



# INDIGENOUS WELLNESS FRAMEWORK

REFERENCE GUIDE



## Acknowledgments

The Indigenous Wellness Framework Reference Guide represents a redesign of the Honouring Our Strengths: Culture as Intervention (HOS:CasI) in Addictions Treatment Reference Guide, originally published in 2014.

The HOS: CasI research project followed an Indigenous Knowledge based set of protocols, recognizing the fundamental differences between a Western view of intellectual property and Indigenous philosophies around knowledge. Thunderbird would like to thank all of the Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, Holders and Carriers, and members of the research team for their contributions:

Honouring Our Strengths: Culture as Intervention Research Team (Nominated Principal Investigator: Colleen Dell (University of Saskatchewan); Co-PI: Peter Menzies (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health/CAMH), Carol Hopkins (National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation); Jonathan Thompson (Assembly of First Nations); Co-Applicants: Sharon Acoose (First Nations University of Canada), Peter Butt (University of Saskatchewan), Elder Jim Dumont (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre), Marwa Farag (University of Saskatchewan), Joseph P. Gone (University of Michigan at Ann Arbor), Christopher Mushquash (Lakehead University), Rod McCormick (University of British Columbia), David Mykota (University of Saskatchewan), Nancy Poole (BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health), Bev Shea (University of Ottawa), Virgil Tobias (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre); Knowledge Users: Kasi McMicking (Health Canada), Mike Martin (National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation), Brian Rush (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), Darcy Stoneedge (Health Canada); Collaborators (Treatment Centres): Willie Alphonse (Nengayni Wellness Centre), Ed Azure (Nelson House Medicine Lodge), Christina Brazzoni (Carrier Sekani Family Services), Mary Deleary (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre), Patrick Dumont (Wanaki Centre), Cindy Ginnish (Rising Sun), Hilary Harper (Ekweskeet Healing Lodge), Cindy Ginnish (Rising Sun), Yvonne Rigsby-Jones (Tsow-Tun Le Lum), Mary Deleary (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre), Patrick Dumont (Wanaki Centre), Ernest Sauve (White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre), Zelda Quewezance (Saulteaux Healing and Wellness Centre); Collaborators (Leadership): Chief Austin Bear (National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation), Debra Dell (Youth Solvent Addiction Committee), Janice Nicotine (National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation), Rita Notarandrea (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse), Elder Campbell Papequash (Saskatchewan Team for Research and Evaluation of Addictions Treatment and Mental Health Services Advisor); Contractors (methodology): Elder Jim Dumont (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre), Randy Duncan (University of Saskatchewan), Carina Fiedeldej-Van Dijk (ePsy Consultancy), Laura Hall (University of Saskatchewan); Margo Rowan (University of Saskatchewan); Coordination: Michelle Kushniruk (University of Saskatchewan (March, 2012–February, 2013); Management: Barbara Fornssler (University of Saskatchewan).

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Main office: 22361 Austin Line, Bothwell, ON P0P 1C0

Phone: 1-866-763-4714

[www.thunderbirdpf.org](http://www.thunderbirdpf.org)  
[info@thunderbirdpf.org](mailto:info@thunderbirdpf.org)

[facebook.com/thunderbirdpf](https://facebook.com/thunderbirdpf)  
[twitter.com/thunderbirdpf](https://twitter.com/thunderbirdpf)

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is Canada's leading culturally centred voice on First Nations mental wellness, substance use and addictions. The organization supports an integrated and wholistic approach to healing and wellness serving First Nations and various levels of government, through research, training and education, policy and partnerships, and communications. Thunderbird strives to support culture-based outcomes of Hope, Belonging, Meaning and Purpose for First Nations individuals, families and communities. Thunderbird's mandate is to implement the Honouring Our Strengths: A Renewed Framework to Address Substance Use Issues Among First Nations People in Canada (HOS) and the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum (FNMWC) framework.

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is a division of the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation Inc.

# Introduction

The Indigenous Wellness Framework Reference Guide stems from *Honouring Our Strengths: Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment*, a three-year study funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Led by a partnership between the Assembly of First Nations, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation and the University of Saskatchewan, the study examined the strengths of First Nations culture in drug and alcohol treatment.

