

Spirituality and Aboriginal Mental Health: An Examination of the Relationship Between Aboriginal Spirituality and Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on Aboriginal [Native American] spirituality has demonstrated that some of its dimensions have significant, positive effects on health and healing. This review will explore and highlight some important spiritual domains and characteristics of Aboriginal life that are significant factors in both the prevention of and recovery from various mental health issues afflicting the Canadian Aboriginal population today. Findings from current research in this area is explored and presented as grounds for supporting the current objectives. As demonstrated, Aboriginal perspectives on health and healing are broader than those of biomedicine, encompassing emotional and spiritual aspects as well as the mental and physical. Mental health practitioners should, therefore, include spiritual dimensions while working with Aboriginal patients, not only to respect the patients' worldview but also for the demonstrated positive effects on healing.

The Canadian Aboriginal population, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, comprises about 1 million people, roughly 4% of the total Canadian population.¹ This includes 11 major language groups with more than 58 dialects distributed among some 596 bands either residing on 2284 reserves or in cities and rural communities.² The Aboriginal population is continuing to rise in Canada. Therefore, this population's need to access urban healthcare systems is increasing, yet, on average, approximately only 1% of nurses are reported as having Aboriginal ancestry.³ According to a report from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples done in 1996, Aboriginal physicians represent less than 0.1% of the total physicians in Canada.¹ Thus, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Canadian health practitioners will need to understand a diversity of Aboriginal cultural perspectives and experiences. To do so, consideration needs to be given to understanding the dimensions of the Aboriginal worldview as it contributes to the healing process.

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Healing, as understood by many Aboriginal people, is described as a process that brings parts of one's self—the 4 human domains of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—together at a deep level of inner knowledge and balance.³ Contrary to a common understanding of the self within the Western medical knowledge system as being primarily mind and body, the Aboriginal understanding embraces notions of the emotional and spiritual as well. In addition, unlike the Western notions of disease as being an objective aspect of the individual, Aboriginal notions of health arise from a syncretic blend of all 4 human domains, with disease seen as resulting from an imbalance of 1 or more domains.⁴ Aboriginal people tend to experience their being in the world as a totality and not as separate personality systems existing within the person.⁵ Knowing this can help health practitioners who work with Aboriginal people better understand and work with this population.

Spirituality is an important dimension in the Aboriginal cultural experience. A considerable body of literature has emerged in recent years on the topics of symbolic healing, including Aboriginal healing, Aboriginal spirituality, and the effects of spiritual ceremonies on dimensions of wellness and well-being.^{3,4,6-10} This growing body of literature can help health practitioners engage in culturally appropriate and meaningful interactions with the Canadian Aboriginal population who see spirituality as an important dimension of health and healing.

This review will explore and highlight some important spiritual domains and characteristics of aboriginal life that are factors in the prevention of and recovery from mental health problems among the Canadian Aboriginal population. This paper reviews research correlating Aboriginal spirituality, as witnessed through ceremonies and spiritual/religious practices, with positive quality of life and healthy psychological states among the Aboriginal populations and also details the importance of spirituality and health for non-Aboriginals. Finally, health practitioners working with Aboriginal people should be aware of Aboriginal perspectives of health and healing and be prepared to address these perspectives in their healing practices.

Although Aboriginal culture is very diverse and consists of many variations among its peoples in how they define spirituality, this paper will adapt a universal perspective, looking for similarities between Aboriginal tribal groups rather than the differences. Furthermore, this review will focus on Canadian Aboriginal peoples, and, specifically, the plains people around the Saskatchewan area.

ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY

Understanding the Aboriginal worldview and perspectives on spirituality is important to better understand how members of this community understand and construct notions of health and healing. Many researchers during the last century have attempted to understand and define spiritual experience. To begin to grasp the complexity of the Aboriginal religions in North America, Dr Lee Irwin,¹¹ chair of the religious studies department at the College of Charleston, illustrates that Aboriginal religions and spirituality are remarkably diverse and grounded in very specific languages, places, lifeway rites, and communal relationships that are embedded in a unique ethnic history, which, in turn, is often overshadowed by the more pervasive history of religious and political suppression. Most commonly today, Aboriginal religions are seen as polytheistic traditions, with no concept of an absolute truth as found within many other religious traditions. Truth, for the Aboriginal, is often understood within the complexity of experience. Thus, within the context of health, one must take into consideration the important role that the subjective qualities of individuals play in their illnesses.

