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Paths to Wellness:
A Gathering of Communities Addressing
Sexual Offending Behaviour

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A gathering organized by
Native Clan Organization,
Hollow Water's Community Healing program,
and sponsored by
Department of the Solicitor General Canada











Dedication

This book is dedicated to the power of the circle for this is where we come to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. It is where we come to share our stories, to bare our feelings, to listen and to learn. The circle is a place of healing from which new beginnings can be generated for each of us as individuals, and for those in our communities whom we care about and care for.



Acknowledgements

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-  To the Elders' helpers and fire keepers, who gave freely and generously of their time and positive energy.
-  Finally, to the participants of the Gathering for their openness and sincerity, for sharing such personal experiences, and for their thought-provoking contributions.

My thanks and appreciation to all who contributed in so many important ways.

Migweetch,

Lawrence Ellerby



Introduction

In September of 1998 a group of people from across Canada gathered to share their stories and experiences of how they, as individuals, agencies, institutions and communities, faced the problem of sexual abuse and sexual offending behaviour. The participants at the gathering were a diverse group: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; from urban centres and rural and reserve communities; from government departments, community agencies and people representing their home communities. Participants included Elders, mental health professionals, para-professionals, and individuals who utilized their own life experiences, personal strengths and lessons learned through their own recovery to help people heal. We all came together on a beautiful fall weekend to share and to learn from one another.

The gathering revealed itself to be a place of connectedness. We were connected to each other in many ways. Some people at the gathering were meeting for the first time and developing new relationships while others were reconnecting with old and dear friends who had been important to them over the course of their lives. We were connecting with the land as the gathering was held away from the noise, traffic and distractions of urban life and set in the tranquil, inviting and peaceful fields of the expansive prairies where we could watch the sun rise and fall. We were connecting with the Creator through the presence and teachings of the various Elders, through the fire that burned from the beginning of the gathering until it's closing, through the pipe ceremonies, prayers and songs that began and greeted each new day, and through the sweat lodge ceremonies that followed the daily sharing circles. We were connecting for an important purpose: to try and help each other understand how best to address the problem of sexual abuse and how to help people heal and be safe. As we sat in the circle over the course of the gathering, we talked about the difficulty of beginning the healing process, the steps people and communities have taken to begin this journey, the approaches that have proven to be helpful and effective, and the challenges and difficulties associated with addressing sexual abuse and sexual offending behaviour.

The following pages contain the information, personal experiences and stories of those assembled in the sharing circles over the course of this gathering. They illuminate some important issues that can assist others in considering the problem of sexual abuse and how they or their communities can respond to this very painful and damaging problem. It is our hope that the experiences of those gathered in the circle will help others in their efforts to bring voice to and stop sexual abuse so that our communities can walk along paths to wellness.



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*Paths to Wellness: A Gathering of
Communities*

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Paths to Wellness: A Gathering of
Communities 




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Paths to Wellness: A Gathering of
Communities 

Confronting Sexual Abuse in Aboriginal Communities: Facing Resistance and Moving Towards Ownership

Community Resistance to Addressing Sexual Abuse

The starting point in the circle was giving voice to the fact that many Aboriginal communities struggle to come to terms with and acknowledging the presence of sexual offending and sexual abuse. There was a strong feeling that communities were invested in avoiding addressing sexual abuse, even when they had begun the healing process for other community problems such as substance abuse, violence, and suicide. There was a consistent message that despite the lack of attention given to the prevalence of sexual abuse, incidence of sexual assault/abuse were rampant and needed to be attended to as the occurrence of abuse affects all community members.

Keeping the Secret

Acknowledging sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities has been a difficult process. Many people are reluctant to accept or face issues of sexual abuse. Often this resistance is identified as particularly common among community leaders. Participants related that while their communities had come to accept other serious problems facing Aboriginal people and communities, sexual abuse was still often buried.

“We still have the surface problems like suicide, alcoholism, child neglect – all those things that cover the big, big secret.”

“I think we're in sort of a ‘closed closet’ situation in our community right now. This kind of stuff is not really talked about.”

“I've dealt with a lot of victims in all other areas of abuse, but sexual offending was a subject that was really hard for me to even deal with because, in our family, there were a lot of abuse issues that were a secret.”

“Aboriginal community leaders ... were very, very reluctant to admit that [sexual offending] was a problem that Aboriginal people had – Aboriginal males. They were quite willing to accept that our people had substance abuse problems, that we perhaps stole things that we shouldn't have, but sex offending, no, that wasn't a problem that the Aboriginal people had.”

“Sex offences are something that is just now being disclosed in communities.”



“In my family kinship there’s probably half the people that know, they just put their blinders back on. They’re not able to deal with it.”

“Nobody wanted to talk about it. Nobody wanted to even acknowledge it. It was there. I’m sick of playing this waiting game between all of us.”

A common theme was that people felt unable to discuss their knowledge or experiences of sexual abuse. The pressure to remain silent appeared strong. People had difficulty acknowledging abuse because of feelings of fear, embarrassment, and shame. There was also an awareness about the stigma associated with being labelled a “victim”. The most significant pressure, however, appeared to come from the community’s resistance to acknowledging sexual abuse and the perception of victims/survivors and their families that no one wanted to listen to them or hear their stories.

“Victims back home, we could never ever talk.”

