



FROM BENZOS TO BERRIES

Treatment offered at an Aboriginal youth solvent abuse treatment centre relays the importance of culture

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Colleen Anne Dell, University of Saskatchewan, Sociology Department & School of Public Health

Maureen Seguin, University of Saskatchewan, Sociology Department

Carol Hopkins, Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre

Raymond Tempier, University of Saskatchewan, Department of Psychiatry

Lewis Mehl-Madrona, University of Saskatchewan, Department of Psychiatry

Debra Dell, Youth Solvent Addiction Committee

Randy Duncan, University of Saskatchewan, Department of Psychiatry

Karen Mosier, University of Saskatchewan, Department of Psychiatry

STORYTELLING & RESEARCH

Storytelling is at the heart of being human. Through stories we share our feelings, heal wounds, deepen understanding, strengthen community, and discover hope. Loretta Outwater Cox, an Alaska Native woman and author of *The Storyteller's Club: The Picture-Writing Women of the Arctic* (2005), relates that 'Stories blow through you like the wind and roll over you like the sea. I'm finding that when you're telling a story in the oral traditions, like my mother, they paint a picture' (*Anchorage Daily News*, November 8, 2005). Community Health Aides and Community Health Practitioners (CHA/Ps), the primary providers of healthcare in rural Alaska, share the importance of story as a culturally respectful way to create meaning and broaden understanding.

Melany Cueva, Regina Kuhnley Anne Lanier & Mark Dignan (2003).
"Story: The heartbeat of learning cancer education for Alaska Aative community health care providers".



The Great Spirit thought the First Thought

“The Universe is made up of stories not
atoms.”

Muriel Rukeyser

STORYTELLING & CULTURE

“...this is why I tell these stories over and over again. And there are others. I tell them to myself, to friends, sometimes to strangers. Because they make me laugh. Because they are a particular kind of story. Saving stories, if you will. Stories help keep me alive. But help yourself to one if you like. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now”

(Thomas King (2003). The truth about stories: A Native narrative. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Inc.)



VOLATILE SOLVENT ABUSE

- The deliberate inhalation of fumes or vapours given off from a substance for its intoxicating and mind-altering effect.
- 10 VSA specific treatment centres have been built, starting in 1996 (under NNADAP).
- The Youth Solvent Addiction Committee (YSAC) was formed to help develop and support a culture-informed approach to treatment.



YSAC TREATMENT FACILITIES

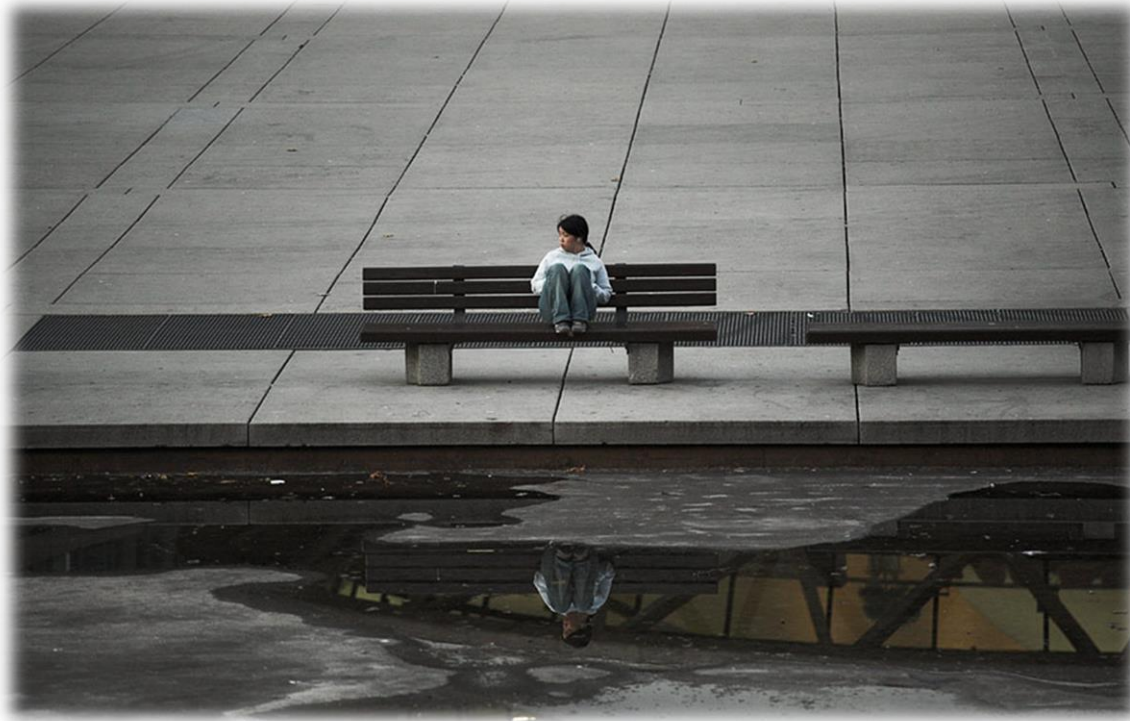
- CULTURE-BASED MODEL OF RESILIENCY “...a balance between the ability to cope with stress and adversity [i.e., inner spirit] and the availability of community support [i.e., relations with the collective community]” (5).