What, exactly, is meant by spirituality and a spiritual experience from the Aboriginal perspective? Since the numerous concepts of spirituality include an understanding of a Creator or God, in order to understand spirituality from the Aboriginal perspective, it is necessary to understand the Aboriginal concept of the Creator as well as the ways in which the people attempt to connect or interact with it. Again, this understanding is developed at the broad level, highlighting similarities within the many Aboriginal spiritual traditions.

The Aboriginal concept of God, Eternal Spirit, or Creator, is that of an entity responsible for bringing about all life and all existence. Thus, the Aboriginal concept of Creator may be perceived as an eternal spiritual force characterized by a strong internal and external presence of nurturing care and unity. The concept of unity can be used here as it describes the understanding that, for many Aboriginal people, all things are connected through the Creator. Moreover, Aboriginal people understand this force as being a vital, energizing part of every living entity. Most Aboriginals, therefore, believe that honoring the spirit of animals, for example, acknowledges the universal presence of the Creator.¹² The Sioux leader Black Elk said that the workings of the Great Spirit included all things. Thus, taking care of the earth and the environment is seen to many Aboriginals as an important spiritual duty.¹³

Simply put, religion and spirituality are the qualities or means to which an individual connects with the sacred aspects of life or more directly with the Creator.¹⁴ According to this understanding of spirituality, the sacred aspects could be directly associated with the Creator or the place in which the Creator resides. In most North American Aboriginal cultures, the Creator and that which is sacred are synonymous, in that the Creator is seen as residing in all things, and therefore, all things are considered sacred.¹² Aboriginal spirituality or religion mainly consists of the practices or actions of connecting with one's

belief of what the Creator (and thus the sacred) is. Hence, the European post-Enlightenment concept of polarity existing between the sacred and the profane is not common in most North American Aboriginal spiritualities. This dichotomous or dualistic thinking often hinders the ability of non-Aboriginal North Americans to understand Aboriginal religious traditions, as Aboriginals typically see all of creation as 1 system. Therefore, notions of the *profane* or *evil* do not hold the same meaning in Aboriginal spirituality as they do in other religious systems.

In his paper "Religion as a Cultural System," Clifford Geertz,¹⁵ a leading anthropologist in the area of religion and spirituality, defines religion as

*A system of symbols which [sic] acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*¹⁵

Systems of symbols are important because, for Aboriginal people, spiritual symbols can act as a medium between the individual and the Creator. For example, the smoke emitted from the sacred pipe is said to travel between the world of the human and that of the spirit. Through the symbol of the smoke, Aboriginal people can begin to connect with the sacred realm of the spirit. Geertz further explains that these symbols act to establish moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence.¹⁵ Within Aboriginal spirituality, these conceptions include ideas of the Creator and concepts of the interconnectedness of all things.

Geertz's definition within an Aboriginal context is attempting to illustrate the importance of having a personal experience of the Creator as uniquely realistic. This is important because of the ample evidence of individual Aboriginal contact with the Creator such as in the vision quest, a solitary time of fasting, usually for 4 days and nights, during which the individual attempts to make contact with the spiritual worlds. The sun dance represents another opportunity for contact with the Creator; it is a sacrificial 4-day ceremony held in the summer months for the plains people, in which fasting and dancing occurs for the duration and concluding with a feast and celebration.¹²

From the Aboriginal perspective, many ceremonies are seen as the psychological medicine of the people. Hence, it would be an error to argue for the importance of the ceremonies' positive effects before outlining and orienting the reader to some common Aboriginal ceremonies and their meaning.

RITUALS, CEREMONIES, AND EXPERIENCE

There are varying degrees to which the Aboriginal practitioner experiences the Divine; however, virtually all North American traditions emphasize one's personal experience with the Great Spirit.¹⁶ According to psychiatrist and author Lewis Mehl-Madrona, MD,⁴ ceremonies create portals for dialogue between radically different levels (human and divine, for instance). From this perspective, the goal of the ceremony is to connect with spir-

its and have a conversation, not to perfect a specific technique but to arrive at the threshold between the levels and have a dialogue. The emphasis then is on the journey and experience of the ceremony itself and not the end-result of the ceremony. Therefore, many variations in Aboriginal ritualistic techniques have naturally developed over the years. Although there are differences among the many Aboriginal traditions existent within Canada, this paper will highlight only the most evident ceremonies and rituals that are seen amongst plains people.

