

THE CIRCLE OF HEALING

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Introduction

Many Aboriginal communities and urban Aboriginal people in the field of social services are utilizing Healing Circles, Talking Circles or Sharing Circles as a way of providing group support for people who are dealing with issues such as addictions, violence, grief, and trauma. The Native Council of Canada's 1993 report affirms that "traditional Healing Circles are being used with increasing frequency in urban Aboriginal communities" (p. i). Through my experiences as a Circle Keeper at the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal (NFCM), I have been learning about the effectiveness of Healing Circles. Social workers, counsellors, therapists and other helping professionals should become aware of Healing Circles, understanding both the process and the potential outcomes. Non-Native service providers who are knowledgeable about Healing Circles should consider referring Aboriginal clients to Healing Circles in their area. Hart (1996) points out, "in order to begin addressing the needs of First Nations people, service providers should develop their practice, knowledge, and skills in a manner inclusive of First Nations world views" (p. 71). The Healing Circles are a fundamental component of Aboriginal perspectives on and approaches to healing; this report identifies some of the helpful aspects of a Healing Circle.

The Healing Circle

A Healing Circle is the process undertaken to promote healing based upon Native traditional belief systems. In traditional Native society, a sharing of one's journey is a great teacher, for it acknowledges that the pain, laughter, and love we experience can bring us closer together and helps us to learn from one another's experiences (The Sacred Fire, 1993).

The significance of the circle is evident for Aboriginal people in many ways. The circle is a sacred symbol of the interdependence of all forms of life; the circle is a key symbol in Native spirituality, family structure, gatherings of people, meetings, songs and dances (Pewewardy, 1995). For example, we dance in circles, our Drums are round, the Sweat Lodge is round, the Tipi is round, and the Medicine Wheel is round.

Walker (1971) relates the importance of a circle as follows:

The sun and sky, the earth and moon are round like the shield, though the sky is deep like a bowl. Everything that breathes is round like the body of man. Everything that grows from the ground is round like the stem of a tree. Since the Great Spirit has caused everything to be round, mankind should look upon the circle as sacred for it is the symbol of all things in nature. For these reasons we sit in a circle in all ceremonies (p.160).

The Healing Circle is symbolic of the cycle of life; all beings are interrelated.

The Elders and the teachers use the Talking Circle as a place to teach important lessons about the sanctity of all of life: the trees, water, the sky, plants, animals, and all four races. In the Circle, people internalize and verbalize the learning. This understanding then becomes a part of spirituality, which is important to maintain the balance of life (Neilson, 1990). The philosophy, values, teachings and spirituality of Aboriginal people are very important aspects of the Healing Circle. It is through listening and sharing that we learn how to get in touch with our true selves.

In the Healing Circle, people who are experiencing various difficulties gather together to overcome problems, which could include trauma from the past, all forms of violence, addictions, adoption by

non-Native families, placement in non-Native foster homes, the effects of residential schools, incarceration, poverty, hopelessness, and grief and loss. The ancestors of Native people experienced colonization and assimilation by the Europeans. When the Europeans arrived, they brought alcohol, Christianity, and diseases. Governments later imposed the Indian Act, the residential school system, and the child welfare system, all of which have had devastating effects on Aboriginal people. These policies continue to have an impact in the intergenerational problems resulting from the effects of assimilation. Individuals may feel: inner pain, anger, fear, insecurity, shame, blame, guilt and loss of cultural identity. These are some of the painful emotions that Aboriginal people experience.

Taking a healing journey can be understood as reweaving a cloth. Abuse and neglect tear and shred the inner life of a person, leaving holes and ragged edges, hindering the ability to trust, eroding the sense of identity, and decreasing confidence and the ability to relate to others. The healing journey is the act of mending this fabric (First Nations and Inuit Health Programs, 1996).

Goals

The goals of the Healing circle are:

- to begin the healing process,
- to promote understanding,
- to prevent or solve problems,
- to build trust,
- to respect each person and oneself,
- to share common experiences,
- to realize that we are not alone,
- to learn from others and learn about life,
- to identify personal issues which help us to understand to grow.

