

THE HEALING CIRCLE

A Research Working Paper
for the Mook'am Program Evaluation Project

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Introduction

Perhaps the most innovative part of the Mook'am Program is the combination of contemporary social work practice with traditional Native healing. A large part of traditional healing takes place in a healing circle.

The healing circle is a form of group discussion in which staff, clients, and a cultural teacher sit as co-equals, sharing painful issues in their lives, and learning cultural values and traditional healing practices. Spirituality is also an important part.

The details of this practice were acquired through an intensive interview with the program's cultural teacher. As well, the consultant himself was a participant in a healing circle during another project. The project Research Assistant has also participated in several healing circles, and shared her experiences and reflections. Later elaborations will incorporate the experiences of clients.

Process

The healing circle process is as follows: The cultural teacher arrives slightly before the circle begins. This allows her to meet with any participants individually for the purpose of dealing with private matters which are not comfortably shared within the circle. This also has the benefit of building trust.

In some cases the circle begins with a short period of exercise, for the purpose of releasing negative energy. This is usually followed by an opening prayer in the teacher's own language.

Next follows a period of cultural teaching and perhaps singing, again in the Ojibway language. The teacher may also drum on a hand drum. The stories and songs, which are explained, speak to themes of healing and growth. The earth and environment ("grandmother moon", water) as sources of healing, are frequent themes. Some language teaching may also occur.

Throughout the cultural teachings, core Native values are taught, including the values of kindness, caring and sharing, honesty, and strength.

The first session is deemed a "getting to know you" period. As well, the first three sessions or so, are generally thought of as important for trust-building. Throughout the healing circle, participants share in the "four gifts of life"...

.sweet grass through smudging

.water

.strawberries

.fire, through a lighted candle

The next stages involve all participants in a process of sharing their pain around a talking circle. A feather, rock or stick is passed from person to person. Upon receiving the feather, each person talks about her life experiences. They may speak on any topic:

"... what is bothering them, what concerns them...anything at all, whether it be their family, themselves their community, their citywhatever."

If they disclose something which causes them to break down and cry, then the Medicine Woman, cultural teacher, (or

an Assistant) will smudge that person until she regains her composure and she starts again.

This whole process continues, each person talking about whatever is on their mind. The feather goes around and around the circle. The particular cultural teacher or medicine woman is able to tell if the group needs more healing, and she may pass it around the second time. Usually the person who is really bothered by something will eventually disclose, no matter how shy, or how long it takes.

The leader seems to know which person in the room has a very serious problem which they want to talk about, but can't.

" So that much patience...the feather would be coming, would get around until each person has disclosed what it is that is bothering them. And through this passing around of the feather or the talking rock or whatever ... in fact I've seen a stone passed around, and it starts off grey and comes back red. The medicine woman said that it showed that the grandmothers were in the room and that it was their way of saying that they were in the room to help us. And you could feel the presence in the air, you could feel...and too, when you are passing the feather around, um, some people pass it on without saying anything."

One observation about Native people is a tendency towards emotional control. This has been attributed to a fundamental cultural code against emotional release and spontaneity. Possibly for this reason, emotional blocks are frequent during healing circles, but these are handled routinely through the practice of smudging.

Should an emotional block occur, the leader will approach the person and smudge her with sweet-grass. Other things may also happen. For example:

"the Medicine Woman.. because the person had blocked off, or almost reaches the point where they don't want to blurt out what it is that they've been carrying around .. she'll say "let it out, let it all out". Its more or less what we say to our children when they have a hurt. "It's O.K., you know..", that kind of thing. And um, with a bit of coaxing usually the person needs to be drawn out... gently. Then once she's on her way to blurting out what ... has been hurting her for so long, it's exhausting for that person, physically exhausting too."

No time pressures are imposed. Sometimes the guidelines leave open the choice of topics; sometimes a structure is given. For example, participants may be asked to talk about their abuse. In other circles, this will not happen.

