

Native American 12 Steps

Based on the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and especially prepared for Native Americans by the Umatilla Tribal Alcohol Program

- Step 1** We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that we had lost control of our lives.
- Step 2** We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could help us regain control.
- Step 3** We made a decision to ask for help from a Higher Power and others who understand.
- Step 4** We stopped and thought about our strengths and our weaknesses and thought about ourselves.
- Step 5** We admitted to the Great Spirit, to ourselves and to another person the things we thought were wrong about ourselves.
- Step 6** We are ready, with the help of the Great Spirit, to change.
- Step 7** We humbly ask a Higher Power and our friends to help us change.
- Step 8** We made a list of people who were hurt by our drinking, and want to make up for these hurts.
- Step 9** We are making up to those people whenever we can, except when to do so would hurt them more.
- Step 10** We continue to think about our strengths and weaknesses, and when we are wrong we say we are wrong.
- Step 11** We pray and think about ourselves, praying only for strength to do what is right.
- Step 12** We try to help other alcoholics and to practice these principles in everything we do.

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The Healing Circle: An Alternative Path to Alcoholism Recovery

Recovery from alcoholism has typically involved the program of **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**. However, the values espoused by AA, especially those related to spirituality, can be in conflict with the values of traditional **Native Americans**. This article discusses healing methods founded in the traditions of **Native American** culture in general and the Oglala Lakota (also called Oglala Sioux) nation specifically. An understanding of these methods gives non-**Native American** counselors additional tools for guiding **Native American** clients to an effective program of recovery.

More than 22 million people suffer from alcoholism in the United States today, and an estimated 88 million people are adversely affected by alcoholism in a family member, friend, or other associate (Yoder, 1990). Alcoholism affects **Native Americans** as much, if not more, than members of the general population. Fetal alcohol syndrome is 33 times higher in **Native Americans** than it is in the White population (Chavez, Cordero, & Becerra 1989). Four of the 10 leading causes of death for **Native Americans** are alcohol related, as are at least 80% of the homicides, suicides, and vehicular accidents (E. M. Smith, 1989). A study conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991) reported that **Native American** groups have high mortality rates from causes that are alcohol related, like cirrhosis, homicide, and suicide. This same study found that the death rate for cirrhosis is five times more pervasive in **Native Americans** than in the general population.

RECOVERY THROUGH ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

For many afflicted with alcoholism, non-**Native American** and **Native American** alike, recovery often involves participation in a 12-Step group. **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**, a worldwide, voluntary, nonprofit organization of persons who consider themselves **alcoholics**, is the first and largest of the 12-Step programs (Berenson, 1987). AA had its 60th anniversary in 1995, and at that time there were more than 1.8 million members (Delbanco & Delbanco, 1995).

Recovery in AA is based on the principles embodied in the 12 Steps (Alibrandi, 1982; Maxwell, 1984). Members refer to "working the steps" to indicate that these principles are being used, one after another, to foster behavior change (L. M. Smith, 1992). Step 1 states, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable" (**Alcoholics Anonymous** World Services, Inc., 1985, p. 50). This step establishes that the **alcoholic's** fundamental problem is lack of control or powerlessness over alcohol consumption. Only when one accepts this powerlessness is one ready to accept help (Beckman, 1980).

There is a strong spiritual element in the AA program (Berenson, 1987; L. M. Smith, 1992). Although the organization denies that the model is based on any religious doctrine (Levinthal, 1996), many authors have noted that AA is, in fact, religiously oriented (Bean, 1975; Rudy & Greil, 1988; Whitley, 1977). Recovery is based on commitment to the group, surrendering oneself to a Higher Power, and prayer (Khantzian & Mack, 1994). Bufe (1991) observed that, although AA leaves the interpretation of "Higher Power" to each individual, the AA practice of starting and ending meetings with prayers that directly address "God" (The Lord's Prayer and the Serenity Prayer) reflects thinking and beliefs of the dominant culture. McCarthy (1991) noted that, in addition to operating within a religious framework, AA fosters group dependence.

For some **Native Americans**, AA is an appropriate and helpful path to recovery. But for others, AA's methods and values are in conflict with traditional beliefs and practices, and the recovery process is unsuccessful. An alternative to AA that is appropriate for **Native Americans** must be built on values that are compatible with the tribal value system. The following sections describe (a) traditional **Native American** spiritual beliefs and healing practices, (b) the relationship of those beliefs and practices to the recovery process, and (c) the application of the recovery process to one specific **Native American** group, the Oglala Lakota.