Our work was inspired by the leadership of Elder Jim Dumont and our treatment centre project partners to walk with First Nations people connected to NNADAP (National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program) and NYSAP (National Youth Solvent Addiction Program) treatment centres on the path to wellness guided by cultural interventions. We gratefully acknowledge the work of all of our team members, past and current, and all whose paths we have crossed and who have impacted our work.

It's important to remember that there is not *one* culture because culture is defined by the land, language and Nation of people. Addictions treatment centres, for example, offer culture through their programs based on the culture of the people where the treatment centres are located.

This Reference Guide shares key concepts gathered from the study: Definition of Culture, Definition of Wellness, Indigenous Wellness Framework, and Common Cultural Interventions. To find out more about the Honouring Our Strengths: Indigenous Culture as Intervention in Addiction Treatment project, please visit our website at: [www.tinyurl.com/CultureAsInterventionResearch](http://www.tinyurl.com/CultureAsInterventionResearch). On this site, you can access the Connecting With Culture: Growing Our Wellness Facilitator's Manual and Activity Guide, which draws on these key concepts to offer service providers a step-by-step process to assist their clients in thinking about Indigenous culture as a support for wellness.

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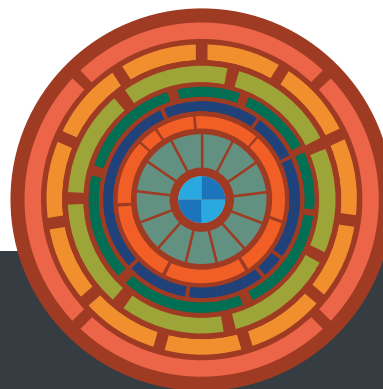
"Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body.

Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of Creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment."

- Elder Jim Dumont, Definition of Wellness

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(Dumont, J. & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014)



The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum framework is a joint initiative of the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, the Assembly of First Nations and Indigenous mental health leaders from various nongovernment organizations.

<https://thunderbirdpf.org/fnmwc-full>  
The FNMWC framework uses the Indigenous Wellness Framework.

# Definition of Wellness

Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body. Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of Creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment.

## Physical

The body is the most outer part of our being and is comprised of the most immediate behavioural aspects of our being. Physical wellbeing is that way of behaving and doing that actualizes the intention and desire of the Spirit in the world. This and the knowledge that the Spirit has something to do in the world generates a sense of Purpose, conscious of being part of something that is much greater than we are as individuals.

## Spiritual

The Spirit causes us to live, gives us vitality, mobility, purpose and the desire to achieve the highest quality of living in the world. Spiritual wellbeing is the quality of being alive in a qualitative way. Spirit is central to the primary vision of life and worldview and thereby facilitates Hope.

## Mental

The mind operates in both a rational and intuitive capacity. Mental wellbeing is the conscious and intelligent drive to know and activate one's being and becoming. Having a reason for being gives Meaning to life.

## Emotional

Within an Indigenous Worldview, being rooted in family, community and within Creation as extended family is the foundation of Belonging and relationships. At this heart level of one's being, emotional and relational wellbeing is nurtured by one's belonging within interdependent relationships with others and living in relation to Creation, including beings in Creation.

(Dumont, J. & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014)

# Our wellbeing comes from a balance of four kinds of wellness

**Spiritual:** Our spirit is at the centre of our being and wants us to live life to the fullest. We connect with our spirit by learning about our identity as an Indigenous person. There is a beautiful story about how the Creator gave us our identity. When we connect with our identity, we have hope for the future.

**Emotional:** Our hearts are filled with so many emotions, such as love, sadness and happiness. Family and community are important. So is our relationship with other living beings, such as animals and plants. We feel well when we have connections to people, land and Creation in our lives.

**Mental:** We use our mind to think and learn. The mind is also capable of intuitive thought. That means we need to listen to our spirit because our spirit nurtures our understanding about the meaning of life through intuition.

**Physical:** We use our bodies to move and live life. Our body is the house for our spirit. Living life with purpose and on purpose needs a healthy body.