Healing Circles and Teaching

Although this varies from circle to circle, and from leader to leader, healing circles are a source of specific teachings. All circles have a cultural learning component. The first Mook'am teacher spoke of teaching cultural practices, healing customs, and the meanings of events and materials in the healing circle. Many of these talks provided the tools for self-healing.

Other teachings give specific advise on how to respond to life events and transitions in a culturally appropriate way. To quote:

"I even got instructions what to do at the funeral...to put my medicine bag in the coffin with [husband], even though he was not an Indian, even though he did not know a thing about sweet grass. Just the very physical act of putting it away in there knowing that he's going to go into the spirit world. So my whole medicine bag and everything went in there with him."

Many life transitions create confusion and emotional upheaval. Building on one's connections to others, society has its ways of providing the support and ideas for handling these transitions, allowing one to get on with one's life in a reasonably orderly way. The following quotes illustrate how healing circles assist major life crises:

"There's instructions, too, that they give you. During the month that [husband] was sick in the hospital before he died I went twice to two healing circles to get the support I needed to be able to get through that month. I knew I could not find it anywhere else, that strength I needed anywhere else. I would not have gotten that emotional, spiritual, and total support, I guess that you get from the healing circle. In the course of the instructions I got in that healing circle, they told me how to help him die, to make it easier for him and also to make it easier for me to go on living. And it was so helpful..."

"the Medicine Woman told me to talk with [husband] and to ask forgiveness for him for all the times that I failed him, and wasn't there for him when he needed me. And also I forgave him for all the times he wasn't there for me, when I needed him. And forgive him for all the times he hurt the kids, and to name specific events that especially hurt me...and to name specific events that I thought were especially hurting to the kids. When I talked to [husband] I first talked to him about the kids and asked him to...First of all, I asked forgiveness for me, because it would be easier to talk to him, and tears were running down [husband's] face. Had I not gone to the circle I probably would not have gotten this instruction nor would I have had the courage nor the strength to tell him to do it. And it was exhausting for both of us, but also very healing for both of us to go through this whole thing. And I had my sweet grass and my sage on me, close to me when I was telling him all this in the hospital, and we both fell asleep. I had my head down on the bed; it was terribly exhausting for both

of us, and we both fell asleep. Most of the Nurses on the floor were my work mates; oddly enough he died on the floor where I worked. That even added to the difficulty of .. because I had to deal with them on a daily basis too. So anyway, this whole healing process helped both of us; it helped him settle."

The Roles of Staff

Other than the distinctive Ojibway teachings and practices, a highly unique aspect of healing circles is the relationship between staff and clients. Both are co-equal participants in the healing process. Staff and clients share previous and current pains in their lives. In contrast to non-Native therapy, the boundaries between the "healers" and "the healed" are dissolved into a "community of healers" in which all participants are cleansed.



Healing and Impact

According to Mook'am's first cultural teacher, the sources of healing in the healing circle derives from...

.sharing the pain

.purification through exposure to the four gifts of life

.the teachings of core Ojibway values

.contact with cedar, through sitting on cedar chips, drinking cedar tea, or through taking a cedar bath

On the close link between physical materials and healing.

"quite often the person who is very hurt feels a terrible weight when they get that feather. Its like the "weight of the feather", which makes them know that it is they that has to talk. I guess the medicine lady knows exactly how...she must be trained to see who is needing it as it goes around the first time. I don't quite know how the process goes, but I certainly know the benefits of it."

(Interview with Research Assistant)

One of the most visible and describable impacts of the healing circle is the emotional catharsis or release. In many cases, perhaps because of a cultural code of emotional control, emotion is released for long-standing pain.

"That burden you carry around with you is lifted a bit. I can tell you that when you come away from those healing circles you definitely have had some...weight lifted off you whether its guilt, grief, indecision,...you come away with some measure of..healing. You feel you have had a ...its hard to describe the feeling..."