The spirit (sweat) lodge is arguably the most prevalent ceremony within contemporary Aboriginal spirituality as a means to connect with the divine. The common name is "sweat lodge," but it is important to note that this name came from the misconception that this ritual was associated with a secularized sauna, hence the term "sweat." Although the physiological aspects are, in part, similar to the modern understanding of sauna, for the Aboriginal people the sweat lodge is primarily a religious and spiritual practice; thus, for our purposes, it is best referred to as the spirit lodge.

Most commonly in North America, the spirit lodge is a low, dome-like structure built on the ground from tree shoots (usually willow branches) and covered with thick blankets or canvas to keep the heat inside. Heated rocks are then placed in the center of the lodge.¹⁶ From here, the lodge can provide for the cleansing of participants' bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits.^{6,16} During the ceremony, an elder pours water on the rocks and steam is produced. While inside the lodge, participants experience the sheer blackness of the enclosed dome and the intense heat from the rocks. Songs, chanting, stories, confessions, decision-making, sacred pipe smoking, and prayer all happen in the heated lodge. Sacred symbolism within the structure itself is important as seen through the orientation of the door, often eastward to honor the rising sun, the circular construction, and the sacred, central placement of the heated rocks.* The lodge itself is often described or understood by some traditions to be like a womb, which both grows within it the seed of new life and provides important teachings to the people. Thus, entering and leaving the lodge are seen as sacred events that involve important rituals. Crawling through the small door upon exiting the ceremony is often interpreted as a birthing process where one is refreshed and begins life anew.

One general story about the origin of the lodge is that the Creator gave it to the people as a way to directly pray or communicate with the Creator. Most important, the lodge is seen and used as a means to which an individual may directly connect with the Great Spirit.¹⁰ This connection to spirit or dialogue with the Creator is said to help the individual transcend his or her limitations. A state of transcendence remains afterward to some extent and is said to improve the capacity of those who take part in it to help others, to be loving, and to be kind and compassionate.⁴

Another important means of fostering connection with the Creator is the thirst (sun) dance. The sun dance is very important among plains Aboriginal traditions because it allows for each smaller tribe or community to come together with other tribes within a common meeting ground.¹⁶ This ritual is usually held once a year in the summer months. Similar to many other

Aboriginal ceremonies, the sun dance is a means of connection to the Great Spirit and a way for the dancer to pray and ask for blessings for the community.⁷ The ceremony usually lasts for 4 days, during which time a pledged dancer will fast, dance, and pray intensively. Each day, this ceremony usually begins and ends with a spirit lodge, the morning lodge to help prepare the dancers for the intense physical and spiritual journey they will embark upon and the night lodge to cleanse them.

An interesting and most distinctive characteristic of the sun dance lies in the fact that the dancers pierce themselves with skewers then dance until the skewer is ripped through their flesh. Although this practice has largely declined since it was made illegal in 1895 by the Canadian government,⁷ it has been greatly revived since the late 1970s in both Canada and the United States.

To most Aboriginal people, the sun dance is seen as a symbol of ultimate surrender of the human will to the Creator. Therefore, the sun dance is very much seen as a sacrificial ceremony since it involves the sacrifice of one's self and one's own flesh and blood to the Great Spirit.¹⁶ This ceremonial dance is always done with the healing or well-being of others in mind, for Aboriginals believe that through one person's suffering others may be saved.

In the religious autobiography of *Lame Deer*, a Lakota Sioux, an interesting comparison is drawn between the sun dancers and Jesus.¹³ Jesus endured suffering so many could be free from it. The sun dancers, like Jesus, also endure suffering for the good of the people. However, this sacrificial symbolism can be seen across many cultures other than Christianity, such as Huitzilopochtli in Aztec mythology or Odin in Norse mythology.⁵ Perhaps this need for sacrifice is simply a fundamental collective need of the human psyche found across many cultures.

