



# NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONAL HEALING

## **WHAT IS NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONAL HEALING?**

Most Native American tribes have traditions about health and illness. These traditions are not based on western science. Instead, they come from the tribe's beliefs about how individuals fit in the web of life. This web includes the tribe, all humanity, the earth, and the universe. Many healing traditions focus on harmony. Healing occurs when someone is restored to harmony and connected to universal powers.

Traditional healing is "holistic". It does not focus on symptoms or diseases. Instead, it deals with the total individual. Different people with HIV disease may get different treatments. Healing focuses on the person, not the illness.

Certain people in each tribe are recognized as healers. They receive special teachings. Healing traditions are passed from one generation to the next through visions, stories, and dreams.

Healing does not follow written guidelines. Healers work differently with each person they help. They use their herbs, ceremony and power in the best way for each individual.

Healing might involve sweat lodges, talking circles, ceremonial smoking of tobacco, shamans, herbalism, animal spirits, or "vision quests". Each tribe uses its own techniques. The techniques by themselves are not "traditional healing." They are only steps towards becoming whole, balanced and connected.

## **WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM TRADITIONAL HEALING?**

Traditional healing can be very powerful for Native Americans dealing with HIV. It can restore a sense of connection to their tribe and culture. This promotes spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical healing.

Some traditional healers only work with members of their own tribe. Others will work with outsiders. Some people who are not Native American believe that working with a traditional healer has helped them.

Most healers work in their local tribal communities. A few participate in public conferences. If you are not a tribal member, it is very difficult to know if someone is really a traditional healer.

Many people use the techniques of traditional healing. However, there is a big difference between traditional healing and using traditional techniques. Participating in a sweat lodge might help almost anyone. However, the experience could be very different depending on who runs the sweat lodge. Were they raised in a tradition that used sweat lodges? Or did they simply learn about the technique? Also, a sweat lodge will mean more to someone who grew up in a tribe that traditionally uses them. Some techniques might have no meaning unless you grew up using them.

Traditional ceremonies usually involve much more than outsiders are aware of. When you attend a ceremony, show respect by asking about guidelines for observing or participating.

## **HOW DOES TRADITIONAL HEALING INTERACT WITH WESTERN MEDICINE?**

Healers have different views about combining their methods with western medicine. Some do not see any value in medical science or treatments. Others believe that the systems deal with different aspects of an individual so there is no problem using both.

Most western physicians do not understand the value or importance of traditional healing to their Native American patients. A few, especially in areas with large Native American

populations, are more open to traditional healing.

If you combine western medicine and traditional healing, let your physician know about any treatments you are using. There might be interactions. For example, a traditional healer might use an herbal preparation to help you sleep. In that case, your physician would probably not want you to take sleeping pills. Your healer might want you to use herbs to cleanse your system. These might interact with western medications that you are taking. Your physician might help you avoid negative interactions.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Native American traditional healing is a holistic approach to health. Each tribe has its own healing traditions.

Traditional healers do not follow a standard procedure. Instead, they apply their skills to each person individually.

By themselves, techniques such as sweat lodges or vision quests are not "traditional healing." They have the most meaning as part of an overall healing tradition.

Traditional healers and western physicians are often skeptical of each other. However, it is best if your care providers all know about everything you are doing for your health. There may be interactions among different techniques that you want to avoid.

*Reviewed May 22, 2008*