(C. Dell, C. Hopkins & D. Dell (2005). “Resiliency and Holistic Inhalant Abuse Treatment”. Journal of Aboriginal Health. 1 (2), pp. 4-12.)



PSYCHIATRY'S RESPONSE TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLES' MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE


- Individualistic understanding





CORY'S STORY

Cory is typical of many of the youth admitted to Nimkee's Healing Centre. She is 14 years old and has been abusing solvents for nearly three years as a way of coping with pain and trauma in her life. Within 72 hours of arriving at Nimkee, like all youth, Cory was sent for a mandatory physical and psychological assessment within the Western medical system. This is the first time Cory has traveled away from her land, territory, language and people; naturally she is very quiet and shy. She is also experiencing the physical manifestations of detoxifying from the solvents she used prior to her admittance. As often happens with the youth at Nimkee, Cory's assessment identifies her as 'high risk' and 'depressed' and consequently she receives a prescription. This was a common occurrence for youth at Nimkee 5 years ago. Today, with mutual cooperation between Nimkee and the Western health services system, including sharing Aboriginal and Western worldviews with one another, the general practitioner and the psychiatrist do their assessments at the treatment centre. They try to address 'assessment issues' through Nimkee's cultural ways (e.g., Elder) before medication is prescribed.



METHOD & RESULTS

- Method – Canadian Journal of Psychiatry focus
- Results
 - Connection to community
 - Connection to self
 - Connection to political context



1. CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

A number of the communities from which the youth who attend the Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre are characterized by pain and trauma from the impacts of colonization. Most of these communities have little knowledge of their traditional cultural practices and beliefs. From one community in particular, a young boy by the name of Joseph attended Nimkee and learned of his cultural heritage. He learned and adopted spiritual beliefs. This spiritual connection facilitated a connection to his true identity. A part of Nimkee's programming is involvement of the immediate family (i.e., parents or guardians) in one week of the youths' residential treatment process. This is done in a sensitive manner such that the parents are not insulted or reject outright the traditional teachings their children are learning. Joseph's family attended the centre and also learned about their cultural heritage, which made it possible for them to practice their beliefs as a family when they returned to their home community. It followed in this case, and frequently with others, that once Joseph returned home, other children from the family, and extended family, requested to attend the centre. The youth are very connected through their place in the community, and this transfers to the healing of not only the youth who attended treatment but their families and communities as well.