Furthermore, *Lame Deer* says the Sioux people have a need to feel this sacrificial experience on a personal level. It seems that there is a belief that in one's personal sacrificial experience real insight can occur. Thus, to the Sioux people, sacrifice is an important part in understanding the inner workings of the self and God. Aboriginals believe humankind is deeply connected, and that, because of this fact, the suffering endured by the dancers can help others find comfort when they endure hardships in their own lives.^{13,16} In this regard, the sun dance as a ceremony

*In the spirit lodge, the significance of facing east, or honoring the rising sun, is associated with some traditions (especially with those of the plains people of south-central Canada and the central United States) to be the direction of birth, renewal, or a fresh beginning. The sun or the east is also considered to be the direction of the physical body and newness, so this direction is associated with the rebirth metaphor upon leaving the lodge. Having the door of the spirit lodge facing this direction means that one would honor the characteristics of the east upon leaving. The circular construction of the spirit lodge is said to represent the medicine wheel or interconnectedness of life. The heated rocks are also placed in accordance with the Great Circle or medicine wheel. In the center of the lodge, there is a small pit dug out of the ground. The first rock is added to the center of this small pit. Then, starting with the east and moving clockwise, 1 rock is placed in each direction. When 5 rocks are down, each subsequent rock is placed in a clockwise fashion, 1 after the other, until the desired amount for that particular round, is reached (sometimes 8 or 11). In short, the sacred central placement of the rocks honors the 4 directions of the medicine wheel or Great Circle.

is not only important for the individual in terms of fostering one's own connection with the Creator, but the sun dance is also important for all those present, creating an enchanted immediate experience of the Great Spirit.

The final ceremonial aspect of Aboriginal spirituality examined here is that of the dance drums and the powwow. These traditions are said to have developed at the same time as the development of the large drum, presumably during the early 19th century, often used in the center of these ceremonies and played by 4 to 8 persons. The most common drum used among the plains people of south-central Canada is that of an animal skin stretched over a wooden hoop and played with others dancing around in a circle. This development spread throughout the plains and flourished between the 1860s and 1880s. By the end of the 19th century, however, Aboriginal dancing had been banned as part of cultural assimilation in both Canada and the United States. But this ban was short lived. By the end of the 20th century, powwows came to be held in large centers around Canada and the United States; in the United States this mainly occurred on July 4 as a secular celebration.¹⁶ With the resurgence of Aboriginal spirituality in the later half of the 20th century, powwows were no longer seen as strictly secular events and started to gain some of their original spiritual aura.

The word *powwow* is believed by modern scholars to be derived from the Algonquin word *pauau*, meaning the gathering of persons with spiritual power for a healing ceremony.¹⁶ Today, the tradition and importance of dancing holds much of the same potency to Aboriginal peoples as a way of prayer as it did many years ago. First, from the Aboriginal perspective, dancing is a form of prayer. It is a way to open a doorway to a connection with the universe. It is further explained that the dance is a way to put to rest the distractions and worries of everyday life so that they may become one with all. Aboriginal people do not just pray with their voices but with their bodies as well.¹⁶ One Aboriginal dancer explains that, "American Indian dance is not a form of mindless amusement; it is a form of praise, worship, and a way to experience interconnectedness through motion."^{16(p132)}

Thus, the powwow and sacred drums, sun dance, and sweat lodge, are all important means by which the aboriginal people practice their spirituality by communicating and reflecting the attributes of the Great Spirit. Consequently, Aboriginal ceremonies and rituals are important means through which Aboriginal people connect with each other, themselves, and the Creator. The practice of spirituality through these ceremonies and others can act as important psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual healing methods for both the individual and the group.

SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH: ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

Aboriginal spirituality has been shown to have positive benefits on health, wellness, and other mental health-related areas. Many Aboriginal people believe that the connection to spirit or dialogue with the Creator that is facilitated through the spiritual ceremonies can help individuals transcend their limitations. As mentioned earlier, after the ceremonies, some degree

of transcendence continues to further improve participants' capacity to help others, show love, and be kind.⁴

This ability to help individuals overcome their limitations also applies to other health- and healing-related areas of people's lives. As we will see from looking through the Aboriginal worldview of interconnectedness, improving one's capacity to help others and being kind and compassionate are elements directly correlated to a healthy, balanced life. In effect, helping individuals increase their capacity to love, as mediated through spiritual ceremony, could be understood as actually decreasing the onset and advancement of various mental health-related issues.