Our approach applies traditional Native values of respect, honesty, wisdom, love, bravery and humility. Sharing, learning, caring and trusting create support, which makes the Circle healthy and strong. It helps break the cycle of isolation, shame and blame. Kindness and support add up to generosity and faith, all of which are intertwined with cultural values and integrity, and which helps the

participants to progress. Tradition and ceremony teach us about the importance of values and rituals. Our Native values are the integral foundation of the Circle. With these values come the building of character which teaches us about compassion, responsibility, cooperation and commitment.

The Circle is a safe place where the participants are able to work on their healing process. By doing so we help ourselves, which in turn has a ripple effect on our family and friends and eventually on our community. A healthy relationship within the family and within the community is important.

Protocols

Protocol refers to expected norms, attitudes, and behaviours associated with the group process. The Circle is premised upon respect, noninterference and the recognition that the Spirits of our Ancestors and the Creator are present to guide us through the healing process. In this method of healing, we pray for guidance and ask the participants to exercise care and respect when speaking. In order to respect the Sacredness of the Circle, smoking or profanity is prohibited. If someone uses profanity while holding the Eagle Feather, that person must Smudge the Eagle feather before passing it to the next person.

Confidentiality is a very important part of the Circle. Who speaks and what is said stays within the circle. This shows respect and builds trust for each other. The Circle provides a safe place to speak about personal issues. Sandy (1996) comments that, "The purpose is to create a safe environment where people can share as much of their pain, anguish or frustration as they want. It operates on a theory that when you are feeling down and out, angry, or disappointed there is someone out there you can talk to and help ease the heavy load off your mind" (p.1).

The Circle is helpful and supportive; we achieve this by being nonjudgemental. We try to be open and honest about ourselves and not hurt others with our words. We are all considered equal in the eyes of the Creator.

Participants make a commitment to attend as often as they need to, to be on time and to remain until the Circle is completed. Once the Circle has begun, no one disrupts the Circle by getting up and leaving. The person who holds the Eagle Feather or Talking Stick

speaks without interruption. We respect each other by being silent when someone is sharing. Everyone remains seated until there is a break, which takes place about halfway through the Circle, because there is an energy created in the circle which we don't want to interrupt. This energy is created by the Spirit of the people; it is something that cannot be fully explained. Subsequently, the Circle becomes a powerful tool for healing to take place.

These protocols teach active listening skills, patience, self-discipline, and expression of thoughts and emotions.

Process

Each circle opens with a cleansing ceremony called Smudging. Smudging involves burning one or more of our traditional Medicines - Sweetgrass, Sage, and/or Cedar and bringing the smoke over our head and body with our hands. At the same time, we pray to rid ourselves of any negativity, which often can create barriers in the healing process.

Our Elders have taught us that before a person can be healed or help to heal another, they must be cleansed of negative thoughts, bad spirits, or negative energy. This helps the healing come through in a clear way, without being distorted or sidetracked by negative "stuff" (Broyden & Coyote, 1991). It does not mean that we cannot express bad feelings, Smudging simply clears the way for clarity to emerge. Symbolically, we are washing ourselves in the smoke, thereby, cleansing our bodies, minds and spirits.

In the centre of the Circle, we place a round piece of leather on the floor, which represents the Animals. We place a number of items on it: the four Medicines - Tobacco, Sage, Sweetgrass, and Cedar, which represent the Earth; a candle which represents the elements of Air and Fire; and an abalone shell filled with Water which represents the element of Water. When the Circle is finished, the Water may be given to a distressed individual to drink as it has been transformed into Medicine. There is a sense of well-being when we restore our connection to the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

Other items in the centre of the Circle include: a Smudge bowl in which to burn Sage, a fan made from the wing of a bird, which we use in the Smudging ceremony, Eagle Feathers, a Talking Stick, a hand Drum, a Gourd or Rattle, wooden matches, and a box of tissues.

Participants can place their own objects of importance in the centre, such as their Medicine Pouches, Feathers or anything they want to be blessed. The centre is considered sacred because we are conducting a ceremony.