The Indigenous Wellness Framework, pictured on the next page, explains that we can connect with our Indigenous culture in many ways. For example, we can spiritually connect with culture by offering prayer or participating in a ceremony. To emotionally connect with culture, find your clan family, or participate in a community event. Learning and thinking about Creation stories allows us to mentally connect with culture. We can physically connect with culture by touching the land and thanking Mother Earth for her gifts. Wellness is a balance of the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. This balance is enriched as we find

**Hope** for our future and the future of our families that is grounded in a sense of identity, unique values and a belief in spirit;

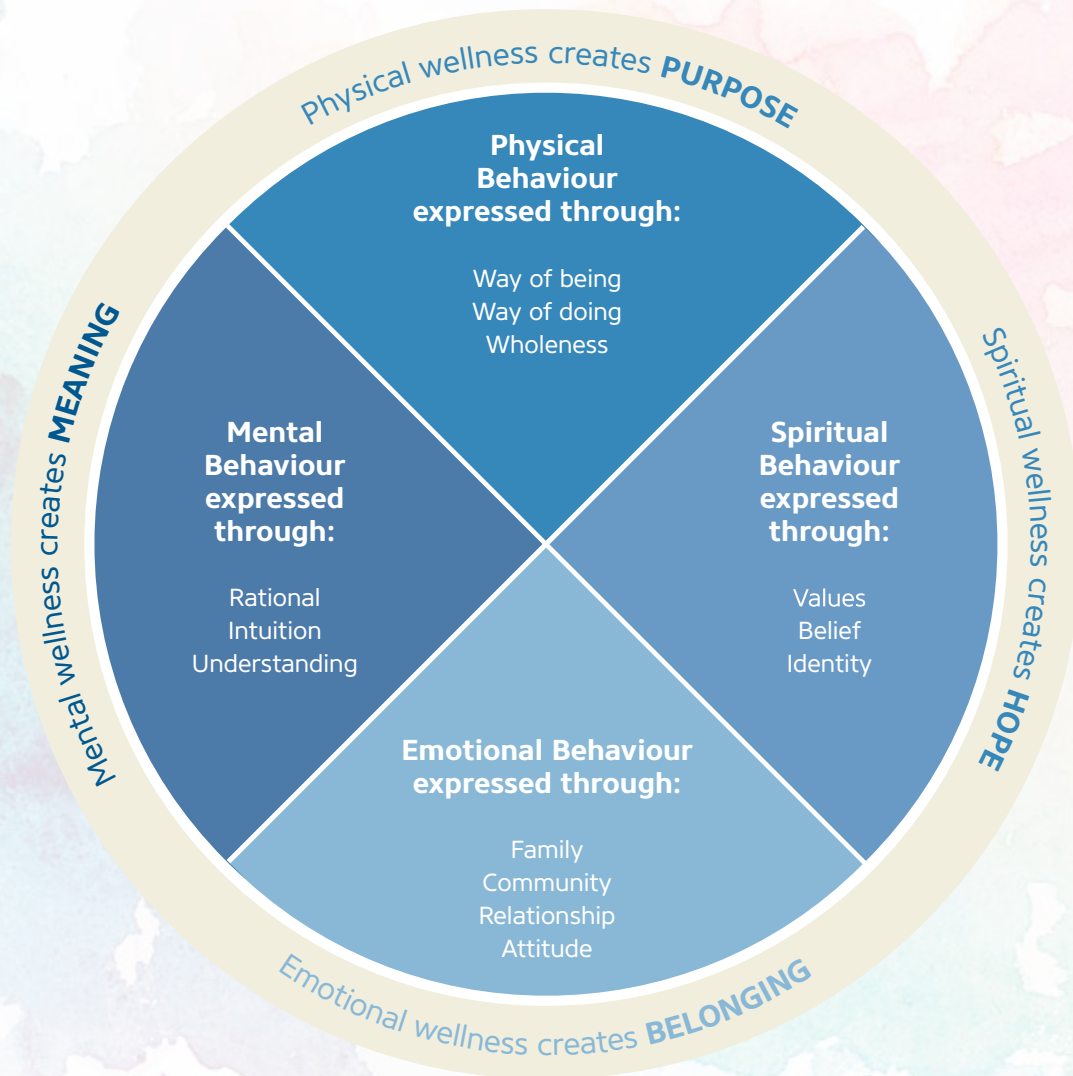
A sense of **belonging** and connectedness within our families, our community and our culture;

A sense of **meaning** and an understanding of how our lives and the lives of our families and communities are part of Creation and a rich history; and

**Purpose** in our daily lives, whether it is through education, employment, caregiving activities or cultural ways of being and doing.

There are no directions (north, south, east, west) attached to the Indigenous Wellness Framework. Although the sacred directions are always present, their meanings can differ from one part of the country to another.

