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## The Sweat Lodge Ceremony: A Healing Intervention for Intergenerational Trauma and Substance Use

Teresa Naseba Marsh

*Northern Ontario School of Medicine, thunzi@me.com*

David C. Marsh

*Northern Ontario School of Medicine, dmarsh@nosm.ca*


Julie Ozawagosh

*Atikameksheng Anishnawbek First Nation, ozawagosh@sympatico.ca*

Frank Ozawagosh

*Atikameksheng Anishnawbek First Nation*

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# The Sweat Lodge Ceremony: A Healing Intervention for Intergenerational Trauma and Substance Use

## Abstract

Many traditional healers and Elders agree that strengthening cultural identity, incorporating traditional healing practices, and encouraging community integration can enhance and improve mental health and reduce substance use disorders (SUD) in Indigenous populations. Despite the fact that traditional healing practices have always been valued by Indigenous Peoples, there is very little research on efficacy. Recent research by one of the authors in this group (T. Marsh) has shown that the blending of Indigenous traditional healing practices and a Western treatment model, Seeking Safety, resulted in a reduction in intergenerational trauma (IGT) symptoms and substance use disorders (SUD). This article focuses on the qualitative evidence concerning the impact of the traditional healing practices, specifically the sweat lodge ceremony. Participants reported an increase in spiritual and emotional well-being that they said was directly attributable to the ceremony. This study demonstrates that it would be beneficial to incorporate Indigenous traditional healing practices, including the sweat lodge ceremony, into Seeking Safety to enhance the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples with IGT and SUD.

## Keywords

post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, substance use disorder, intergenerational trauma, two-eyed seeing, Seeking Safety, traditional healing practices, decolonizing methodologies, Indigenous worldviews, sweat lodge, sharing circles, Elders

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## **The Sweat Lodge Ceremony: A Healing Intervention for Intergenerational Trauma and Substance Use**

The contemporary challenges of violence, substance use, intergenerational trauma symptomology, and mental health problems in Indigenous communities are an indication of the impact of colonization, including residential schooling and other factors, on individuals, families, communities, and nations (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Miller et al., 2011; Spittal et al., 2007). Barman (1996) stated, “the high rates of impoverishment, incarceration, suicide and alcoholism in Canadian Indigenous peoples, can be traced back to the abuse received at residential schools” (p. 273). Familial fragmentation and disintegration are evident in Indigenous communities where interpersonal, individual, and familial violence, as well as drug and alcohol dependence are pervasive (Bombay et al., 2014; Chansonneuve, 2007; Kerr et al., 2009; Spittal et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2003). The blending of Western approaches and traditional healing (or attention to culture) has been reported as a successful element in substance use disorder (SUD) programs designed for Indigenous Peoples (Jane & Glode-Desrochers, 2014; Tousignant & Sioui, 2009; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004).

A few case studies report the incorporation of healing rituals into conventional counselling and treatment interventions (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1998; Duran, 2006b; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). Scholars, traditional healers, and Elders encourage and utilize integration; however, some feel that these approaches require additional scientific evidence to support their use (Hill, 2003; Poonwassie & Charter, 2005; Stublely & Rojas, 2014). Currently, Indigenous Peoples and communities are challenged by the huge service gaps in areas such as withdrawal management, trauma treatment, aftercare, and psychiatric care (Hart, 2007; Jane & Glode-Desrochers, 2014; Spittal et al., 2007). Recent studies demonstrate that it could be beneficial to incorporate Indigenous-healing practices into the Western treatment model Seeking Safety (Marsh, Young, Meek, Najavits, & Toulouse, 2016; Marsh, Cote-Meek, Young, Najavits, & Toulouse, 2016; Najavits, 2002). Furthermore, this integration could enhance the health and well-being of Indigenous people with intergenerational trauma (IGT) and SUD (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016; Marsh, Young, et al., 2016). One of the key components of the Indigenous Healing and Seeking Safety (IHSS) intervention was the sweat lodge ceremony. While the broad set of Indigenous healing practices utilized in the previous study of IHSS are discussed elsewhere (Marsh, Coholic, Cote-Meek, & Najavits, 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, Toulouse, Najavits, & Young, 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016), this article explores in-depth the application of the sweat lodge ceremony as a component of IHSS.

### **Literature Review**

The key to healing following the experience of residential school abuse and its intergenerational effects lies in the area of reclaiming identity (Bombay et al., 2014; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999; Waldram, 1997). Reclaiming Indigenous identity means recovering traditional values, beliefs, philosophies, ideologies, and approaches, and adapting them to the needs of today (Brave Heart, 1999; Chansonneuve, 2007; Duran & Duran, 1995; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Kovach, 2010; Marsh, Coholic, et al., 2015). This reclamation process encompasses both individual and collective identity, and it can be sought by way of traditional healing methods.