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH TO RECOVERY

Elements of Native American Spirituality

Spirituality is an underlying concept that permeates every aspect of a **Native American's** life. But **Native American** spirituality is different from that of the dominant culture. It is closely connected to the natural world rather than to the heavenly world. **Native Americans** hold their land and community as having the highest possible meaning. Certain places hold special meaning because revelations were experienced there. These places are remembered by the community and set aside as locations where rituals and ceremonies can be held to once again communicate with the spirits (Deloria, 1994).

Native American spirituality is circular in nature and encompasses the seven sacred directions of West, North, East, South, Sky, Earth, and Center (Arbogast, 1995). West, North, East, and South are viewed as the sacred quadrants of the universe. Each quadrant contains special meanings, elements of power, spirits, and sacred teachings. The spiritual essence of all life forms--plant, animal, and human--resides in these four directions (Coggins, 1990). The fifth direction, Sky, is the upward direction that represents Wakan Tanka ("God" in the dominant culture), who is a supreme and sacred Spirit, an Omnipresence. Earth, the Sixth direction, represents mother'grandmother, the source of all life forms. The seventh direction, Center, is responsible for the connection and unification of all the sacred directions. Center is the spiritual essence of self, so that every living entity is also a Center. All of these directions in unison represent the Sacred Hoop, or Medicine Wheel (Arbogast, 1995). When the seven sacred directions are in harmony and balance, the Sacred Hoop is whole (Brown, 1989).

The **Native American** concept of the Medicine Wheel is the cord that ties all other elements together. It promotes harmony with self, community, and the cosmos and is closely connected to other tribal beliefs and practices (Brown, 1989). To understand the Medicine Wheel, one must visualize a set of four concentric circles. The center circle represents Family. Surrounding Family is the circle representing Clan, which is the community in which the family lives. The third circle represents Tribe, the heritage of the family. The largest circle, encompassing the other three, is the Medicine Wheel, which divides all aspects of existence into four realms. There are four directions, four seasons, four races of humanity, and four spheres of existence—the mental, the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual (Coggins, 1990; Kifaru Productions, 1995). An individual spends his or her entire existence within the four realms of the Sacred Hoop. Life begins with infancy, moves to childhood, proceeds to adulthood, and ends with one's being an elder. Specific age-related practices and ceremonies mark the transitions from one realm to the next (C. Johnson, personal communication, February 1996).

Elements of Recovery

Alcoholism has caused a condition that **Native Americans** call "the broken circle" or "broken Hoop" (Arbogast, 1995; Brown, 1989). The term refers to the fact that traditional teachings are being ignored. Therefore, the incorporation of tribal spiritual teachings and practices into the recovery process can be crucial to its success. Three elements are central to the recovery process: the Sweat Lodge, the Red Road, and the Recovery Medicine Wheel. All are intended to help mend the broken circle.

The Sweat Lodge is a widespread tradition throughout **Native American** culture. A Sweat Lodge is often held in a circular structure. The actual building of the structure is an important part of the ceremony, and every aspect of the process has special meaning. Twelve willow poles are set into the ground and bent to form the framework. The four main poles represent the first four directions of the Sacred Hoop (Bruchac, 1993; Burning Feather, 1995). Willow is used for the poles, because this tree grows close to running water, and water is the one element that is essential to all living things (Burning Feather, 1995). Traditionally, the structure was covered with a buffalo hide or skin of another animal, but canvas or heavy blankets are currently used (Bruchac, 1993).

The ceremony itself consists of four segments, or "doors," because the number 4 represents the four sacred quadrants of the universe (Eastman, 1995). Water, herbs, and tobacco are poured over heated rocks that have been placed in the center. The glowing rocks symbolize the spark that is in every living entity (G. Thin Elk, personal communication, February 1996). The Sacred Pipe is smoked at the opening of each of the doors. The rising smoke and steam are symbols of the participants' prayers being lifted to Wakan Tanka (Arbogast, 1995; Brown, 1989). The ceremony takes place in total darkness, which represents a return to the womb. It gives participants a chance to reenact the genesis and experience a rebirth of their spirituality (G. Thin Elk, personal communication, February 1996).

A second element in the alternative path to recovery is the Red Road, a holistic approach to spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional wellness (Thin Elk, 1993). The Red Road is founded in the traditions of the Sacred Hoop and uses prayer as the basis of all healing (Coggins, 1990; Kifaru Productions, 1995; Thin Elk, 1993). The Red Road runs north and south. North represents purity, and South is the source of life (Brown, 1989). The Black Road runs east and west and is the path of error and destruction. "Walking the Red Road" is considered the path to purity and spirituality and is analogous to the Christian concept of the straight and narrow way. "Walking the Black Road" means that one is ignoring the teachings of the Sacred Pipe and is moving away from the traditional healing methods of the Sacred Hoop (Arbogast, 1995; Brown, 1989). Individuals on the Black Road are distracted, ruled by their senses, and living their lives only for themselves rather than for their people (Brown, 1989).