Emotional release is accompanied by physical contacts and connecting at a basic physical level:

"I've seen people fall apart and not.. and think that they are not going to come together again, but usually through almost like a "laying on of hands", almost, where people just hug them and cry with them... the physical contact of spontaneous feelings you share with them of caring...they come out of it, and they walk away from that whole healing process and have a cup of tea (laughs). And you just marvel at how..something so simple can bring about such change."

The intervention of the leader may represent another way in which healing circles differ. Some leaders of the circle may not be as active as others in drawing people out. Circles have been observed where that intervention did not happen. If there is a block and some tears, and clearly the person is holding it back, the leader may not intervene.

The intensity of the experience and the open-ended structure of the circle produces, for some, a changed perception of time. Circles often break up very late at night. There are no restrictions on how long they can last.

"Most people who want to be healed...you're not even aware of time. It was only my own physical discomfort that took me out of the circle, because I had to sleep. Even people find it difficult to leave the room and go to the bathroom once the circle is underway.

... there's no rule. It's almost a sense of... for me, anyway that you don't want to break that circle...that power".

Spirituality

Healing circles have a strong spiritual component:

"There is almost a spirituality type of thing that comes with it too. You come away with almost a new reverence, a new feeling of ... a certain reverence for the whole feeling."

The spiritual references and feelings are created through the leader's talks, and the symbolism of cultural materials and activities.

Visions have been reported:

"I've actually been present in the room where other... I don't know .. like Grandmother has materialized. Somebody is sitting in an empty chair, what was an empty chair, somebody is sitting in it. We have been in a room where there has been a fancy dancer while the healing circle is going on ... and this person dressed in the fancy outfit has been there. I didn't think it was possible. They didn't stay for long, but we knew that there was something special happening, and it was not frightening. We just realized that something very special was happening to us all."

Visions are described as a component of healing:

"These are spirits who materialized while we were there in the healing circle and they added to whole healing. You've never heard of it? We don't talk too much to non-Natives about it. We had one non-Native person there, and she didn't see anything, but some of us did see a fancy dancer. Two of the young girls that were there saw the fancy dancer... I didn't, but I saw the Grand-mother sitting there. And you feel the presence of other spirits in the room too, so it ...you know there's something extraordinary going on. And you feel confident knowing that your Grandmother is there watching over you."

"I...haven't talked to the Medicine Woman about that presence yet, but both of us who were there and saw her felt comforted, and were in no way...It just seemed like a natural thing to have there, almost a natural part of that healing... I have always had a strong belief in powers like that because my Grandfather was also a medicine man. He talked a great deal about spirits."



Sweet grass and smudging also is believed to mediate the events of the circle and the spirit world.

"I guess ...from my personal point of view... I actually believe that smudging has that cleansing feeling. But also, you know that your thoughts and your prayers are going up to the Creator through the smoke. Whatever you are feeling, whatever is happening to you is being almost being elevated up to ...wherever."

Some participants believe that the strength of healing circles at least partially comes from the spirit world. Talking about the death of her husband:

"...before that circle ended we also set a date for another circle for after [husband] died, for me to go through another healing circle so that we could deal with [husband's] death, and my feelings about it. And the grief that I felt. So the whole thing was very useful for me to be able to continue working, to be able to help my family who were all around me that did not go to any of these healing circles, and are not even aware that such a thing exists. My own children don't know...So they wondered where I got the strength from...it comes from the Creator and also goes through that healing circle."

Healing Circles and Group Therapy

The importance of spirituality clearly distinguishes traditional healing circles from group therapy. There are other differences as well. In contrast to group therapy, participants rarely talk to each other during the healing circle:

"There's no communication. It's almost like a .. each one telling a story, a chapter in their life. It's like another chapter in this healing process. Once you leave the circle, you never talk about it again. I have never had the curiosity to ask a person who almost fell apart anything that happened that day. I just saw with my own eyes what happened, and it seemed like a natural turn of events."

(Interview with Project Research Assistant)