# Indigenous Wellness Framework and Outcomes



Indigenous Wellness Framework-Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. (2015). *Indigenous Wellness Framework*. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (NNAPF Inc.). Retrieved from: <https://www.thunderbirdpf.org/IWF>

# Definition of Culture

Although there are many ways by which culture is expressed amongst the various First Nations, there are principal, foundational beliefs and concepts that are commonly held that support a unified definition of *Indigenous culture*. The primary concepts of the Indigenous worldview are outlined below.



## The Spirit

The most fundamental feature of the Indigenous worldview is the Spirit. Within this reality the spirit is housed within an inclusive concept of body-mind-heart-spirit. In our life within this earth realm these work together in such a way as to be inseparably functioning as a whole. The spirit is always central and always works in relationship to the other levels of being. Spirit is in all things and throughout all things. In the Indigenous worldview we live in a spirit-ual universe and within a spirit-ual relationship.

**Spirit: Spirit is in all things. Our spirit, heart, mind and body work together as a whole.**



## The Circle

The circle, more than any other symbol, is most expressive of the Indigenous view of the world. The circle is primary to all of life and life process, and, is also of primary significance in relating to and understanding life itself in all its dimensions and diversity. Human beings, amongst other beings, are in harmony with the life flow and grow to their greatest fulfillment when they too operate in a circular fashion. The circle, then, being primary, influences in every way how we see the world. The circle is synonymous with wholeness. Wholeness is the perception of the undivided entirety of things. To see in a circular manner is to envision the interconnectedness and the interdependence within life. The wholeness of life is the circle of life.

**Circle: The circle reminds us that everything is connected and part of a whole. Day is followed by night. Winter is followed by spring, then summer and fall, year after year.**

**If we look, we can see circular patterns in our own lives.**



## Harmony and Balance

Desire for harmony is the pre-disposition of all of the created world. Harmony is a central value of the Indigenous worldview, which pre-supposes that all of life consciously cares for one another, and while respecting the individual's autonomy, strives to achieve and maintain an interrelationship that assures quality of life for the collective whole. Balance is a fundamental principle within the way that harmony in interrelationship works. A worldview that presumes a disposition toward balance causes people to see the dynamic character of their real world as always striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry in all aspects of the total economy of its ecology. Simply put, the Indigenous person sees the world as always and naturally striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry – everything will ultimately try to achieve a balanced solution. The value of harmony works well within such a worldview because it assumes that people lean toward this same balance, and therefore, desire to be in harmony with one another.

**Harmony and Balance: The world is constantly changing, but it works towards harmony and balance. It's just like when people sing in harmony. The different individual voices blend together beautifully. We learn to balance when we ride a bicycle. We live in harmony and balance with our family, friends and neighbours when we respect each other's differences and care for one another.**

## All My Relations

All that is created consciously cares about the harmony and well-being of life; all things are regarded as persons and as relatives. Personhood not only applies to human persons. Plants, trees, animals, rocks, and visible and unseen forces of nature are also considered *persons*. Because they are persons, they have the range and qualities of personhood that are commonly attributed in Western ideology exclusively to human persons. Once this is accepted, it elevates the prevailing view of other-than-human beings to a higher quality of being and moves the nature of relationship to an all-inclusive ethical level. We are all related to one another as persons, and are responsible for maintaining good and harmonious relationships within the *extended family* of persons.

**All My Relations: We are connected to all things – people, plants, trees, animals and rocks. We are all related to one another and need to look after each other**



## Kindness/Caring/Respect

Another key to understanding the Indigenous worldview is the recognition of the fundamental precept: the universe cares. The Creator cares for his Creation. The Earth cares about her offspring and all of earth-life. The beings within Creation care about each other and about how they relate to one another within the interconnectedness and interdependence of the web of life. In that the Creation originated in this way, it sustains itself and thrives by means of an underlying orientation toward kindness. The key to harmony in a life that is conceived as *all my relations* is respect. Respect is understood as the honouring of the harmonious interconnectedness of all of life, which is a relationship that is reciprocal and interpersonal. The Indigenous person is predisposed to have in his or her interest both the greatest good for the individual as well as the collective good.