A considerable body of literature has emerged in recent years that has attempted to highlight the important effects of spirituality and spiritually-based rituals and ceremonies on health and wellness. One such research program has explored Aboriginal spirituality and symbolic healing in Canadian prisons. Symbolic healing as method, explained by Thomas J. Csordas, PhD, a psychological anthropologist and researcher, "contributes as recognition that healing is contingent upon a meaningful and convincing discourse that brings about transformations of the phenomenological conditions under which the patient exists and experiences suffering or distress."¹⁷ Basically, symbolic healing generalizes specific social and cultural experiences that are embedded in a specific cultural myth—with the myth defined as an individual's worldview or as Csordas put it, "model of experiential reality."¹⁷ James B. Waldram, PhD, medical anthropologist and researcher from the University of Saskatchewan, further describes symbolic healing as a process that involves the healer convincing the patient that his problems can be defined in terms of this myth and treated through the manipulation of transitional symbols, particularized to the individual, and are derived from this myth.⁶ This view ultimately suggests that healing can and has occurred in the absence of direct manipulation of the physical makeup of an individual. Healing can occur through the association and manipulation of symbols in an abstract manner. Thus, from this perspective, changing a patient's worldview or perspective of reality can have physical ramifications, much like a placebo effect, whereby a measurable, observable, or felt improvement in health is not directly attributable to a medication or treatment that has been administered.

The notion and importance of myth can also be seen within Dr Mehl-Madrona's book *Narrative Medicine* as discussed in terms of the "Master Narrative," which suggests over-arching belief systems found within cultures that demonstrate lasting effect on psychiatric treatment success.⁴ In addition, according to Geertz,¹⁵ spirituality and religion are defined as a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations. Thus, the concepts of symbolism and myth mentioned in the previous example of symbolic healing are important aspects of spiritually-based healing. Aboriginal spirituality as practiced through ceremonies can act as powerful symbols that help form and reshape moods and motivations, modifying one's perspective on disease and illness while simultaneously assisting to realign an individual to a more balanced, healthy lifestyle.

As seen within Dr Waldram's research with sex offenders, the spirit lodge ceremony is an important means of spiritual education among these criminal offenders.⁶ It provides the most direct link between the individual and the Creator, helping people transcend limitations by regaining power through strengthening relationships with others and with the Great Spirit. The spirit lodge ceremony in the context of Canadian prisons has also been described as having a placebo effect and instilling altered states of consciousness, both of which are components of symbolic healing.⁷ Commenting on the effects of the sweat ceremony, one traditional northern Ojibwa inmate stated, "It takes my anger away. Sometimes I feel real happy." Another said, "It brings up my spirit, especially when I come out of a sweat, eh. When you come out of that sweat, there's nothing that can disturb you today."⁶ Waldram's interviews with Aboriginal inmates demonstrate how the spiritual ceremony creates persisting transcendence, which further improves their capacity to help others and show compassion. From the Aboriginal perspective, these changes would be understood to actually decrease the onset and advancement of pain and suffering, while simultaneously increasing dimensions of well-being.⁴

In a study seeking to demonstrate the positive effects of Aboriginal spirituality on health and well-being, Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff, PhD, and Kerrie Moore, MSW,¹⁰ researchers at the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work, directly examined the impact of the spirit lodge ceremony on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains of individuals. Similarly to Waldram,^{6,7} Schiff and Moore reported that the sweat lodge ceremony can have a positive impact on participants' dimensions of emotionality and spirituality.¹⁰ These researchers employed a quantitative, experimental design measuring the effects of the sweat ceremony using 2 measurement scales given to participants before and after the ceremony. For the physical and mental domain, they used the SF-36, a multipurpose health survey developed by Ware and colleagues in 1998 to measure physical and mental health. Schiff and Moore argued that no well-validated instruments culturally sensitive to indigenous spirituality were currently available. Thus for emotional and spiritual domains, the Heroic Myth Index (HMI), inspired by Jungian theory and developed by Pearson in 1991, was selected to be the most relevant scale available to measure aspects of spirituality and emotional well-being within the Aboriginal context.

The HMI consists of 72 items that are constructed into 12 Likert-type scales, representing personal archetypes or personality types. The researchers controlled for test-retest reliability and administered extra experimentation of the scales to ensure reliability.¹⁰ A total of 39 participants completed pre- and post-ceremony instruments. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the pre- and post test sweat scores on the SF-36 showed no significant improvement in the mental or physical domains measured before as compared to after the sweat ceremony. The SF-36 is not expected to demonstrate results quickly. This lack of significance may be attributed to the choice of measuring device. Further testing would be required over longer time periods to determine more accurate measure of physical and mental health.