A male and female act as Circle Keepers who assist in various aspects of preparation, facilitation, and maintenance. When the Circle begins, they smudge themselves first, then everything in the centre of the Circle. Participants stand in a circle, and a Keeper will smudge each person. The participant brings the smoke over their head and body; then, the Keeper asks the person to turn around and smudges their back with the bird-wing fan. The other Circle Keeper sings Native songs or chants and drums while the smudging is taking place. Native singing and chanting is also a form of prayer.

The female Keeper asks if there are any women who are on their Moontime. She explains that we are told by our Elders that women on their Moontime are releasing negativity through a natural cleansing process and do not need to participate in ceremonies because their energy, which is going in a counter-clockwise direction rather than a clockwise direction, could affect the other people who are participating. The woman could also be affected by another person's negative energy because she is open and could take on another's pain. Because the women are cleansing themselves naturally and do not need to smudge, the Circle Keeper asks them to stand outside the Circle during smudging and to pray. She lets them know that the next time they are on their Moontime, they don't need to participate in ceremonies and that they can take this time to take good care of themselves. The Circle Keeper explains that Moontime is not a bad thing. The woman is not being banished; rather, because the woman is very powerful during her Moontime, she needs to be honoured and to honour herself. If there are women on their Moontime, the person seated to her right will hold the Eagle Feather for her, as women on their Moontime do not touch sacred objects for the reasons already mentioned.

After everyone has finished smudging, we remain standing and we all hold hands while someone says an opening prayer. We ask someone in the Circle to volunteer to say a prayer in their own way. Prayers are an integral part of the Healing Circle and are said to open and close the Circle. After the prayer is finished, everyone sits down and one of the Circle Keepers welcomes everyone and explains how the Circle is conducted, which includes the goals and the protocol of

the Circle.

The chairs are set up in a circle. When people sit in a circle, the individuals' attention and their perception of their own place in the scheme of things changes. Everyone is the same distance from the centre; everyone can see each other, and everyone is seated at the same height. It is hard to hide in a circle; therefore, when you are part of a circle, you are responsible and a part of everything. What goes around will eventually come to you (Bruchac, 1995).

Each person introduces her/himself, usually just their name and Nation, after which an object, such as an Eagle Feather, a Talking Stick, or a stone, is passed around the Circle in a clockwise direction; some Nations use a counter-clockwise direction. The significance of the Eagle Feather is that there are two sides to an Eagle Feather, symbolizing life, which has a duality about it; for example, good and bad or love and hate. The balance between the two sides is the stem of the Feather, which represents the path of life or what Native people refer to as the "Red Road". The Eagle Feather is a symbol of not being earthbound and is spiritually significant. When an individual is in possession of the Feather, he or she is considered to be in perfect balance. Participants holding the Feather must be truthful, and while in possession of the Feather, they may address any issue which concerns them - without interruption (Society of Aboriginal Addictions Recovery, 1994).

Whoever holds the Feather or Stick may speak about what they wish to share; or, if they do not want to speak, they pass the Feather to the person on their left. Whoever holds the Feather is respected with silence; no one speaks while the person holds the Feather; nobody is interrupted at any time; patience and good listening skills are highly regarded within the Circle. The person can speak for as long as they need to; there is no time limit. When the Eagle Feather or Talking Stick has made a complete circle, everyone stands up and someone will say a closing prayer. We close the circle by giving each other a hug or shake hands. We complete the evening with eating and socializing with each other.

Aspects of the Healing Process

The healing process is the path an individual takes to get well and to work on issues that interfere in personal growth. Healing involves all the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of a

person. Healing begins when a person shows up and is ready to listen and/or talk about what is bothering them.

The healing process involves different ways of expressing emotions, such as talking, crying, laughing, yelling, and releasing emotions. Healing deals with all aspects of the person and exemplifies the ideology of walking in balance with the body, mind and spirit.

Letting go is an important aspect of the healing process. Letting go means talking about events; by doing so, healing takes place. The participants in the Circle learn to feel and speak about the pain of the present and the past and to let it go by expressing it. In time comes understanding and acceptance.