A third approach to sobriety is called the Recovery Medicine Wheel, a method of walking the Red Road that can work either in conjunction with AA or separate from it (Coggins, 1990). Like AA, the Recovery Medicine Wheel is a step approach to sobriety. Unlike the 12 Steps of AA, which are considered progressively from Step I through Step 12, an individual can begin step work at any point in the Wheel. Because the Wheel is circular in nature, all of the steps can be reached in succession. This circular nature of the Wheel helps recovering persons to remember Wakan Tanka as they walk through the steps, because the circle, like Wakan Tanka, has no end (Brown, 1989).

There are four areas within the Wheel that correspond to the four realms of human existence: (a) the physical realm, (b) knowledge and enlightenment, (c) the spiritual realm, and (d) introspective thought (Coggins, 1990). Each of these areas contains 4 steps, making 16 steps altogether as follows (Coggins, 1990, p. 14):

North (The Physical Realm)

1. Take good physical care of myself.
2. Regain balance in my life by developing an understanding of the important connection between the physical, psychological, spiritual, and emotional parts of my existence.
3. Stop inflicting pain (either physically or emotionally) on others or myself.
4. Come to an understanding that change is a process (I can't expect miracles overnight).

West (The Realm of Introspective Thought)

1. Speak honestly with myself.
2. Look at my problems and my accomplishments with a willingness to commit myself to positive growth and change.
3. Examine the ways in which I have tried to manipulate, control, or manage the lives of others and make a commitment to stop this behavior.
4. Acknowledge that change in my life must begin with me.

East (The Realm of Knowledge and Enlightenment)

1. Reawaken to all of creation and to all of the beauty that exists in the world around me.
2. Make a commitment to release myself from a narrow view of life and begin to grow, learn, and gain new knowledge.
3. Remember that I have a sacred right to live my life as I wish and the need to bring harmony and balance to my existence by respecting the life rights of others.
4. Work on understanding the changes I must make in order to achieve personal harmony, balance, and freedom.

South (The Spiritual Realm)

1. Come to an understanding of my special relation to Mother Earth (release my pain to Mother Earth).
2. Come to an understanding of my special relation to Father Sky.
3. Seek a greater understanding of my sacred connection to all of the universe.
4. Reconnect with and nurture my own Spirit.

Each step is begun in the same manner, that is, with a statement concerning the individual's intentions. For example, a person might decide on any one day to work on Step 1 in the Physical Realm of the North. He or she might say, "Beginning today I will take good physical care of myself" (Coggins, 1990, p. 16).

FACILITATING RECOVERY FOR NATIVE AMERICAN CLIENTS

Counselors can best facilitate the recovery process by developing a personal understanding and appreciation of tribal healing methods and the spiritual beliefs on which they are based. It is important to remember, however, that **Native Americans** are a heterogeneous group comprising 517 federally recognized **native** tribes (Herring, 1991). Personal programs of recovery can be more successful when they are grounded in tribal practices, but counselors will need to become thoroughly familiar with the unique practices of each client's historical culture. As the following section demonstrates, a knowledge of specific cultural practices and the incorporation of those practices into a program of recovery are often essential to the success of the process.

The Oglala Lakota Nation

The Oglala Sioux (or Oglala Lakota, the historical non-European name) are a **Native American** people whose tribal home is the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota. Like other **Native American** groups, they show the effects of widespread alcoholism. Thin Elk (1993) reported that more than 75% of the tribal population are directly affected by the adverse effects of alcohol. During 1995, 80% of the 1,200 annual referrals to Reservation Human-Service offices were related to alcohol, and 90% of all suicide attempts were alcohol related (A. Swallow, personal communication, February 1996). The Oglala Sioux Tribe Public Safety Commission Statistical Report (1995) revealed that for fiscal year October 1, 1994, to September 1, 1995, there were 10,100 reports of incidences that involved alcohol. This number

included reports of drunkenness and driving while intoxicated, as well as 65 other offenses in which alcohol was a factor.

A. Fuhrman, a tribal member, believes that the AA program is relevant for tribal members who are substantially assimilated into the dominant culture; for others, the 12-Step philosophy conflicts with traditional healing methods and the **Native American** way of life (personal communication, October 1995). Two examples of specific conflicts are as follows. First, individuals who are raised in traditional ways are taught a value system in which each person has sole responsibility for living his or her life in the proper manner; the development of group dependency does not fit well with this value (P. White Dress, personal communication, March 1, 1996). Second, the AA practice of continuously identifying oneself as an **alcoholic** directly contradicts the Lakota belief in the sanctity and power of words; if a person continues to say that he or she is an **alcoholic**, then he or she will, in fact, be a drinking **alcoholic** (C. Herrera, personal communication, May 1996).

