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Indigenous Native American Healing Traditions

Mary Koithan, PhD, RN-C, CNS-BC and Cynthia Farrell, MSN, FNP-BC

Dr. Koithan is an Associate Professor at the University of Arizona and Ms. Farrell is a DNP candidate at the University of Arizona, College of Nursing and pre-doctoral fellow in the Arizona Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Training Program

A Picture of Health

“Desbah,” a 99 year-old Native American woman enjoys a solitary life tending to her sheep on an isolated Native American Indian reservation in Arizona. Her home consists of a modified railroad boxcar without plumbing or electricity. She is a tiny, delightful woman whose serenity fills the room during visits to her primary care provider. She is gracious and animated, her conversations often peppered with humor. Her longevity, sharp mental acuity, and overall good health and wellbeing beg the question: How does she maintain such positive physical and mental health when she has so few of the basic amenities that most of us take for granted? Unlike allopathic systems of care where health is defined by the physical condition of the body or emotional/mental capacities of the mind and described as diagnoses that note differences from “the norm”, health and wellbeing are viewed as intrinsically linked to spirituality in Native American culture. Walking in beauty, a Native woman's ideal state of wellbeing and health, requires a close connection to the earth and living in harmony with the environment.¹

Native American Traditional Healing Systems

Native American (NA) traditional healing is identified by the National Institutes of Health/ National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) as a whole medical system that encompasses a range of holistic treatments used by indigenous healers for a multitude of acute and chronic conditions or to promote health and wellbeing.² While there are individual tribal differences (i.e., the use of specific healing practices), there are also shared health beliefs and interventional strategies, including a health promotion foundation that embraces bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approaches and traditions. Native Americans in Arizona run each day to greet the dawn, a practice that not only conditions their bodies but also nourishes their spiritual wellbeing. Stories and legends are used to teach positive behaviors as well as the consequences of failing to observe the laws of nature. Herbs, manipulative therapies, ceremonies, and prayer are used in various combinations to prevent and treat illness.¹

For thousands of years, traditional indigenous medicine have been used to promote health and wellbeing for millions of Native people who once inhabited this continent. Native diets, ceremonies that greet the seasons and the harvests, and the use of native plants for healing purposes have been used to live to promote health by living in harmony with the earth.

Corresponding Author: Mary Koithan, Address: 5861 Placita Roanoke, Tucson, AZ 85704, Phone: (520) 990-6701, FAX: (520) 626-7891, mkoithan@nursing.arizona.edu.

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Increasingly, younger generations of Native people are abandoning these traditions - opportunities for a close connection to the earth – with a resultant increase in disease and impaired health states. Less than 100 years ago, diabetes was almost unheard of among NA. Today diabetes runs rampant through many tribes as they integrate into the mainstream culture and adopt the typical American lifestyle. The consequences of abandonment of traditional practices can be readily seen when comparing the health of younger generations of NA to their living elders who are engaged in traditional health practices.

Symbolic Healing

Ceremonies play an important role in the overall wellbeing of traditional Native American people but the healing potential of this practice is typically unappreciated by allopathic health providers. NA ceremonies involve the patient, the family, and the community in the healing process. Ceremonial gatherings may last for days or weeks; the more people that are present, the greater the healing energy. Through their participation in songs, prayer, music, and dance, the family and community contribute healing energy to the patient.

People of all cultures utilize symbolism found in their various religions and spiritual practices to cope with health problems. NA healing ceremonies rely heavily on a combination of traditional and Christian religious symbols, icons, and ritualistic objects. These symbols cue bio-psycho-social-spiritual healing responses by restoring the harmony necessary for health. Symbolism, whether associated with ceremonies or church services, can be incorporated into their treatment plan to create a powerful healing synergy.³

Integrating Indigenous Healing: A Lesson for Us All

Today Native Americans frequently combine traditional healing practices with allopathic medicine to promote health and wellbeing. Ceremony, native herbal remedies, and allopathic medications are used side by side. Spiritual treatments are thus an integral part of health promotion and healing in Native American culture.

Yet, the role of spirituality in health promotion and wellness is uncomfortable for many allopathic providers. Advanced practice nurses with their tradition of holism that embraces the bio-psycho-social-spiritual nature of health have an opportunity to suggest new ways to care modeled on traditional NA practices. The inclusion of family and community in treatment plans, decreases the isolation often found in allopathic care. And, thinking about the lack of person-environment harmony and balance may important clues for the diagnostic process.

Walking in Beauty: Re-visioning Health Promotion

Traditional indigenous systems of care provide a blueprint to model new healing strategies that have the potential to extend health promotion beyond the individual to the collective. In Native American culture there is a saying that “we are all related”; all things live in relationship to one another. Living in harmony with the earth and our environs has meaning and purpose, not only for us but the whole --- the earth, its peoples, and all that is. When we engage in health promotion by “walking in beauty”, we all win.

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