Healing groups deal with each person's pain. They give people a chance to learn more about themselves and the things that have been hurting them. People find relief from the feelings and events in their lives. They talk about things that have been kept hidden. They talk about things about which they have felt ashamed or afraid. Healing groups give people a chance to look at different ways to grow (Status of Women Council of the North West Territories, 1992).

Laughter is another aspect of the healing process. We use humour when we are healing; it helps break tension. After we have expressed our pain, we are able to laugh and feel good.

We try to be open and honest about ourselves and not hurt another person with our words. The participants do not judge one another in the Circle. Everyone in the Circle is considered to be equal. At the same time, everyone is at different levels in their healing process.

Eventually, people develop trust in themselves and in their relationships with others and are able to talk about their lives and to express their emotions. Trust is formed when participants are respected and listened to. All that is shared in the Circle is respected and confidential, thus honouring the trust that is established.

The circle provides support and encouragement, which is given through listening and not by offering advice. The participants validate each other's pain by demonstrating that they are not alone. This is how we get well, by listening and being supportive of each other. Mutual support and encouragement help put an end to feelings of powerlessness. We are no longer victims but survivors. The Healing Circle is a powerful tool for healing because as Aboriginal people, we have many common experiences that have caused much pain in our lives. The Circle provides an opportunity to release this pain and to

support each other through it (Clarkson, Morrisette & Regallet, 1992).

Initially, when someone was crying, we passed them tissues right away; we stopped because that can be perceived to mean, "stop crying." Now, we leave a box of tissues in the centre of the circle, and we tell the participants that when they need tissues, they can reach for them themselves. In that way they don't feel that someone is trying to stop them from crying. If someone is crying uncontrollably, we light the Smudge and place it at the person's feet. The Medicine helps to calm them.

After a few Circles, I suggested we give each other a hug after the Circle was finished, in order to build trust and support within the Circle. To this day we still conclude the Circle by giving and receiving hugs from each person. People have the choice to hug each other or not.

Acceptance and belonging to a group of Native people is another important aspect of the Healing Circle. Dudemaine (1995), states that, "Speaking out is putting an end to solitude, it's finding one's own suffering in others, Healing Circles are an opportunity to recapture solidarity" (p.2). Similarities create a bond between participants. Oftentimes it is found that the pain experienced by one individual is the same pain experienced by another. This commonality allows people to put their feelings in context (Clarkson, Morrisette & Regallet, 1992).

The Healing Circle is a natural way of healing without the use of mainstream health professionals. We are our own therapists. One could call it a very effective form of Native group therapy.

In the Healing Circle, we come to understand who we are and to love and accept ourselves; we come to recognize our good points and our flaws, and we learn on which areas we need to work. The Healing Circle is very simple, basic and real.

The Circle provides a forum for the expression of our feelings. It is a learning experience, because we become aware of the feelings that are contained inside people and learn new ways of dealing with our problems (Clarkson, Morrisette, Regallet, 1992).

We learn that healing takes a lot of hard work, that there are no quick fixes or magic cures. Healing is a life long process and needs to be maintained; it requires ongoing work. We learn how to "walk our talk" not just "talk the talk".

Spirituality and Culture

Spirituality is a key aspect and an essential component in the Healing Circle. It involves the spiritual connection to the earth, to nature, and to the animals, which are all part of spirituality and with which everyone needs to connect. We learn about our culture, which some of us never knew, so we learn how to pray from the heart.

Spirituality is something people need to balance their lives, to understand the holistic aspect of life as the Spirit is the core of the healing process. In the Healing Circle, people learn more about their culture and feel more confident.

History and Development of the Healing Circle at the NFCM

In the summer of 1994, I conducted a research project for the NFCM to assess if there was a need for Healing Circles for Aboriginal women who had experienced violence. The results indicated that a Healing Circle was very much needed by both women and men who suffered from traumatizing life experiences.

