



Sharing Our Wisdom

An Aboriginal Health Initiative

Background

Aboriginal peoples have been deeply affected by the negative consequences of colonization and have struggled to survive in a western world while enduring the ongoing impacts of residential schools, reserves, assimilation attempts, and cultural suppression.

History has had a profound effect on Aboriginal peoples' health and the deterioration of the traditional Aboriginal health care system. Historically, European colonizers felt that Aboriginal peoples' traditions and knowledge were inferior to that of the dominant, Western culture. This was embedded in governmental policies that invalidated Aboriginal knowledge.

To this day, Western processes of health promotion are often implemented without considering or respecting Indigenous knowledge of healing & wellness. As well, these mainstream health strategies have been minimally effective in addressing health concerns among Aboriginal peoples.

Previous research and consultations with Aboriginal communities in Vancouver, British Columbia have illustrated the importance of strengthening access to multiple forms of healthcare, including mainstream and traditional healing. This direction led to the development of Sharing Our Wisdom: An Aboriginal Health Initiative.

Guiding this Work

Before the start of this project, we had already formed the Aboriginal Health Working Group (AHWG), made up of a experts in Aboriginal health, including Elders, traditional healers, service providers, and knowledge keepers. The AHWG, which has been in place since 2011, has guided the development of the Sharing Our Wisdom framework.

In addition to building on previous consultations and reviews that have been completed with Aboriginal communities in Vancouver and the province, our work with the AHWG helps to ensure that this research is meeting community needs, through ensuring that the workshops delivered are beneficial to those directly participating as well as the greater community.



Traditional Coast Salish Territory

Vancouver is on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including four First Nations, Tsleil-Waututh, Musqueam, Squamish, & Tsawwassen. As well, the urban Aboriginal population in Vancouver is very diverse, representing many different Aboriginal peoples from across Canada living both on and off reserve, with diverse languages, beliefs, and cultural practices.

Aboriginal people represent about 5% of the British Columbia's total population. Vancouver has the largest Aboriginal population of any city in BC.

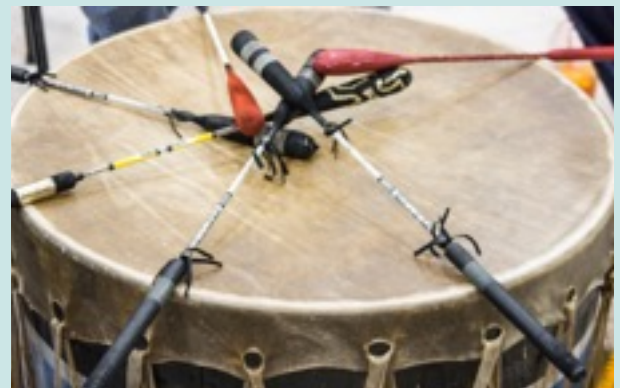
About the Program

Sharing Our Wisdom involved a series of workshops, called Health Circles. Two groups of around 20 community members have joined us for a program of seven Health Circles. These Health Circles were each facilitated by a different Aboriginal Elder or traditional healer to share their knowledge and wisdom on a different aspect of healing and traditional healthcare practices. The topics included:

1. **Protocols and Place** (respect)
2. **Identity and Health** (relationships, building identity)
3. **Traditional Foods** (food as medicine)
4. **Emotional Competence** (emotional health, responsibility)
5. **Medicine Making** (traditional medicines)
6. **Drumming Circle** (singing, drumming)
7. **Ceremony** (spiritual health and wellness, reciprocity)

For the research aspect of this work, we gathered feedback and information from participants in a number of ways, including weekly feedback forms, written surveys, focus groups, and interviews. These methods gathered feedback on the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and perspectives of participants in the program.

We would like to thank all of the participants, facilitators, and members of the Aboriginal Health Working Group members who shared their knowledge and wisdom in this program.



Findings

Over the course of the seven week programs, participants provided feedback on the new knowledge that they gained. Most commonly, new knowledge was reported for:

- Ceremony and spiritual wellness
- Traditional medicines
- Emotional wellness

As well, participants noted the benefits of the workshops. These most commonly included:

- A sense of community
- Ceremony
- The facilitators and the teachings

Participants spoke about having more ownership over their health and healthcare choices, as well as the importance of ongoing support for traditional healthcare practices.



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