

TRADITIONAL HEALING

Traditional Healers and Elders say that the Great Spirit works through everyone, so that everyone has the ability to heal, whether it's the mother who tends to the scrapes of her child, a friend who eases your pain by kind words or the Healer who heals your sickness. Everything that was put here is healing – the trees, the earth, the animals and the water.

In the past, knowledge of the medicines was a natural part of everyone's learning. We knew what plant medicines were for and how to prepare offerings for them. When we needed special help beyond what was common knowledge, we looked to our Medicine People and Healers. This familiarity with the healing properties of the plants that grew around us was empowering. It was something that belonged to the community.

This knowledge is no longer widespread and many of the illnesses that our communities are faced with today were not seen in the past. Many Native people are seeking emotional, mental and spiritual healing for past abuses and traumas, for the pain that they are carrying as a result of what generations of their families went through and for a loss of identity due to separation from family and culture. Others are seeking help for physical illnesses such as diabetes and arthritis that affect Native people in disproportionately large numbers.

Native people know that everything in Creation – the plants, trees, the water, wind, rocks and the mountains – have spirit. As part of Creation, we also are sacred and have spirit. Healing is understood in terms of the spiritual basis of everything.

Our approach to healing is through ceremony. When we put our tobacco down as an offering to these things we call Creation, our spirit is making that connection so that we will be able to get that life source from them.

Our healing ways are referred to as Traditional Healing. This way of healing is holistic, based on an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of balance and harmony in Creation.

The Number Four in Creation

In all of Creation, there are four parts to everything that is natural. There are four parts to the morning, four parts to the afternoon, four parts to the evening and four parts to the night. The human body has four parts: the arms, legs, trunk and head. A tree has four parts: the roots, branches, trunk and leaves. They are all connected but have different functions.

Just as in Creation all things are connected but have different functions, so our mind, body, spirit and emotions are part of the sacred circle of life and are interconnected. When one of them is out of balance, it affects the others. If you have a physical problem, it is connected to your spirit. If your mental state is out of balance, it will cause emotional turmoil.

Traditional Healing is the restoring of balance to the mind, body, spirit and emotions. There needs to be harmony and balance in us just as there is in all of Creation. When that harmony and balance is lacking, sickness ensues.

It is said that a great deal of healing comes from ourselves because we want to be healed. In taking responsibility for our own healing, we may participate in ceremonies. This can include our daily ceremony of offering tobacco. It can also include other healing ceremonies that we participate in

under the guidance of Healers and conductors, such as the sweat lodge, the shaking tent, the sun dance, the fast and the vision quest. When you start on a healing journey, you are making a commitment to help yourself, your family and your community.

Although ceremonies differ from First Nation to First Nation, basic beliefs are similar. We have all come to take care of the spirit. Use of sacred items such as the pipe, the drum and the eagle feather can help us make the connection with Creation. It is said that all of Creation can give us teachings, that our way is a loving way that teaches us about kindness, caring, sharing, honesty and respect.

When we pray, the spirits that travel with us hear our prayers. They recognize us clearly when we let them know our spirit name. In this way our spirit name is said to be fifty percent of our healing and balance and also, because, with it, we know who we are, we know where we belong, we know where we are going and we know where we came from.

We can approach a Traditional Healer or Medicine Person for healing. We can also approach our Elders who heal through the sharing of their wisdom and the teachings.

When we go to a Healer or Elder, they ask the Creator for help on our behalf. They have a gift to heal through spiritual powers which come from the Creator and their spirit helpers and from within themselves.

Healers and Medicine People work in a variety of ways. Each Healer has their own way and special gift. Healing involves ceremony. When a person comes for doctoring, that is a certain kind of ceremony. When Medicine People call in

the spirit of the medicines to help, that is also a kind of ceremony.

Some Healers know and work with the plants through their connection with the spirits of those plants. Healers and Medicine People prescribe medicines specifically for an individual. The way in which the medicine works is not exactly known and is sometimes referred to as "The Great Mystery."

Great respect is shown for the plants that are used in healing. Healers say that the spirit force of a plant directs them to the plant to use for an individual. Before the plant is picked, the Healer puts down a tobacco offering to acknowledge the spirit of the plant. The plant is addressed by its Native name as, it is said, at least half of the healing is done by the spirit of the plant.

Some Healers do doctoring which may involve the extraction of illness. Some Healers describe their way of working as working with energy, the mind and the spirit. Some are seers, some are counsellors, and some heal with their hands.

All Traditional healing is holistic. If a person seeks help for an ulcer, it is not only the ulcer that is treated. The root cause of the condition is addressed. The whole person is worked on. Maybe the whole family will be involved in the healing process. Or maybe the person will need to do something for the community.

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 Fasting
- C Clans
- C Your Name and Colours
- C Feasts and Give Aways
- C Sweat Lodge
- C Moontime
- 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.

Anishnawbe Health Toronto
225 Queen Street East
Toronto, Ontario M5A 1S4
Tel (416) 360-0486
Fax (416) 365-1083

©Anishnawbe Health Toronto, 2000



TRADITIONAL HEALING

"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.

ANISHNAWBE HEALTH TORONTO