The HMI showed significant results between pre- and post-ceremony responses on 3 dimensions: "Innocent," "Warrior," and "Sage." The "Innocent" scale is thought to reflect the theme that people love and look after each other. The "Warrior" scale is said to represent an aspect of spirituality that encompasses the importance of taking care of the self and others. The "Sage" scale is said to reflect the worldview that all things are connected, that there is balance, and that life has many teachings about universality. All 3 of these scales demonstrated significant increases after the participants took part in the sweat lodge ceremony.¹⁰ The researchers interpreted these results to support the idea that spiritual ceremonies can have a positive effect on dimensions of spirituality and emotional well-being.

A study by Linda M. Hunter, RN, MScN, of the Conference Board of Canada, and colleagues³ attempted to demonstrate how Aboriginal traditions addressed health issues and to explore the link between such traditions and holism in nursing practice. The researchers conducted 8 in-depth, face-to-face interviews, 4 months of participant observation, and 4 months of field notes. During the interviews and field notes, the 3 major thematic categories that emerged were (1) following a cultural path, (2) gaining balance, and (3) sharing in the circle of life. The aspects that specifically highlight the importance of a spiritual dimension in health and well-being involved gaining balance. The authors noted that the spiritual aspect of gaining balance is vital to a holistic approach to healing. Spirituality from this perspective is seen to be a part of all things—a way of living one's life—that is available to all. One participant from their study noted,

I guess it's not a matter of how does it [spirituality] fit in, because it's everything. You don't have to go to church or a sweat lodge to get your spirituality; your spirituality is in here [points to body]; it's how you feel, share, and do things in a good way. It's part of everything we do and a way of living. . .^{3(p17)}

By understanding this participant's perspective, it is easy to appreciate that spirituality is an important dimension of health, as it is a crucial dimension for one's way of living life, or, in the participant's words, "everything." Furthermore, the researchers found that the beneficial nature of helping others created feelings of security, stability, and control in the face of an unstable world.³

These ideas of control and stability are important dimensions of spirituality, as they help the participant have the strength to overcome limitations, thus creating more positive mental constructs related to compassion and love, which in turn relate to health and well-being. The researchers from this study concluded from their qualitative analysis that, from the Aboriginal perspective, becoming a healthy person meant regaining balance. The balance that is described is seen as a dialogistic harmony between the 4 human domains: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. As seen from this study, Aboriginal perspectives of health and healing are broader than those of biomedicine encompassing emotional and spiritual well-being, as well as the mental and the physical. Thus, health practitioners working with Aboriginal patients should be aware of these differences and be prepared to

address them in their healing practice.

Paul Spicer, PhD, and colleagues at the American Indian and Alaska Native Program, at the University of Colorado, Denver,⁹ examined the role that spirituality and religion play in changing drinking behaviors among Aboriginals previously identified as having alcohol abuse from 2 tribal reservation-dwelling populations within the United States. The National Comorbidity Survey (NCS) and American Indian Service Utilization Risk and Protective Factors Project (AI-SUPERPPF) were the 2 measures used in the study. The researchers administered these self-report questionnaires to 3084 individuals, gathering information about alcohol-related behaviors including reasons for drinking, frequency, and abstinence. Religious and spiritual practices and experiences (eg, prayer, participation in ceremonies, attendance at church) distinguished individuals who were abstinent in the previous month from those who continued to drink in some fashion.⁹ Furthermore, spirituality and religion were mentioned as an explicit component in the abstinence of 17 of 35 of the long-term abstainers.⁹ These researchers concluded that religion and/or spirituality do occupy a central role as Aboriginal communities continue to fight many troubling health concerns.

In a collaborative research project with the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment to the Navajo Nation, public health researcher J. Phillip Gossage and colleagues⁸ at the University of New Mexico, examined the effectiveness of the sweat lodge ceremony for jail-based treatment, concluding that spirituality as measured by attendance at a sweat lodge ceremony was shown to decrease drinking levels among Aboriginal inmates. Taken together, these studies adequately demonstrate the importance of spirituality on alcohol remission and consumption and how this dimension is positively related to Aboriginals' health and well-being.

As future research in this area of Aboriginal health continues to develop, the importance of spirituality will no doubt only become more relevant. Moreover, spirituality may be an important dimension of health and well-being for not only Aboriginal peoples but for all populations.

SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH: WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Another dimension to review is the relationship between general spirituality and the North American healthcare system. Healing in early-Western societal history was often a combination between spiritual and scientific methods working in harmony. In the early stages of healthcare, religious and spiritual aspects were synthesized with the material aspects into a single approach.¹⁸ Aided by the Flexner Report of 1910, secular ideas of rationalism, empiricism, and positivistic science began to dominate human services.[†] Spirituality was marginalized or even excluded as the North American medical model evolved into a secular entity.