In the fall of that year, I was enrolled in a course on group work, and one of the assignments was to start a group. I had been to Circles before and from observing, participating and asking questions, I felt that I wanted to start a short-term Healing Circle for women and men. I presented my proposal to the Executive Director of the NFCM, and she agreed to let me start a Healing circle.

I asked Delbert Sampson, a local elder, if he would like to conduct the Circle with me, in order to create a balance by having a male/female perspective, and if one of us could not attend, the other one would be there. He agreed. Since then, we have conducted the Circle together.

As this was our first convening of a Healing Circle, we decided to have a closed Circle with a maximum of 14 people, once a week for a 10 week period. We decided not to turn away any non-Natives who chose to participate, but our target group was the urban Aboriginal community. The reason we decided not to turn away any non-Natives is because of the teachings that say we are all equal and that we need not judge another person by the colour of their skin. If someone is hurting and in pain, that person needs help and should not be refused.

At the first Healing Circle in October 1994, we had fourteen

participants. The response was very positive and the participants wanted it to continue, so we held another closed Circle for an additional 10 weeks. Other people would ask if they could join, and because we did not want to put anybody on a waiting list, we decided to have an open and ongoing Healing Circle; there was a definite need for it. The Circle has been taking place weekly since 1994.

The Healing Circle consists of people of all ages, from children to Elders, males and females, Natives and non-Natives, and those who speak English and/or French and/or their Native language. The Circle is conducted in English, but people can speak in the language of their choice. We occasionally invite Elders to the Healing Circle to share their knowledge. The duration of the Circle depends on how many people attend; if there are many people, it will take a long time to complete. It could last up to four hours because there is no predetermined time frame and each person can speak for as long as they need. I learned to remind the participants at the beginning of a Circle that we are there to focus on ourselves and on our healing and to remember why we are there.

In November 1994, the Healing Circle went to its first Sweat Lodge about one hour from Montreal. We continued participating in the Sweat Lodge ceremony every second weekend for approximately one year. In April 1996, the Healing Circle built a Sweat Lodge at a reserve near Montreal where we go on a regular basis.

The Role of Circle Keepers

As Circle Keepers, we are not above anyone, as everyone is considered to be equal. We talk about our own issues, our past, our present and what we have learned. We cry and vent as much as anyone else in the Circle; this keeps us well and helps us to relieve stress. Yet, as Circle Keepers, we are looked at as role models who provide hope that healing does take place and that people do change and grow at their own pace.

As Circle Keepers, it is our responsibility to open and lock the doors, set out and put away the items in the centre of the Circle, take care of the Medicines and the items that we place in the centre of the Circle, set up and put away the chairs, make coffee, buy refreshments, clean up and say when and for how long breaks are, and organize Sweat Lodge ceremonies.

Conclusion

This article indicates the potential that Healing circles offer for the healing process. My own experiences, have convinced me that the Healing Circle is an effective way for people to heal from current problems and past trauma. It is a very simple and basic way to work on oneself within a group. Aboriginal people should be the ones who conduct Healing Circles because of the Sacredness of the items that we use in these ceremonies, which are a part of our heritage.

I feel very proud and honoured to be a part of this Circle, to be able to take part in a traditional Native practice. It is encouraging to see the progress individuals are making. The participants of the Healing Circle express their gratitude in being a part of this very special circle. We see a lot of healing and much growth. We continue to learn how helpful the Circle can be for people who are going through a healing process. This Healing Circle is the longest running in the city of Montreal.

Being a part of this Healing Circle has been very special for Delbert and myself. It has helped us begin our own healing process and has been a great learning experience. It helps us in our growth. We learn about Native values and culture and about commitment and responsibility.

An Elder once told me that if we do not experience painful moments in our lives, we are not growing. How we deal with the difficulties in our lives defines who we are as individuals. When we go through trials and tribulations, it is because further down the road something good will happen.

The overall message that people give and receive from participating in the Healing Circle is that confidentiality builds trust, togetherness builds support and with hope and faith comes understanding. We learn that we can improve our lives and that we are not alone. We come to understand that when we talk and cry, we heal; when we go through pain, we grow; and when we listen, we learn.

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