2. CONNECTION TO SELF



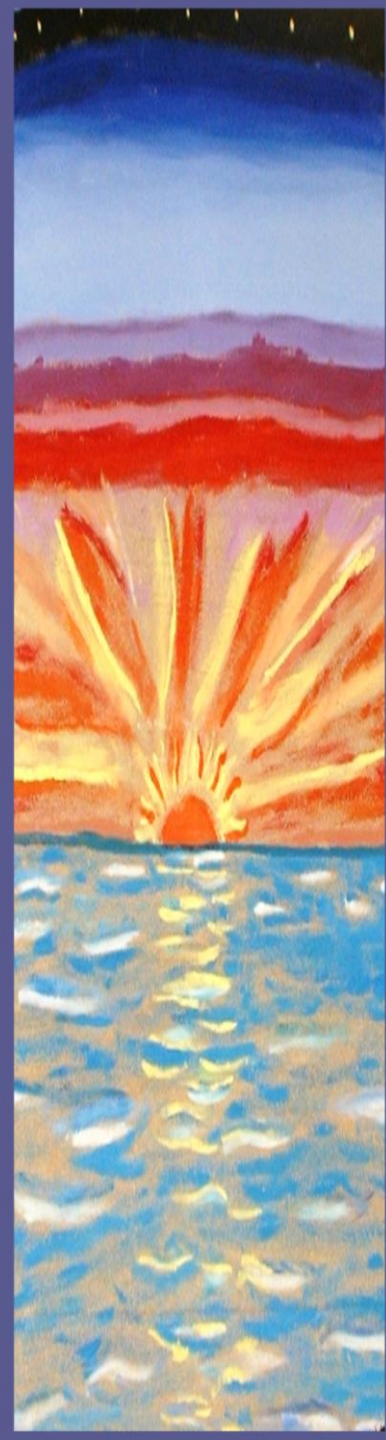
A traditional teaching offered to the youth at Nimkee is that their identity, values and language are innate within their inner spirit, but may be dormant. They are taught that they have a genetic memory. The cultural environment at Nimkee helps to nurture the youths' inner-spirit. For example, the youth are able to quickly participate in a sweat lodge once at Nimkee because their spirit is awakened and this is what motivates the youth to do what they do. This is what happened for Jamie. He was afraid of the dark, of taking off his shirt in front of others, and of sitting close to others. Because the sweat lodge is a cultural activity, the youth are motivated by their inner spirit to participate. Jamie did. The spiritual part of the youths' being needs to be in balance with the emotional, mental and physical aspects of their selves, and so they are internally motivated to take part in cultural activities to achieve this. An individual's spirit causes their heart to beat, their blood to flow, and the movement of energy. Youth like Jamie become quickly attuned to this once in the Healing Centre environment.

3. CONNECTION TO POLITICAL CONTEXT

The impacts of residential schooling are evident in the generation of today's Aboriginal youth who are having strained relationship issues with their parents and extended caregivers. When Janice completed the Nimkee program, she like many of the other youth in the program, said one of the greatest things to come from it was her ability to communicate better with her parents, and to trust that she will be heard.

While in the program Janice spoke on a regular basis with her parents by telephone and her family was brought to the treatment centre for a week to participate alongside her in her treatment journey. Her family learned how important it was that they communicate effectively with Janice and encourage and speak positively with her and their other kids. Her parents also learned about the stages of youth development and cultural understandings of parenting.

Janice also relayed, again as the majority of other youth do, that the most meaningful part of her time at Nimkee was participating in cultural programming. This includes, traditionally, learning about parenting. Healthy parenting skills have been critically impacted due to the history of colonization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (e.g., residential schooling).



MOVING THE TWO WORLDVIEWS CLOSER TOGETHER

- **Western Approach to Health Promotion:**

Health is understood to be a state of unity or balance across the physical, mental, social, and spiritual components of an individual's well-being, rather than merely the presence or absence of disease

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When John started at Nimkee he learned that he had to take part in a spiritual assessment (for lack of a better word) with an Elder. The Elder does a type of 'reading' through which he is able to see negative energy blocks in a person. The Elder can tell from this whether the youth needs certain medicines, for example, or a feast. A lot of youth like to participate in the assessment because it is a time when they can have their name, clan and colors identified to them. When John arrived at Nimkee it was quickly evident that he used his size to intimidate, control and bully others, including Elders. In John's assessment, the Elder said he saw a trauma near John's neck, and John responded that he did not ever try to commit suicide. The Elder continued to see this energy at John's neck, and John eventually relayed that his father tried to stab him in the neck when he was a young boy. The Elder told John that this block needed to be moved because John could not express himself with his voice, and as a consequence, he was compensating by being physical.



THANK YOU

Contact Info:

Carol Hopkins,
Executive Director,
National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation
chopkins@nnapf.org