According to the World Health Organization (2000), the term *traditional medicine* refers to:

The sum total of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences Indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness. (p. 1)

The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) defined traditional healing as:

Practices designed to promote mental, physical, and spiritual well-being that are based on beliefs which go back to the time before the spread of Western 'scientific' bio-medicine. When Indigenous peoples in Canada talk about traditional healing, they include a wide range of activities, from physical cures using herbal medicines and other remedies, to the promotion of psychological and spiritual well-being using ceremony, counselling and the accumulated wisdom of Elders. (p. 348)

There appears to be a consensus amongst researchers and practitioners that restoring traditional healing practices and knowledge is a pathway to both empowerment and health for Indigenous peoples and communities (Brave Heart, 2003; Duran, 2006; Hill, 2009; Menzies, 2014). However, in order to achieve this goal, the traditional knowledge once practiced in historical Indigenous societies needs to be restored and included in the interventions aimed at addiction, trauma, and the epidemics facing Indigenous peoples (Duran, 2006; Thatcher, 2004). While it is a common Indigenous belief that traditional culture and knowledge are important for promoting community health and well-being, little effort has been made to investigate the healing benefits that Indigenous people have always acknowledged (Duran & Duran, 1995; Mussell, 2005; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Warry, 2008).

Although sweat lodge ceremonies have historically been an important part of Indigenous cultures throughout North America, little evidence supports the efficacy of this intervention. However, there is now a revival of traditional Indigenous ceremonies, and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have increasingly utilized the sweat lodge ceremony as a means of healing in multiple dimensions of body, mind, emotion, and spirit (Moodley & West, 2005; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Walkingstick & Larry-Osborne, 1995). Also, sweat lodge ceremonies are now offered in prisons and substance use treatment centers, and treatment providers agree to its recognition and growing acceptance as an important aspect of healing for Indigenous Peoples (Colmant, Eason, Winterowd, Jacobs, & Cashel, 2005; Gone & Waldram, 2008; Kovach, 2010; Stewart, 2008).

The universality of the sweat lodge ceremony among Indigenous Peoples—including American Indian tribes from coast to coast, in Alaska, across Canada, and in Mexico—is well documented (Colmant et al., 2005; Colmant & Merta, 2000). Furthermore, evidence of North American Indigenous Peoples using the sweat lodge ceremony can be found as early as 400 B.C. (Abdullah & Stringer, 1999; Brave Heart, 1998; Colmant et al., 2005). There are differences in rituals and traditions associated with the sweat lodge ceremonies. These differences are dependent on

location, territory, and cultural practices. For example, some ceremonies may include drumming and gift offerings to the ancient ones, while in other cases it could be part of a Sun Dance. Colmant et al. (2005) found that use of the sweat lodge supported the building of group cohesion, which many Indigenous Peoples in North America have also reported. Many Elders and traditional healers teach about the connections to spirit, family, and friends that are shared and cultivated in a sweat lodge ceremony (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016; Menzies, Bodnar, & Harper, 2010). Furthermore, Elder Rolling Thunder, in his teachings, highlights the importance of laughter, presence, and support to others in the sweat lodge (cited in Crow, Mails, & Means, 2001). Elders teach that the sweat lodge ceremony serves a sacred purpose through the ritual healing or cleansing of body, mind, and spirit while bringing people together to honour the energy of life (personal communication Elders Julie and Frank Ozawagosh, January 5, 2013). The Elders teach that each person enters the lodge with his or her own challenges, suffering, conflicts, addiction, and concerns. This sitting together brings connection, truth, harmony, and peace through sweating, praying, drumming, sharing, stories, and singing.

There appears to be a scarcity in the research literature reporting the effectiveness of the use of the sweat lodge in contemporary settings. Schiff and Moore (2006) examined the impact of the sweat lodge, examining the outcomes in the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical realms by interviewing 42 Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals with experience of sweat lodge ceremonies over a period of 4 months. Changes in quality of life, health, and spiritual and emotional well-being were measured using the SF-36 quality of life measure, the Heroic Myth Index, and a multipurpose health index. Results showed a significant increase in spiritual and emotional well-being. They concluded that this outcome was directly attributable to participation in the ceremony (Schiff & Moore, 2006).

Over a three-year period, Gossage et al. (2003) explored the impact of sweat lodge ceremonies on inmates at the Dine' Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Participants included 123 inmates ranging in age from 18 to 64 years, and all were included in the sweat lodge ceremonies. Four self-administered questionnaires were developed to gather data from the inmates. Results showed significant improvement in several cultural, social, and physical variables, including increases in the participants' relationship to the mineral, animal, and human world; increases in the level of social and family support; decreases in violent acts; decreases in medical problems and the degree to which participants were bothered by those medical problems, along with increases in feelings of overall physical wellness; and substantial improvement in marital relationships (Gossage et al., 2003). In another study, the authors reported that they observed sweat lodge participants were less worried and had a higher level of self-esteem (Ross & Ross, 1992). In a review of the literature, Colmant and Merta (1999) found that many American Indians spoke about the importance of socialization and friendship and the healing properties that come with laughter in a sweat lodge.