**Kindness/Caring/Respect: Kindness and caring are gifts from the Creator that our spirit carries into this world when we are born. Imagine that. We are naturally kind and caring. When we nurture this gift through our relationships, we learn about respect.**

## Earth Connection

We are all relatives because we have the same mother. In the Indigenous mind, the human person is of the Earth and from the Earth. Like all of the created world, the human being is part of the balance of nature and must find a special yet interconnected place within the created whole. A human being is related to all peoples of the Earth, along with all creatures, as we all call the Earth – *Mother*. The Earth herself is a living, breathing, conscious being, complete with heart/ feeling, soul/ spirit, and physical/organic life, as it is with all the relatives of Creation. Indigenous identity and relationship is defined by the land and the connection to the natural world.



**Earth Connection: We're all relatives because we're all part of Mother Earth.**

## Path of Life Continuum

The experience of living in this world is understood as a journey of the spirit moving progressively through stages that are interconnected and continuous. In the same way, lives are connected inter-generationally as *strings of lives* connecting us to our ancestors and to those yet unborn.

**Path of Life Continuum: Life is a journey. Babies learn to crawl and then to run. We grow up and figure out what our purpose is in life and how we can contribute to the life around us. We grow old. We're not alone on our journey because we're connected to our ancestors who came before us and to those who are not yet born.**



## Language

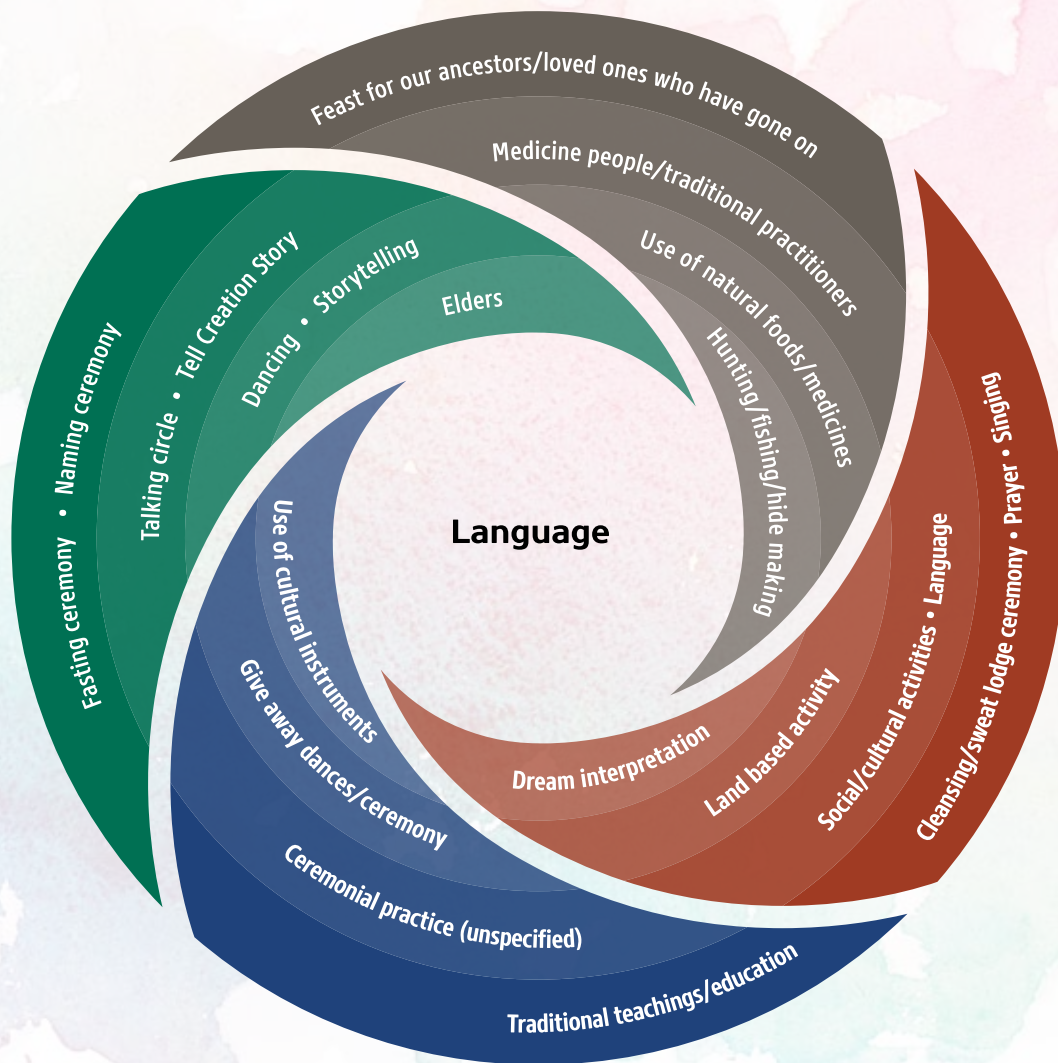
The original language is the most expressive communication of the spirit, emotions, thinking, behaviour and actions of the people. Language is the *voice* of the culture and therefore the true and most expressive means for the transmission of the original way of life and way of being in the world.

