energy. Healers and Elders say that fasting has a cleansing and healing effect. Fasting has also been described as a healing way where the first person we face when we fast is ourselves. People may fast either in the spring or fall each year.

Offerings are made before the fast. This may be food offerings as well as tobacco. Very often, fasters will go into the sweat lodge before they are taken out to their fasting spot and later, when they are brought in from their fast. The fasting conductor lets the fasters know the duration of their fast through the connection he or she has with the spirit world.

Firekeepers tend the sacred fire at the base camp for the duration of your fast.

The person who has put you out on your fast looks after you while you are out.

Your fasting site might be encircled with cedar and with tobacco ties. You might build a sacred fire at your site where you offer your tobacco. However your fasting site is set up, you are in the care of Mother Earth and our First Family.

## FASTING EXPERIENCES

Everything you see on a fast is important, even the little bugs around your fasting area. You may find yourself feeling closer to the sky world than you have ever felt before when the sacred light from the moon and stars brightens the night sky. You may gain an increased awareness of the beauty of the natural world, our First Family.

Your dreams and visions are all part of the journey. It is said that fasting brings you closer to the spirit world and that your spirit wakes up when you are on a fast. You may feel that the questions you were asking have been answered.

When you are on your fast, you have your sacred items with you - your drum so that you can sing the traditional songs you have learned and the sacred medicines to help you in your prayers. It is said that when you call on the spirits with a song, they will hear it and come to help you.

## ENDING A FAST

At the end of a fast, when the person who has taken you out to fast comes to get

you, you may be taken into a sweat lodge where you have the opportunity to talk about your fasting experience. Your fast may be ended by drinking spring water or cedar water and berries. A Traditional Feast is prepared for the fasters in celebration of the spiritual journey the fasters have experienced.

## FASTING CONDUCTORS

The conductor of fasts has been trained and has earned the right to take people out on a fast. The conductor does this in a certain way, in the way that he or she has been taught. The conductor of a fast is able to tell you the Traditional teachings of the fast they are taking people out on.

The fasting conductor should be informed of any health condition you have before you go out on a fast.

The conductor of a fast watches over the physical and spiritual well-being of the fasters whom he or she takes out to fast.

The conductor of a fast should be able to interpret the dreams, visions and gifts that have come to you and to offer guidance about your fasting experience.

As our awareness and knowledge of our traditions and culture increases, so does our honour and respect for these ways. This has not always been the case in our communities. There are always those who present themselves as Healers, Elders or Medicine People who have not earned that title and may use the teachings and medicines in the wrong way. It is important for everyone, especially young people, to be aware of this and to exercise caution when they seek healing, teachings or advice. It is advisable to consult with people whom you trust to get referrals to respected and recognized Traditional Elders, Healers or Medicine People.

Other pamphlets in this series include:

- C Approaching Healers, Elders and Medicine People
- C Clans
- C Your Name and Colours
- C Feasts and Give Aways
- C Sweat Lodge
- C Moontime
- C Traditional Healing
- C Four Sacred Medicines
- C Sacred Items and Bundles

Special acknowledgement is given to the following Healers and Elders who contributed their knowledge and understanding of the traditions and culture in the preparation of these brochures:  
Jake Aguonia, Garnett Councillor,  
Harlan Down Wind, Roger Jones,  
Rose Logan, Mary Louie, Dorothy Sam,  
Nelson (Sugar Bear) Shognosh,  
Geraldine Standup and Ella Waukey.

This project has received financial support from the Government of Ontario, Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy.

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“Native Teachings are about  
a Way of Life”

The information in this pamphlet is only a small portion of the many and extensive Native Teachings that exist. Teachings vary from First Nation to First Nation and even from one geographic region to another. For more information, please consult with a Traditional Elder, Healer or Medicine Person.

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