Daniel Sulmasy, OFM, MD, PhD,¹⁸ director of the Bioethics Institute of New York Medical College, Valhalla, New York, argues that the North American healthcare system treats people as objects, with science and economics as its foundational approach. This objectified approach seems unwarranted as ill-

nesses are often coupled with the onset of spiritual insights—the experience of illness generally raises questions about life after death, meaning, and relationships with a higher power or transcendent force. Moreover, Herbert Benson, MD, director emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital,¹⁹ notes that 80% of his patients choose prayers to help themselves relax. Yet when David B. Larson, MD,²⁰ epidemiologist and psychiatrist, reviewed 2348 empirical studies published in 4 major psychiatry journals, he found that only 2.5% contained aspects of religion or spirituality. The current North American medical model does not adequately satisfy the spiritual needs or questions of patients, even though illness is shown to relate to spirituality on many levels.^{18,21-23}

The separation of these 2 viewpoints has recently spawned research into the effects of reincorporating spirituality into the Western medical model.^{21,22,24,25} Modern research on spirituality has observed the many positive effects it has on patients' well-being and healing effectiveness.²⁶ Arndt Büsing, MD, chair of Medical Theory and Complementary Medicine, University of Witten/Herdecke in Germany and colleagues analyzed the attitudes of patients with life-threatening or -altering illnesses.²⁶ They found that when patients embraced spiritual themes, they achieved an increased ability to cope and recover from their illnesses. Similarly, Nalini Tarakeshwar, at Yale University, and colleagues²⁷ found that the use of positive spiritual coping mechanisms, such as belief in the benevolent purpose of existence, were associated with a better overall quality of life for cancer patients. Structured interviews and regression analysis revealed positive correlations between measures of self-efficacy and multidimensional measures of religion and spirituality. Comparable findings coincide with these conclusions that quality of life improved in patients suffering from spinal cord injuries with the application of spiritual coping methods.²⁸

It is evident from the reviewed articles that spirituality affects more than just everyday living. Spirituality appears to be significantly connected to positive healing and coping experiences in patients suffering from illness. Significant evidence supports the importance of attending to the spiritual needs of the patient. Nursing researcher Corinne M. Lemmer²⁵ protests that nurses must be able to recognize the clients' spiritual needs and be able to address them as necessary in order to provide optimal care. Despite this, the North American medical model does not satisfy the spiritual needs of patients, even though research suggests that human spiritual domains should be incorporated into a more holistic healing model.

For example, T. Anne Richards, MA, at the Public Health Institute, Oakland, St. Mary's College of California, Moraga, California, and colleagues report that the implementation of a spirituality-based program positively influenced nurses' working

† The Flexner Report is the most important event in the history of American and Canadian medical education. It was a commentary on the condition of medical education in the early 1900s and gave rise to modern medical education. The report is named for Abraham Flexner (1866-1959), who prepared it. Flexner A. *Medical Education in the United States and Canada: A Report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*. Boston, MA: The Merrymount Press; 1910.

experience. The program incorporated such dimensions as putting others first, slowing down, and regular breathing and meditation exercises. One of the nurses from this qualitative study explained her experience of using the spiritual program at work: "I have become more focused and less distracted. . . .It's allowed me to focus on my patients and kind of close out what's going on in the periphery."²²

The previously reviewed studies suggest the need to incorporate spiritual practices into secular healing models. From time immemorial, Aboriginal models of health and healing have considered these spiritual dimensions to be important in the practice of healthcare and healing. These dimensions of spirituality may become more important and relevant in all healing models as research into Aboriginal systems of healing increases.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in this review, Aboriginal perspectives of health and healing not only involve the mind and body, as in biomedicine, but also include the emotional and spiritual aspects of the patient. Therefore, health practitioners should be aware of and include spiritual dimensions while working with Aboriginal patients, not only to respect the patients' worldview but also for the demonstrated positive effects on healing.

The latter part of the article explains a generalized need to include spiritual dimensions while working with *all* patients.

Future research might investigate common justifications for not including spiritual domains into the healing process in the Western world and specifically address them. This paper provides the necessary information to allow health practitioners to begin considering other models of healing that might have benefit when combined with their current understandings.

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