In a recent study that reviewed the literature on interventions to treat SUDs in Indigenous populations, Rowan et al. (2014) reported:

Seventeen types of cultural interventions were found, with sweat lodge ceremonies the most commonly (68%) enacted. Study samples ranged from 11 to 2,685 clients. Just

over half of studies involved quasi-experimental designs (53%). Most articles (90%) measured physical wellness, with fewer (37%) examining spiritual health. Results show benefits in all areas of wellness, particularly by reducing or eliminating substance use problems in 74% of studies. (Abstract, Results section, para. 1)

While many of the studies on sweat lodge ceremonies support the effectiveness of the intervention and blending Western and Indigenous approaches to healing from SUD, none addressed the integrated treatment of IGT and SUD.

## **Methods**

This study seeks to explore in detail the sweat lodge ceremony as a component of the Indigenous healing practices utilized during Najavits' study (2002), which demonstrated the integration of Indigenous traditional healing practices into the Seeking Safety model produced a feasible, suitable, and beneficial group treatment for IGT and SUD in Indigenous women and men (see also Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). A qualitative, Indigenous decolonizing methodology was used during this project. The two-eyed seeing approach was used to guide this research process. This approach was selected because it aligns with decolonizing and Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Many Indigenous scholars agree that the process of decolonization requires ethically and culturally acceptable approaches when research involves Indigenous Peoples (Menzies et al., 2010; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). The two-eyed seeing approach is consistent with Aboriginal governance, research as ceremony, and self-determination. In other words, it is consistent with the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP<sup>®</sup>; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2007; National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2008; Wilson, 2008).

A previous study by Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al. (2015) utilized a mixed-methods approach, which includes both quantitative and qualitative methods, guided by cultural ethics and protocols. The qualitative findings for this article are drawn from this study. It was also critical to conduct this research in a honourable, honest, respectful, and humble manner. Cultural knowledge carriers, including Elders, an Indigenous advisory group, Indigenous scholars, and clinicians, were invited into this process as consultants. The presence of an Elder in the sharing circles and sweat lodge ceremony was an important healing practice within the two-eyed seeing approach. Aboriginal Peoples have long recognized the role of the Elder as integral in the healing process. Elders' skills, knowledge, and their ability to help individuals restore balance in their lives have earned them a significant place within Aboriginal communities (Menzies et al., 2010). The Elder's presence in the sharing circles was reflexive and culturally adaptive. The Elder taught about two-eyed seeing, while also focusing on the positive identity of each person in the circle. They also helped to develop a connection to the spiritual world through their teachings. The teachings, wisdom, guidance and feedback of these knowledge carriers were critical to the success of this research. The results of the qualitative and quantitative outcomes of the IHSS intervention are discussed in separate articles (Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). The purpose of this article is to give a more detailed description of one of the cultural interventions, the sweat lodge ceremony, drawn from the qualitative data.

## Methodological Overview

While the detailed methodology of the IHSS study has been reported elsewhere (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2015), the approach utilized to generate the qualitative data on sweat lodge ceremonies is briefly described below. Four facilitators and two students were selected to lead the Seeking Safety groups, which for our purposes were called *sharing circles*. The Elders advised that these individuals should be Indigenous and have experience working with Indigenous Peoples. All four facilitators had previous experience working with women and men who have experienced IGT and SUD. As a competent practitioner in the Western Seeking Safety model, the first author trained the facilitators in group facilitation and delivery of the sharing circles. The training lasted for 1 week, 8 hours per day, and consisted of didactical, experiential, small-group learning, and practice sessions. The training was video recorded so that facilitators could critically reflect on their techniques. Furthermore, discourse on group methods, group process, therapeutic use of self, and expectations were included. The facilitators offered tobacco bundles to participants, which had been prepared ahead of time. The facilitators took time to explain the respectful rules for the sharing circles. The first author remained mainly in the background, but was always present to help and support. Since the first author interviewed all the participants, they welcomed her presence and at times would invite her into the circle to give a teaching.

Participants were recruited by counsellors and healthcare workers from the following locations: N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, Iris Addiction Recovery for Women, Salvation Army Addiction Treatment Centre, Waters of Change Counselling Centre, Rockhaven Recovery Home for Men, Shkagamik-Kwe Health Centre, and Ontario Addiction Treatment Centers (OATC) Sudbury. In addition, participants were also recruited via workers on reserve in the area surrounding Sudbury. Referrals were sent to the first author who held appointments with prospective participants.

A convenience sampling approach was used to recruit 24 participants (12 women and 12 men) who self-identified as Indigenous. All participants were willing to accept a method of treatment that incorporated Indigenous traditional healing practices. In addition, all participants resided off reserve in Northern Ontario and were between the ages of 24 and 68 years (with an average age of 35 years). Of the 24 participants, 16 identified as Ojibway, 2 as Cree, and 6 as Métis. Furthermore, all participants self-reported that they had IGT and SUD (actively using or not), no active psychosis, no acute withdrawal, and no current suicidality or homocidality. The cultural informants deemed self-reporting culturally appropriate for identifying substance use and trauma symptoms. The Laurentian University Research Ethics Board approved this study in May 2013. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## IHSS Intervention

An initial 90-minute meeting was conducted with each of the participants. During these meetings, participants received information about Seeking Safety, traditional healing, sharing circles, sweat lodge ceremonies, and the program details. The men's sharing circles ( $n = 12$  participants) took place at the Rockhaven Addiction Recovery Home for Men, located in