Culture is the expression, the life-ways, and the spiritual, psychological, social, material practice of this Indigenous worldview.

**Language: Our Indigenous languages are a sacred gift from the Creator. So, language is more than just a way of communicating.**



# Common Cultural Interventions



It is said that **what the Great Spirit gave** to his/her children to live in this physical world in a good way, **was given forever**. This means that the answer to addressing substance use issues exists within Indigenous culture.

(Dumont, J. & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014)

# The Strength of Cultural Interventions

Culture is the facilitator of spiritual expression. One's spirit desires to live life to the fullest. A connection to spirit is essential and primary to wellbeing. Cultural interventions are therefore essential to wellness. Cultural interventions attend to the whole person. Cultural interventions are facilitated by individuals who have sanctioning of their skills and knowledge in culture because they live the culture and have been recognized by both the cultural teachers/community and the spirit to lead or facilitate a certain cultural activity.

Foundational to cultural interventions is Indigenous language. Every cultural intervention has primary meaning in the language, for example, social and ceremonial songs are primarily in the Indigenous language. Similar to various western theoretical models that require specific knowledge and skill to effectively address substance use issues and mental health issues, cultural interventions require the facilitation of a Cultural Practitioner or Elder who has been sanctioned for the specific practice.

It is through the facilitation of a Cultural Practitioner or Elder that one will distinguish which cultural interventions can be and should be practiced on one's own. For example, prayer is a cultural intervention that is necessary for everyday wellness and it's important to know to whom one is praying and how. Prayer in an Indigenous language is always encouraged.

While some cultural interventions can be learned and facilitated by people other than a Cultural Practitioner or Elder it is important to remember that culture is not just a behaviour or action and sanctioning of practice is always required. First Nations cultural interventions should not be appropriated as a method to be facilitated or used by everyone.

Some cultural interventions, generally those that are not ceremonial, do not require this level of expertise. An example is the use of sacred medicines for smudge, although this differs across cultures. All cultural interventions require a level of cultural competency that is in compliance with the culture of the people on that land. Critically important is to know that there is not *one* culture because culture is defined by the land, language and nation of people. Treatment centres offer culture through their treatment programs based on the culture of the people where the treatment centre is located. Clients participating in the treatment programs may experience cultural interventions different from their own

culture. Cultural interventions then become an introduction to culture and are always facilitated with an encouragement to clients to *go home and find their own way*.

First Nations traditions, ceremonies and practices connect us to our culture. They help us to create wellness in our lives by balancing the spirit, heart, mind and body. Most cultural activities require a cultural teacher (sweat lodge ceremony, naming ceremony). We can do others such as social dancing, social singing or praying on our own.

All of the cultural interventions affect the whole person and people may experience them differently.

All cultural interventions are spirit centred, including social activities. Social songs are primarily sung in a First Nations language, and use of natural medicines for smudging requires that one knows the Indigenous name of the medicine from a First Nations language. Hunting and fishing requires prayer to the spirit of the animal or fish being sought, by using their Indigenous name. There are protocols for facilitating cultural interventions that must be sanctioned and learned in order to fully benefit from the spiritual relationship that is central to cultural interventions.

People will experience differences in the benefits of cultural interventions - some may experience the benefit more at a spiritual level while others may experience the benefits of a cultural intervention more at a physical level. While this may be the case, one thing for certain is that every cultural intervention attends to the whole person. There is no one cultural intervention that will only attend to one aspect of a person's being. All cultural interventions attend to the whole person.

Knowing how cultural interventions attend to the whole person or why people experience the benefits of a cultural intervention in one aspect more than another is knowledge that Cultural Practitioners, Elders, and traditional teachers have acquired through sanctioning by a community or by a sacred society. Every cultural intervention has a story of origin that is the foundation of knowledge.

## References:

Dumont, J. & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation. (2014). *Honouring our strengths: Culture as intervention in addictions treatment project*. National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation.

