



## Incorporating Culture into Healing to Wellness Court: *The Research*



For Natives, wellness is a holistic state, implying physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual balance. Imbalance, including suffering from a substance use disorder, impacts all of a person's being and requires treating that person holistically.

Yet service providers are encouraged to only administer services and practices that are documented by evidence of their effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes for identified target populations. However, few evidence supported practices have been developed for American Indian/Alaska Native communities ("Natives"). Even fewer are in consideration of the different customs and traditions amongst tribes.

### **Recovery-Relevant Activities**

Research indicates that drug court participants achieve better results for longer periods of time when they engage in recovery-relevant activities, such as developing a sober support social network (Kelly et al., 2011a), engaging in spiritual practices (Kelly et al., 2011b; Robinson et al., 2011), and learning effective coping skills from fellow group members (Kelly et al., 2009).

Non-tribal drug courts have improved the outcomes for their participants by using intensive referrals that assertively link participants with support-group volunteers who may escort them to the groups, answer any questions they might have, and provide them with support and camaraderie (Timko & DeBenedetti, 2007).

### **Culturally-Tailored Treatments**

Women and racial minorities, including Natives, are often underrepresented in clinical trials of addiction treatments, and so those treatments are frequently less beneficial for these individuals (Burlew et al., 2011; Calsyn et al., 2009). A small but growing number of treatments have been tailored specifically to meet the needs of women or racial minority participants in drug courts. In one study, outcomes were improved significantly for young African-American male participants when an experienced African-American clinician delivered a curriculum that addressed issues commonly confronting these young men, such as negative racial stereotypes (Vito & Tewksbury, 1998).

Similarly, substantial evidence shows that women, particularly those with histories of trauma, perform significantly better in gender-specific substance abuse treatment groups (Dannerbeck et al., 2002; Grella, 2008; Liang & Long, 2013; Powell et al., 2012). This gender-specific approach has been demonstrated to improve outcomes for female drug court participants in at least one



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randomized controlled trial (Messina et al., 2012). A study of approximately seventy drug courts found that programs offering gender-specific services reduced criminal recidivism significantly more than those that did not (Carey et al., 2012).

### **Serving American Indians/Alaska Natives**

It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of Native American healing practices using Western standards and practices. Limited or inconsistent funding, culturally incompetent or incongruent evaluation practices, and abuses incurred during or after data collection are major confounding variables that have limited evaluation on the effectiveness of incorporating traditional practices into Western approaches to the treatment of substance abuse and mental illness. Further, each tribe and community will likely have different customs, healing traditions, and beliefs about treatment providers that can influence not only willingness to participate in treatment services, but also the level of trust clients have for providers. Nonetheless, a literature review on the use of “indigenous therapeutic interventions” for alcohol abuse and dependence suggest that a number of these interventions have been of value to Natives with substance use disorders (Mail and Shelton 2002). Other authors have concurred (Coyhis and White 2006; Sabin et al. 2004).

Overall, many Natives believe that culture is the primary avenue of healing and that connecting with one’s culture is not only a means of prevention, but also a healing treatment (Bassett et al. 2012). For many communities, recovery cannot happen for individuals alone, but instead, when a member is sick the entire community has become sick. One cannot take a sick tree from a sick forest, heal it, and put it back in the same environment expecting that it will thrive. Instead, the community must embrace recovery (Coyhis 2000). Like the benefits of recovery-relevant activities, tribal cultural activities can provide a grounding connection to a participant’s identity beyond addition, including their ancestral past and their present-day community. They can additionally provide the community an opportunity to reembrace the participant.

Critically, the conditions and history of genocidal policies aimed at destroying Native family ties as well as experiences of ongoing discrimination, bring added dimensions for consideration when providing services to Native families, particularly those involved in the child welfare system (Lucero & Bussey, 2015).

However, not all Native Americans have a need to develop stronger connections to their communities and cultural groups. Culture is complex and changing, and a return to the values of a traditional culture is not always desired (Brady 1995). An initial inquiry into each client’s connection with his or her culture, cultural identity, and desire to incorporate cultural beliefs and practices into treatment is an essential step in a culturally competent practice.



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## Additional Resources

1. **Tribal Law and Policy Institute Website:** [www.Home.TLPI.org](http://www.Home.TLPI.org)

The Tribal Law and Policy Institute (TLPI) home website overviews all of TLPI's current projects and numerous resources, including the Legal Code Development Series, the Tribal Legal Studies Textbook Series, and more.

2. **Wellness Courts Website:** [www.WellnessCourts.org](http://www.WellnessCourts.org)

A comprehensive website with resources for Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts, including the Wellness Court Publication Series, Webinar Series, and materials from the Wellness Court Enhancement Trainings, as well as numerous resources from operational Wellness Courts.

3. **Tribal Court Clearinghouse:** [www.TLPI.org](http://www.TLPI.org)

A comprehensive website with resources for tribal justice systems, victim's services providers, tribal service providers, and others involved in the improvement of justice in Indian country.

4. **Tribal/State Collaboration:** [www.WalkingOnCommonGround.org](http://www.WalkingOnCommonGround.org)

Promotes and facilitates tribal-state-federal collaborations, and includes tribal-state agreements, promising strategies, and information on tribal courts.

5. **The Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for Tribes** [tribalinformationexchange.org](http://tribalinformationexchange.org)

Provides assistance focused on the Indian Child Welfare Act, Tribal Title IV-E programs, and continuous quality improvement and data systems.

6. **Sex Trafficking in Indian Country Resources:** [www.TribalCoalitions.org](http://www.TribalCoalitions.org)

Created for sexual assault and domestic violence tribal coalitions and contains information on sex trafficking in Indian country, including the [Sex Trafficking Victim Services Directory](#).

7. **The Office for Victims of Crime Indian Nations Conference:** [www.OVCINC.org](http://www.OVCINC.org)

Contains all conference information and past conference materials, including handouts and PowerPoint presentations by experts in the field. Please visit the [11<sup>th</sup>](#), [12<sup>th</sup>](#), [13<sup>th</sup>](#), and [14<sup>th</sup>](#) conference agenda pages to access these materials.

8. **Tribal Protection Order Resources:** [www.TribalProtectionOrder.org](http://www.TribalProtectionOrder.org)

Designed to assist Native nations and those working in tribal justice systems with information on protection orders, including resources on the drafting and enforcement of tribal protection orders.

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