Sudbury, Ontario. The female sharing circles ( $n = 12$  participants) took place at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in the same city. Each of the sharing circles were co-facilitated by two Indigenous healthcare workers and one student and included both Seeking Safety material and approaches. These facilitators organized and led sharing circles twice a week for both the male and female circles for 13 weeks. Each weekly sharing circle was 2 hours long. To encourage a holistic view of mental health and substance use (which includes connection to community), many Indigenous protocols were incorporated into the sharing circles. Each sharing circle was opened and closed with smudging, ceremonial drumming, and singing. Tobacco, a plant recognized in Indigenous culture for its sacred and healing powers, was prepared in bundles in advance of the sharing circles. It was offered to each participant for protection and healing. Participants were also invited to participate in three sweat lodge ceremonies held in Weeks 3, 9, and 12 of the intervention period.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis approach and results have been published in an earlier paper (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). All discussions from the sharing circles and the semi-structured interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word using numbers to maintain participant confidentiality. After transcription, a qualitative thematic analysis was performed to search for themes that emerged from the text of each individual post-treatment semi-structured interview, and the end-of-treatment sharing circles. Themes were identified via careful reading and re-reading of the data by the primary author. The identified themes were then categorized as pattern recognition occurred. The following four core themes were identified:

- a. Healing through traditional Aboriginal healing methods;
- b. Education and knowledge about Seeking Safety and material;
- c. Awareness and understanding of the link between trauma, substance use, and the impact of colonization; and
- d. Integration and application of knowledge.

During data analysis, the Elders explored the four core themes and decided that these themes connected with the teachings in the Medicine Wheel. Based on the recommendation of the Elders, the results were depicted through the lens of the Medicine Wheel (Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016), in order to authenticate the Indigenous decolonizing methodology of two-eyed seeing (Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). Next, member statements that corresponded to a specific theme were identified and transformed into meaningful units, and then coded into subthemes.

### **The Sweat Lodge Ceremonies**

The sweat lodge ceremonies were conducted by Elders Julie and Frank Ozawagosh from the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek (Whitefish Lake) community. These sweat lodge ceremonies were offered in the above-mentioned community and the lodge was built by Elder Frank Ozawagosh. Elder Julie taught that the sweat ceremonies helped repair the damage done to the spirits, minds, and bodies of the participants. During the sweat ceremonies, Elder Julie gave



teachings about Indigenous traditional healing and its restorative power. Participants were also invited to share their stories and experiences. Three sweats were offered for each of the groups over the period of three months. The Elders and the advisory group recommended that sharing circles and sweat lodge ceremonies be offered separately to male and female participants. The Elders advised that gender division was important to ensure that participants felt comfortable and safe during the sharing circle sessions. However, the male and female facilitators attended both sets of ceremonies to offer additional support. Not all participants were able to attend the ceremonies; on average, 8 of 12 participants were present. Consent from participants was obtained for the sweats. The sweats were conducted in a dome-shaped and circular lodge, built low to the ground.

### **Teachings, Preparations, and Protocols**

All the participants and facilitators received teachings from Elders Julie and Frank before they participated in a sweat lodge ceremony. The Elders taught that even people that are experienced with sweats, and attending a ceremony led by a properly trained ceremonial leader, could suddenly experience problems due to underlying health issues. They recommended that people only attend lodges with traditional spiritual leaders who are recognized by their community to conduct ceremonies. Elder Frank also gave a powerful teaching about the preparations before the sweat lodge ceremony. For example, the collection of the rocks (grandfathers) and the wood for the fire, as well as the cleaning of the lodge is a sacred ritual that is performed weeks before the sweat ceremony. This teaching helped the participants to appreciate and respect the creation and hard work of Elder Frank. Furthermore, Elder Julie talked about the physical risks related to the reports of lodge-related deaths resulting from overexposure to heat, dehydration, smoke inhalation, or improper lodge construction leading to suffocation. She assured us that she and her helpers were trained and well aware of risks, and that they took precautions to avoid these kinds of accidents by using proper technique. The lodge was properly constructed with great care, and with respect for the environment, and for the materials being used. Elder Julie also talked about the precautions with regards to heat exposure and explained that it gets very hot in the sweat lodge. The rocks used to heat it are glowing red and water is poured on them to create steam that is at least as hot as the boiling point of water. Participants were also taught to leave the lodge if they experience discomfort. Simple garments were recommended: men wore shorts and women wore a loose dress or skirt. Participants were asked to bring two towels into the lodge with them: one with a wet corner to help with breathing at hotter moments and to wipe the sweat, if desired, and the other for use for personal waste: For example, if the participant felt the urge to spit. Two persons remained outside the sweat lodge to protect the ceremony, assist the participants, and aid with lodge etiquette. Some of the participants who could not tolerate being inside the sweat lodge had the option to sit outside of the lodge with Elder Frank and could still receive the benefits of the ceremony. The facilitators, students, and the first author attended all the sweats and provided support to the participants. The duration of each of the sweat ceremonies was about one and a half hours.

