

The role of the treatment provider in Aboriginal women's healing from illicit drug abuse

In 2005, a community-based collaborative research project was initiated by the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and the University of Saskatchewan. The project examined the role that identity and stigma have in the healing journeys of criminalized Aboriginal women in treatment for illicit drug abuse at National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program centres across the country.



RE-CLAIM

Empathy

- Relay **empathy** for the struggles that women face due to their problematic substance use (for example, loss of custody of their children).

Acceptance /
Having a non-
judgmental
attitude

- Be **accepting and non-judgemental** about women's past behaviours (for example, women's involvement in prostitution for survival).

Inspiration

- Provide **inspiration** by acting as a role model (for example, when appropriate share parts of your own healing journey to show it is possible to gain further education as an adult and secure meaningful employment).

Recognition

- **Recognize** the impact of **trauma** in women's healing (ranging from the intergenerational effects of colonialism through to the disproportionate rates of inter-personal violence faced by Aboriginal women).

Communication

- Open lines of **communication** for two-way, non-hierarchical dialogue with the women.

Care

- Show **care** for the women and passion for your own role as a treatment provider.

Link to
spirituality

- Support the link to **spirituality** in women's healing through Aboriginal culture as well as any other traditions and teachings with which the women identify.

Momentum

- Promote **momentum** in the women's healing journeys; that is, assist the women in **moving toward the future** after **acknowledging the past** (promoting accountability). For example, assist the women in developing healthier relationships and parenting skills. Fostering the women's ties to their communities will help break generational cycles.

FOCUS: This research examined the skills and traits that treatment providers found to be important in assisting women on their healing journeys. It is well-established in Canada that criminalized Aboriginal women who abuse drugs face stigma and discrimination and this has a serious impact on their health. The treatment staff spoke strongly about the need for women to **RECLAIM** their identity to ward off the negative effects of stigma and continue on their healing journey. For some women it is to **CLAIM** a healthy identity for the first time. The treatment providers spoke from their perspective as service providers as well as their own healing experiences (80% self-identified as having recovered from substance abuse). This sample provides unique insight and understanding—they believe that a shared personal experience with the women in treatment helps to establish trust, which is necessary to begin healing.

METHOD: The findings are based on a single treatment centre sample of 11 interviews, complemented with a review of 27 additional interviews at 5 centres and one community agency. The findings have been arrived at through a community-based, participatory approach to data analysis. You can learn more about the methodology of this study in the 2009 article, “Beginning with our voices: How the experiential stories of First Nations women are contributing to a national research project” by S. Acoose, C. Dell, V. Desjarlais and D. Blunderfield in the *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, at <http://www.naho.ca/english/journal.php>. The data were analyzed from multiple standpoints (e.g., treatment worker, experiential woman) and the findings verified with all 6 treatment centres participating in the study. Fifty percent of respondents are female, 80% are First Nations, and the average age is 49 and the average number of years in current substance-related position is 10. The findings are intended to initiate discussion at the NNADAP treatment centres and do not at this point reflect the research literature.

MEANING: The Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, drawn from the work of Edward Benton Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (Minnesota: Indian Country Press, 1979), frame the meaning of the findings of this study. It is important to note that each of the teachings were given to the First Elder to pass as a whole; they do not exist in isolation from one another. The main finding of this study, that Aboriginal women need to re-claim their identity, is symbolized by the turtle, which represents mother earth, and thus recognizes the importance and centrality of women’s role in life. The Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers encircle the turtle and the findings of this project. Just as the Seven Teachings cannot be understood apart from one another, so too the findings of the study must be understood in conjunction with the Teachings. For example, respect must be understood by treatment providers in order to be able to recognize the impact of trauma in women’s healing.

NEXT STEPS: Our team plans this to be the first in a series of fact sheets that will focus on the staff findings as well as the findings from our interviews with women in treatment and women who have completed treatment. We also plan to use the findings to inform women-specific policy and programming at NNADAP treatment centres. This could include, for example, the design of handbooks for residents and staff.

CONTACTING US: For more information on our project, you can visit our website at: <http://www.artsandscience.usask.ca/colleenannedell/index.html>. To learn more about the findings reviewed in this fact sheet or others, please contact Dr. Colleen Anne Dell at the University of Saskatchewan (colleen.dell@usask.ca) 306-966-5912 or Sharon Clarke at the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation (sclarke@nnapf.ca) 866-763-4714.