

## *Using Alternative Healing Ways*

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Healing and recovery is a process—a very individual journey. This article does not intend to describe all types of healing that a victim/survivor might embark upon, nor does it attempt to illustrate the exact forms used by all tribes, spiritual healers or survivors. What will be described are some alternative/supportive healing and recovery processes other than mainstream approaches.

While mainstream techniques are helpful, they are not necessarily holistic and neglect to focus on all areas of healing, often either overlooking or unable to address the fact that the spirit of the victim needs attending to as well. This is a major difference between the process of alternative healing and recovery and mainstream approaches to sexual assault. Both look at the physical, mental and emotional healing of victims/survivors, but alternative healing ways also look at helping women heal their spirits after an assault.

Many Native people are returning to the traditional beliefs of their ancestors for healing. The high incidence of alcohol, drugs, major health issues, partner violence and sexual violence are leading problems in the lives of many Native Americans. Organizations and agencies that are designed specifically for Native people must build their philosophy on traditional beliefs, teachings and values with the intention of providing alternative services that benefit the Native population.

The violence done to a woman's body, emotions, mind and spirit has led Native advocates to consider rape through tribal teaching and belief—seeing surviving sexual assault as a death and rebirth. The spirit of the survivor has embarked on a journey to the unknown (death) and begins another journey (rebirth). The grieving and loss that is a part of a sexual assault survivor's experience is also seen as a part of the journey of death and rebirth. One rebirthing ceremony, or ritual, is the placing of a blanket—a star quilt, around the shoulders of the survivor, like bundling a newborn at birth and welcoming the new life. The survivor has a multitude of feelings, losses and needs that this particular teaching can address.

Ceremonies encompass and focus on all areas of teaching: the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects of a person. These areas are interconnected, and in order to be well, one needs to keep each area in balance with the other. Balance allows us to live our lives in harmony. Sexual assault takes away this balance, the survivor's life as she once knew it—it annihilates her sense of self, leaving a wasteland for her to navigate. As celebrations of life and death, ceremonies can guide and provide healing in order to recover from any of life's misfortunes—they can help us with our health (physical, mental and emotional), and with grief, which affects us emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Healing ceremonies can take a variety of approaches, but most follow the framework or concept of the Medicine Wheel, used by many of the tribes and Nations across the continent. The Medicine Wheel contains the following four aspects: Spiritual, Physical, Mental and Emotional.

***Spiritual* – SPIRIT**– Reconnection between one’s self and a higher power builds a strong foundation for a balanced life and purpose. Sweat lodge ceremonies help re-establish this connection, to enter the sweat lodge is understood as being inside your mother’s womb, a rebirth.

***Physical* – BODY**– Medicines and herbs help heal physical ailments such as pain, tension, sleeplessness, etc. Natural medicines and herbs are passed down to medicine people to use for the People. Cedar baths are essential to cleansing and healing.

***Mental* – MIND**–The mind needs to be calmed and brought back to harmony. For some individuals, this may mean sitting with elders and seeking their advice and wisdom. Meditation and prayers—sitting by water or next to a tree and simply feeling creation and nature are very healing to the mind.

***Emotional* – HEART**–This is where our emotions sit. When we experience grief it feels as though our heart has been broken; when we love, we say it comes from the heart. Sharing and talking about how you are feeling is an important part of the healing journey. Have you ever shared a part of yourself with a group and found that someone else has had a similar experience? You connect and then you feel a bond and are amazed by the coincidence. Was it a coincidence or was the higher power helping you on your healing journey? Many elders or spiritual healers will say it is so.

The following briefly describe some ceremonies that women can take part in for their healing and recovery.

### **Healing Ceremonies:**

➤ *Sweat Lodge or Purification Ceremony:*

The sweat lodge is a very healing process, in which a survivor is guided, supported, encouraged, respected, believed, reconnected, and rejuvenated by a rebirth. Many tribes have these sweat lodge ceremonies available in their communities.

➤ *Wiping of the Tears:*

This ceremony is also called the Grieving Ceremony, and varies from tribe to tribe. This ceremony involves prayer, purification and the use of the sacred eagle fan or feather/s.

➤ *Welcoming – Bundling with a star quilt or blanket:*

A blanket or star quilt is wrapped around a survivor and words of welcoming are expressed along with purification. Sometimes an eagle feather or plume is gifted.

These ceremonies will include prayers, purification, food; a gift offering, an offering of tobacco or whatever is used by that tribe (corn pollen, etc.).

Native ceremonies are oral teachings and traditions. However, written pieces can be found in books, and on websites. Ceremonial activities are personal experiences, either alone with a spiritual healer or with a group of traditional tribal members. One thing an advocate should keep in mind, however, is that spiritual sexual abuse happens in our communities and women who are attempting to heal from sexual violence are very vulnerable. Some women have been taken advantage of in sexual ways by spiritual advisors who instill fear by telling women that “bad medicine” will be placed on them if they talk about the abuse. Make sure that the healer or advisor is well known in the community and has a good reputation. Ask around, find out who they studied with, what their healing history is. Medicine men or spiritual advisors have been convicted of sexually abusing women and girls.

Other suggestions for alternative healing and recovery are:

- ❖ Support groups
- ❖ Meditation
- ❖ Journaling
- ❖ Art therapy
- ❖ Exercising
- ❖ Being good to yourself – bubble baths with candles, redecorating, a retreat, etc.

**Support Groups** – Groups are held any day of the week, and are structured and facilitated by well-trained advocates. These support groups are designed specifically for sexual assault survivors and should be in a confidential, safe and trusted environment for the survivors.

**Meditation** – Survivors who find meditation healing will find time and space to relax and be free from any distractions. Meditation includes Native women who relate to creation and nature by sitting quietly by water or trees. Those who find meditating difficult or wonder how to go about doing it can seek therapists who use and teach the art of meditation.

**Journaling** – This technique enables the survivor to reflect on and write about the everyday feelings and emotions they experience after an assault. Journaling can help them identify the progress of their healing journey and the empowerment they feel days, weeks, months or years later.

**Art Therapy** – Art is used to heal and empower the survivor of sexual violence. In order to bring out a person’s creativity, many art forms are explored: doll making, mask making, collages, pottery, sculpture, poetry, dancing, acting, music. Survivors lose self-consciousness when involved in art therapy and they are able to use their creative expression to feel empowered, thus allowing their spirit and emotional and mental abilities to begin to heal.

**Exercising** – Survivors of sexual assault who begin exercise programs start for a number of reasons, often not realizing that it has a healing affect. Once an exercise program has been started and becomes a daily routine, it builds character, self-confidence and self-awareness, not to mention the benefits of improved physical strength, appearance, endurance, and a healthier lifestyle. Exercising regularly can re-connect us with our bodies; it is a challenge and to face it is empowering.

**Being good to yourself** – Taking bubble baths with aromatic candles, re-decorating a part of your home, gardening, or treating yourself to a massage, dinner, a retreat, or vacation—there are a number of ways to be good to yourself. All the little things that a survivor can do for herself are signs of healing.