Many of the participants shared that they never had a sweat before and some stated that it has been years since their last sweat (see Garrett & Garrett, 2002; Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Coholic, et al., 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2015). Elder Julie continued the teachings with

the sweat lodge itself as a return to the womb of Mother Earth. The rock pit was in the center of the lodge and the participants sat along the sides of the pit facing the four directions: East, South, West, and North. Elder Frank, the Fire Keeper, had the responsibility of tending the sacred fire in which the ceremonial rocks were being heated. Participants entered one by one, on their hands and knees to show humility and respect for the Earth. Next, the rocks were brought into the lodge, arranged to represent the four directions, and the flap or door opening was sealed shut. The darkness in the lodge brings forth and symbolizes the darkness of the spirit, our ignorance, and indicates the healing and cleansing needed so that the light can come in (Garrett, Brubaker, Torres-Rivera, West-Olatunji, & Conwill, 2008; personal communication Elder Julie and Frank Ozawagosh, October 5, 2013).

The ceremony began with Elder Julie drumming and encouraging those with drums and shakers to join her. After the drumming, the Elder initiated the ceremony with prayers in her Ojibway mother tongue, thanking the Creator, ancestors, and spirit guides and animals. This was followed by a vocation to the Great Spirit, Mother Earth, the four directions, and the spirits by the pouring of special water and an herbal mixture (sage and cedar) over the heated rocks producing a purifying steam that fills the lodge. The Elder then asked the participants to share starting in the west and proceeding around to the east side of the lodge. This was repeated several times in cycles known as rounds. Participants first shared their needs and cried and/or prayed for themselves, their families, friends, each other, and asked for wisdom, forgiveness, and healing from their IGT and SUD. After each sharing, the Elder and participants would thank the Creator, and the Grandmothers and Fathers for the healing. More songs were sung, and rites and rituals performed, until the Elder closed the round. After the ceremony had been completed, the Elder gave permission for the participants to leave the lodge. In the meantime, a volunteer and some of the participants who could not participate in the sweat ceremony prepared a feast of beef, chicken, moose meat, vegetables, wild rice, and berries. During this feast, the Elders with participants and facilitators shared and reflected on the experiences through laughter and tears. Afterward, the participants took time to reflect with one another on their experience (Garrett et al., 2008; personal communication Elder Julie and Frank Ozawagosh, October 5, 2013).

## **Results**

### **The Analysis of Participants' Qualitative Responses**

Many of the participants reported that the inclusion of traditional healing approaches and the sweat lodge ceremony helped with their healing spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Some participants lamented that they had lost their traditions by growing up off reserve, or that their family did not follow the traditional way. For example, one female participant (P 1) explained:

What I found most helpful was the sweat lodge. Trying to connect, to find myself, to know me. It was really helpful to go in there. It helped me a lot.

Many of the participants felt this connection with Creator, the Elders, and spirit helpers during the sweat lodge ceremonies. As male P 16 stated:

I found that going to, incorporating the sweat lodge, having that time with the Creator, and having our Elders come in, and cultural resource people come in, were beneficial for me, being Aboriginal. There were people of our culture who were there to support us, encourage us, give us insight on how we were doing as Native people. To have them there was very beneficial. To have them be more with us would be a better component to the Seeking Safety.

Trauma destroys the bonds and connections individuals have with themselves, others, and the world. This disconnection affects their sense of community and belonging, moving them further into isolation, shame, guilt, and self-blame (Bombay et al., 2014; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Haskell & Randall, 2009; Hatala, Desjardins, & Bombay, 2016; Herman, 2015; Marsh, Coholic, et al., 2015). Throughout the ceremonies, participants expressed that they experienced a sense of connection, release, and peace through the presence of ritual and healing practices, including the sweat lodge ceremonies (Colmant et al., 2005; Duran, 2006; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016; Menzies et al., 2010).

Another male (P 24) noted:

In the sweat lodge ceremonies, we received teachings, and that was something that . . . for me it was really good because I've known Julie for some time now, and reconnecting with her and Frank was really good. During one of the sweats, I had the chance to go see one of my friends and healer, Brian, too. He was a very important part of my recovery. The spiritual component of having the sweat lodges, and teachings, and the feast, was so important. I've always believed that Native tradition, for me, it was the way to go when dealing with child and sexual abuse, and I did that before I started going to the 12-step groups. I think it was about 12 or 13 years I was working on that stuff, but it was a great turning point in my own life, having that spiritual component, the Native spiritual component.

The women and men had separate sweat lodge ceremonies and some clients commented on this. One of the males (P 15) said:

Oh yes, that's one thing I feel too. I know that in some cases, it's not appropriate to have men and women together in this kind of setting, but on certain days—like, say we had sweats or something—it could be good to have men and women in a sweat. Have that balanced energy.

One female (P 5) stated:

The sweat lodge was very powerful for all the women. Learning about the sweat lodge, because it was my first sweat. The first sweat I did was in this program, and it was good. The first sweat I did was so good. I felt so good. I felt so light after the first sweat. I didn't know that's how sweats were. Just wow. That's when I wanted to keep doing that. I wanted to keep going to sweats. That's something I'm still going to do now. And doing the smudging, and all that stuff with everything, yeah. To me, I'm used to that stuff, like

when I do circles, so I like that. I'm comfortable with all that. I expected that healing to happen, so it was good.