Recovery for Oglala Lakota people involves traditional tribal beliefs. In addition, it also involves a return to the practices of the Seven Sacred Rites. The Seven Sacred Rites are beliefs specific to the Sioux culture that are founded in the legend of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman's teachings and that have been passed down from generation to generation (Eastman, 1995). The rites are as follows: Keeping of the Soul, Purification, Vision Quest, Sun Dance, Making of the Relatives, Womanhood, and Throwing of the Ball. Lakota people consider the Purification Ceremony, or Inipi, to be essential to the purification and recreation of the spirit. Inipi is the Lakota word for the Sweat Lodge described in the previous section.

According to G. Thin Elk (personal communication, February 1996), the Inipi is extremely important in the treatment of **alcoholic** tribal members and is often the first step on the road to sobriety. Walking the Red Road is also viewed as essential to recovery. "Individuals on the Red Road know who they are as Lakota people" (P. Lakota, personal communication, April 17, 1996).

The Story of Philomine Lakota

Philomine Lakota, whose Lakota name, "Tunweya Waste Wen" translates to "Good Scout Woman," is a well-known elder of the Oglala Lakota nation who is in recovery from alcoholism. She first attempted recovery through AA and was somewhat successful in that she was sober. She remembers that she was recognized by her community for her sobriety and became "president of this and president of that." But, she adds, "I didn't become well, I just became good." She believes that her 2 years of recovery through AA isolated her from family members, who felt abandoned. Some of the AA teachings seemed irrelevant to life on her reservation. She eventually relapsed and entered an AA-oriented treatment program for the second time. During this treatment, she began to have vivid dreams and visions. She was inspired by the fact that she heard the sound of the eagle-bone whistle, a sacred instrument used in **Native American** ceremonies. She felt empowered to open her mind to her traditional ceremonies and healing rites. Shortly thereafter, she accepted a friend's invitation to participate in a yuwipi, a

ceremony of singing and praying. She describes the experience of that first ceremony as "beautiful" and "full of spiritual visions and messages." All the fears she had felt during her years of active alcoholism and AA-oriented recovery were gone.

The experience was a "plunge" into her traditional culture. She became immersed in the ceremonies and ways of her people. She began to experience her recovery on a more meaningful level and realized that recovery through AA had brought her to sobriety but had not met her spiritual needs. She understood that for her, true sobriety required "action," which she defines as "ongoing involvement in the traditional ceremonies and ways of my people."

Her current recovery still revolves around involvement with her people's traditions. She explains that the biggest part of this involvement is the preparation required before one actually takes part in a ceremony. "Preparation is a big part of Lakota life. A ceremony actually begins when one has the first thought of participation in it and begins all the activities that are connected with participation."

Philomine is still available to assist other **alcoholics**, as she was during her days of active involvement in AA. However, her method of helping has changed. When someone comes to her wanting help, she invites the person to participate in an Inipi, the ceremony which she describes as the door to all other ceremonies. She explains that, during the Inipi, the person will be contacted by spirits either directly or indirectly, through a Medicine Man or Medicine Woman. The spirits will then guide the person to participation in other ceremonies and actions. Philomine describes this process as "the spiritual network." She compares it to the AA network of sponsors but believes that the network of spirits is more powerful and helpful than human sponsors could ever be. Once connected to the spirit world through the Inipi, an **alcoholic's** personal program of recovery takes whatever path the spirits dictate (P. Lakota, personal communication, July 1996).

CONCLUSION

The process of recovery can take many forms. For some **Native Americans**, an effective program must include traditional spiritual elements. For nonNative **American** counselors, helping **Native American** clients to formulate personal and effective programs of recovery requires (a) an understanding and appreciation of tribal beliefs and practices and (b) assisting their clients to connect to those practices. Often, counselor assistance may take the form of facilitating an alliance between the client and a traditional tribal healer. When appropriate, counselors can encourage clients to contact a Medicine Man or Medicine Woman, who will, in turn, introduce or reintroduce the client to traditional customs.

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White bison - White Bison, Inc. uses the Medicine Wheel, a culturally appropriate recovery program for Native American people that has a single-word version of the Steps in which "each of the 12 Steps is presented from the perspective of the value that it reflects." Participants share their Step insights and experiences in a talking circle.

1. Honesty
2. Hope
3. Faith
4. Courage
5. Integrity
6. Willingness
7. Humility
8. Forgiveness
9. Justice
10. Perseverance
11. Spiritual Awakening
12. Service