One of the facilitators said:

The sweats were incredibly powerful, and so healing on so many levels. I can't even articulate with words what it meant for the men. It really just added to the healing process. And the traditional healing piece in general, again, added a spiritual component that maybe otherwise wouldn't be nurtured as much. Beginning with the smudge really just framed, set the stage, for every session.

Most of the participants identified that the information in the IHSS program helped them understand why they acted and behaved in a way that isolated them from themselves, family, and community. They equally applaud the Western Seeking Safety knowledge as they did the traditional healing practices, including the sweat lodge ceremony. Also, throughout the feedback and testimonies, the participants valued the facilitators for bringing this wisdom. Many articulated in such a profound way the role the addiction played in their lives and how they needed to self-medicate so not to feel the pain of the trauma. They clearly indicated the role of the trauma and how it kept them in frozen states. There was a general consensus amongst the participants about how the sweat lodge ceremony and the teachings enlightened and changed them. As female (P 1) so clearly stated:

The women sharing in the circles brought so much knowledge. The topics informed us. Laughing helped us. The traditional approach brought wisdom. Eating helped us heal. Going to the sweat lodge was healing. Yes, all of those things were what I most remember. And the thinking and noticing brain information also really helped.

Another male (P 16) said:

Our facilitators were great. They allowed discussion. If we needed to debrief or talk about different things, the facilitators allowed that to happen. They were a part of the group. They shared their own experiences, strengths, and hopes with us. They participated in the sweat ceremonies. Everything we've done, the facilitators were there as well.

A deep understanding of the IGT, the function of trauma symptoms, and the role of the substances emerged in the sweat ceremonies and the discussions after the sweat ceremonies. For example, one female (P 12) shared:

It was life changing for me. This happened from the time that I started to the time that I finished this program. I'm no longer reliant on medications to make it through a day. I am not in panic mode without it. Every time I went into a panic attack, I didn't know how to stop it. Now I know how to stop it before it even gets to that heightened . . . it doesn't get to a peak anymore where I'm out of control. I can actually figure out my triggers, and even if something hits me, that I was not expecting, I know my body. It was

the same with the sweats, smudging, and meditation. I also got a lot out of the Native teachings that we learned. And the medicine wheel (was as powerful). To this day, I still do smudging and meditation. I know when I do it consistently, it really helps me. It keeps me positive.

Once traumatized, people often report that they are plagued by intrusive thoughts, emotions, and behaviours that are destructive to themselves and others. Consequently, they often lose the meaning of life, feel hopeless, and have times in which they feel de-humanized. Some authors refer to that condition as a spiritual crisis or soul wound (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Brave Heart, 1998; Duran, 2006; Marsh, 2010; McQuaid, Bombay, McInnis, Matheson, & Anisman, 2015). It was clear that many of the participants regained their trust in themselves and experienced a greater awareness about their thoughts and feelings during the ceremonies.

Another female (P 2) noted:

I found a calmness, as we got there, from my regular life, so I think leaving there with peace and not anxiety . . . which didn't happen very often, but if there was a triggering topic then maybe the checkout should be a focus. Other than that, I think everything was perfect. And of course, I would like to see more sweats. I feel like three sweats wasn't enough. The third sweat was probably the best sweat, but I'd like to see maybe a final sweat, after we graduate. A sweat before we get in, maybe and having Elders in the circle.

Both male and female groups reported that more sweats could have been offered. They felt that they could let go of all the pain, hurt and trauma during the sweats. Another male (P 15) indicated:

I found the sweat lodges amazing. For me, it was the smudging at the beginning, and the sweat lodges, because when I was in those sweat lodges, it gave me time to reflect on everything that we've been talking about the month before, to cry out what I needed to cry out, to let go of what I needed to, and just to want to be strong and move on with my life in a more healthy, positive way. It's been really great.

This theme emerged very powerfully in both male and female sharing circles, as well as during the semi-structured interviews. This connection to their culture, rituals, land, and healers was both healing and revealing (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016).

When participants were asked about their experience in the sweat lodge ceremonies, both men and women shared so many powerful experiences. Many indicated that the sweat lodge ceremony was a spiritually connecting experience. As one female (P 5) described it:

The sweat lodges were just an amazing experience as well. It gave me that spiritual connection, and the chance to process my thoughts and what I've learned.

Female (P 12) concurred:

This is a cleansing for the spirit along with the sweats. I don't know what else to say.

One of the males (P 16) stated:

Again, like (P 24) said, the sweat lodges, and having our Elders on board from time to time, when they were able to attend and share their teachings with us. That was helpful for me, to have them here.

Another male (P 18) stated:

I really liked the teepee at Laurentian, and the sweat lodges. I really liked the story . . . when Elder Julie came as a visiting Elder . . . about the medicine wheel and everything. I'm Métis myself, and I always wanted to learn about the Aboriginal culture and traditions.

Participants expressed how safe they felt in the sweat lodge ceremonies. As so eloquently expressed by male (P 24):

The sweats were wonderful. Elder Julie is very recognizable in this community as an Elder, a good teacher. She's safe. She's a very good woman. She is a good teacher. I've known her for a long time. Having the sweat at her and Elder Frank's place, that was really good. I thought it was a good choice. Being in the lodge was really healing and safe. There were times I remember going in there, and it was just at the right time, being a part of that sweat lodge.

This was a theme that emerged throughout. Participants felt this deep sense of connection with both Elders. The Elders brought forth this safety and enactment as mother and father during the ceremonies. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) also write about individuals in groups that mirror the action of others. In this way, they further explain, the survivor recognizes and claims a lost part of him or herself. In that moment, the survivor begins to re-join the human community (Marsh, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Many traumatized individuals lose their sense of connection and often move into isolation. Therefore, communal connection, as was displayed in the sweat lodge ceremonies, was highly effective in reducing trauma symptom scores for the participants (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016).

Many of the participants talked about the social time after the sweat when we would have our meals together. They further stated:

It gave us a chance to debrief even more or learn more about this program.

This aspect of therapy and healing is an important component and was palpable and visible throughout all the sweat ceremonies. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) concur about the power of shared testimonies of traumatized individuals. They specifically refer to the moment when two people compassionately respond to the needs of the other. The power of the sweat ceremony resulted in a reawakening that can occur through common altruism by others and the presence of the Elders (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Brave Heart, 2003; Daly, 2008; Drake, 2009; Duran, 2006; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016).

## Discussion

This study set out to identify whether or not it would be feasible, suitable, and beneficial to incorporate traditional Indigenous healing practices into the Seeking Safety treatment model for the group treatment of IGT and SUD in Indigenous women and men (Marsh, Young, et al., 2016; Marsh, Coholic, et al., 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). Within the context of this study, this article explores in depth the impact of the sweat lodge ceremony as a component of the IHSS intervention.

The teachings and healing that occurred in the sweat lodge were a key contributing factor in the benefits of the IHSS implementation project. Sweat lodge ceremonies represent a return to the womb of Mother Earth. In doing so, participants were encouraged to release the pain of the past and present and claim back the Spirit (Drake, 2009; Duran, 2006; Menzies et al., 2010; Nabigon, 2006; Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, & MacKay, 1999). Through the presence of the Elders, the Creator, and the Ancestors, all participants reported deep-level healing. The hallmark of the Western model, Seeking Safety, is to encourage safety and self-care, so that a space can be created for healing from both IGT and SUD (Najavits, 2007). All the core content in the sweat lodge ceremonies was delivered to promote knowledge and understanding, as well as to create a space and place of healing. These ceremonies were offered to help participants to heal from internalized oppression, which represent one of the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma. Once oppression is internalized, it can only be played out in two ways: people self-harm, and they hurt others, including children and family members (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Gone, 2013; Hill, 2009; Kovach, 2010; Najavits & Hien, 2013; Patitz, 2011).

The studies that exhibited evidence of the impact of sweat lodge ceremonies includes studies by Colmant et al. (2005), as well as the work of Colmant and Merta (1999, 2000). Colmant et al. (2005) confirmed changes in health and wellness after the participation in a sweat lodge or sauna. Furthermore, they showed that the use of sweat lodge and sauna stimulated and enhanced immunity, helped with sleep problems and pain management, and increased relaxation. Furthermore, the authors noted neurological sweating that positively impacted the sympathetic nervous system as well as the hormonal system (Colmant et al., 2005). Other evidence was found in the studies conducted by Gossage et al. (2003) and Schiff and Moore (2006).

There has been little research on the Indigenous sweat lodge, but stories and feedback from participants and Elders affirms that it has restorative and healing power. Many scholars have written about the support that members bring to each other in a group setting, and the healing quality of this group support (see for example Brave Heart, 1999; Duran, 2006; Jane & Glode-Desrochers, 2014; Menzies et al., 2010; Nabigon, 2006; Nabigon et al., 1999; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Similarly, the sweat lodge ceremony creates this same kind of group setting wherein many participants described the connection to others and the support they received (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). Participation in the sweat lodge ceremony was shown to provide a deeply moving and truly spiritual experience that has been reported by some as having physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. Colmant and Merta (1999) described how “the sweating process in the ceremony requires mental and physical fortitude, bringing with it a strong sense of

accomplishment, thus providing an ideal vehicle for those who want to commit to change” (p. 69). The Elders teach that the connection and the sacredness of this ceremony could be restored during the sweat lodge ceremony, and several participants in the study reported this experience. Also, many Indigenous researchers and clinicians concur that the rocks used during the sweat lodge ceremony are spirits that work for the people to reveal fears, suffering, and stories so that healing can come and be received (Beck & Spielmann, 2006; Brave Heart, 1999, 2003; Duran, 2006; Menzies et al., 2010; Nabigon, 2006; Nabigon et al., 1999). Other evidence comes from the work of Beck and Spielman (2006), who shared the teachings of the Anishnaabe peoples about the sweat lodge, and Benton-Banai (1988), the head of the Medewewin Lodge. He teaches that the sweat lodge depicts the womb of Mother Earth. Once in the womb, the prayers and ceremony help with the release of deep pain and trauma through the sweating, lamenting, and crying. Grandfather stones in the centre of the lodge are used for spiritual renewal. “The earth as mother is the nurturer of life and purifies those who enter the lodge for healing” (Beck & Spielman, 2006, p. 198).

In another example, counsellors taking part in traditional healing practices with Indigenous men reported an increased openness to treatment, an enhanced level of self-disclosure, and a greater sense of grounding or stability after these men attended a sweat lodge ceremony (Lane, Bopp, Bopp, & Norris, 2002). As one therapist suggested, “Having attended sweats, I do know that during the ceremony people are able to talk about their own victimization because of the safe and secure nature of the sweat” (Lane et al., 2002, p. 16). The seminal work of Levine (2002) on trauma healing supports these findings about sweat lodges. Levine (2002) taught that trauma resides in the nervous system and not in the events. While he did not explore the impact of sweat lodge ceremonies, his concepts and theories about trauma treatment are similar to the responses of participants who attended sweat lodge ceremonies. These changes, such as a physical and emotional well-being during and after trauma treatment as described by Levine (2002), are similar to the changes experienced and reported during the sweat lodge ceremonies (Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). Furthermore, Levine (2002) wrote that when people resource, meaning they receive or reach out for support from safety, some regulation of the nervous system is restored. Levine (2002) also agreed that people have the ability to discharge some of the gross traumatic energy that gets stuck in the body through movement, vibrations, sweating, crying, and shaking. During the sweat ceremonies, many participants reported this sense of letting go and releasing through the heat and sweating (Bombay et al., 2014; Levine, 2002; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016).

### **Limitations**

The findings in this study has been very positive and healing in an holistic way as reported by the quotes and viewpoints of the participants; yet, some of the limitations in offering sweat lodge ceremonies should be noted. First, the experiences of participants were all self-reported. Second, the participants might not have been representative of all Indigenous Peoples living in Northern Ontario, Canada. This limitation could be remedied by future research with a larger sample size and participants from a broader range of settings. Finally, the attribution of the benefits identified by the participants to the sweat lodge ceremonies does not prove causality, which



would require a different methodology. Therefore, future studies with comparison treatment and non-treatment groups would be useful.

### Conclusion

The participants who attended the sweat lodge ceremonies reported remarkable and moving experiences, including spiritual, emotional, and physical relief of painful experiences related to IGT and SUD. Furthermore, the sweat lodge experiences allowed a deep connection among the participants to themselves and others. This was eloquently described and reported by participants. Sweat lodge ceremonies as discussed by many authors and healers sustained and brought healing to Indigenous peoples and this wisdom dates back as early as 400 B.C. (Abdullah & Stringer, 1999; Brave Heart, 1998; Colmant et al., 2005; Hatala et al., 2016; Menzies et al., 2010; Nabigon, 2006; Nabigon et al., 1999). While the participants in this study saw the sweat lodge ceremony as helpful, in part because it is one of their traditional practices, among other Indigenous populations traditional healing practices vary. Reclaiming Indigenous identity means recovering traditional values, beliefs, philosophies, ideologies, and approaches, and adapting them to the needs of today (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1999; Chansonneuve, 2007; Duran & Duran, 1995; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Marsh, Coholic, et al., 2015). This reclamation process was clearly seen and reported by participants throughout the sweat lodge ceremonies. What stood out and was very significant in these findings were changes in spirituality, because such changes are a fundamental component of healing within an Indigenous paradigm. In order to confirm these findings for future studies a larger sample and the use of multiple sweat lodge sites would allow the findings to be generalized beyond the current study population. An extended study could also examine if these effects are cumulative over several sweat lodge ceremonies. This article has presented qualitative findings of the sweat lodge ceremony experiences and indicated powerful changes in the health and well-being of this group. Future research is encouraged to replicate this work with other Indigenous populations to add evidence to the benefits of such an approach (Gone, 2013; Hatala et al., 2016; Hill, 2009; Kovach, 2010; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016; Mehl-Madrona, 2009; Menzies et al., 2010).

As Indigenous people, the authors appreciate the complexities and dynamics in health policy and research. Given the complexity of the impact of intergenerational trauma on the lives and wellness of Indigenous Peoples, future treatment interventions must be holistic and multifaceted with the inclusion of cultural safety models in policy and legislation, and with research being key to making those strides and changes and elevating the health of a nation who have suffered due to the exclusion of these concepts in the past (Czyzewski, 2011; Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016). Our position remains that self-determination in Aboriginal communities can only be enhanced if the principles of cultural safety can be inclusive in decision-making, because cultural safety brings the critical lens in which unequal power relations can be explored. Holistic approaches to treatment and cultural safety prompt a moral and political discourse and dialogue that is directly linked to particular moral ends with social justice implications (Bombay et al., 2014; Czyzewski, 2011; Macaulay, 2009; Marsh, Cote-Meek, et al., 2016).

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