“The offenders could go around and brag about what they’ve done to people and nobody would say anything, but victims in my community could not talk. Total silence.”

A More Real Look: Comments on the Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in Aboriginal Communities

While there was a consistent message about the reluctance to acknowledge and discuss sexual abuse, participants at the gathering were very candid and outspoken in revealing the presence and prevalence of sexual abuse in their communities. The extent of sexual abuse described by some was staggering, given the small size and population of these communities. From the discussions held, it was noted that in many communities every member is affected either directly or indirectly by sexual abuse.

“I see a lot of abuse to the women in our community. A lot of it.”

“There is a lot of [sexual abuse] there, but stat-wise it’s not recorded. There’s a lot of things happening there that people don’t even want to talk about.”

“It’s a problem that we’re faced with on a daily basis. It never ever goes away. Eighty percent of my community were either victims or offenders. For many of us, two out of every three people has been victimized sexually. One out of every three has moved on to be a sexual offender.”

“I saw a lot of the stuff that you guys are talking about here ... a lot of sexual abuse. The term that they used in my community was ‘Gang Bang’. ... I can still see those things happening.”

“We have a hard time talking about it, but it’s happening out there in our community.”

Ripples of the Secret

Participants stressed the importance of beginning to be more open in identifying and discussing issues of sexual abuse within communities because of the way in which the abuse touches and affects community members.

“There is no family in our Nation that hasn’t been affected by sex offences. You either have a niece or a nephew or a cousin ... I have lots of cousins out there that have had this happen, or have witnessed it, or have been affected by it. You don’t necessarily have to be abused to be affected by the behaviour of somebody else who is an abuser or a victim.”

“We’re getting on with the business of healing, especially in my community with such a high rate of abuse of so many of our children and our women. We can’t even say it’s only our children and women – it’s also the men, the Elders – everybody is affected and everybody is just going round and round with some pretty painful stuff. It’s really hard for people to break out of that.”

Not only were participants able to indicate how everyone in a community is touched and affected by sexual abuse and sexual assault, but they were also able to provide important and heartfelt descriptions of specific ways in which sexual abuse affects individuals, families, and communities. Once again, the impact was not only experienced by those who had been abused, but given the interconnectedness of community members, the disclosure of sexual abuse sends waves throughout the entire community.

“She disclosed to me that she had been abused when she was ten. ... What really blew me away was the way she disclosed this. ... I have never seen anyone in such agony and such a low feeling about herself as she was telling this story of what happened to her. I just felt such rage at this man who, five minutes before I heard about this disclosure, I thought was the most wonderful man in the community.”

“I see how it affects you, ... you want to be close to your family and [the secret of sexual abuse] is in between [you]. ... It stops you.”

“We all grew up thinking that we were the only ones. So the whole issue of breaking that isolation is a biggie for the victims in my community.”



Thwarted Efforts

Community resistance to identifying and addressing sexual abuse was consistently identified both as an existing problem in many communities and as a challenge which community members wanting to break the silence and begin the healing must take on. Not only does resistance come in the form of denial or avoidance of the problem, but in some cases takes the more overt form of discouraging or interfering with efforts to develop programs to treat sexual abuse perpetrators and victims/survivors. Given this, it can be difficult for programs to succeed. Participants shared their frustrations with the difficulties in attempting to establish and gain acceptance and support for treatment/healing programs in their communities.

“Well, actually it’s not totally acknowledged. It’s the workers who are trying to address it, but the families of the offenders ... go against those ideas that we’re trying to bring forth. It brings a conflict there.”

“Because they are identifying and discussing abuse issues, the workers are blamed for the problem.”

“Our community basically is run and controlled by the Chief and Council. Anything that happens there needs to go through the Chief and Council so a lot of times, when there’s programs ... they usually get put on the shelf somewhere.”

“They tried for a while. They had a circle with teenage girls. That got dangerously close and things got shut down.”

“The only time it comes out is when somebody gets picked up that was charged for sexual assault and they go through the system. ... Then the community realizes that something has to be done so a program is put on, but it doesn’t last long.”

Understanding Resistance

While there was frustration expressed regarding the difficulty in standing up to community resistance and pursuing a healing path for sexual offending and victimization, there was a sense of understanding about the origins of the resistance:

“I think ... there is a real natural reluctance on the part of a lot of communities to deal with healing. ... [It’s] probably the most difficult thing any community and any individual can go through. I think there’s a lot of fear on the part of individuals in the community of taking that step because they don’t have any guideposts in the community to say they’re doing well or that this is the right direction or that there is some hope at the end of the journey that the community will be any better for having gone through the pain of trying.”

Taking Responsibility: A Need to Move from Community Denial to Community Ownership

Although there was frustration about many communities' unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of sexual abuse, all those gathered around the circle voiced the need to break the denial and silence, to help people come to see the need for healing and for communities to take ownership of their problems and take care of their fellow community members.

Strong Voices

It was encouraging to hear a number of stories in which individual community members and people involved in treatment/healing programs asserted the need to identify and address sexual offending and abuse, despite community resistance. These individuals bravely stood up and voiced that the secrets could no longer be kept and that the silence would be broken.

“One of the things that we’re really working hard to get people to realize [is] that we’re not accepting it anymore, that we have to say ‘No’, and we’re not sweeping it under the rug.”

“I want to have that voice for children, keep on that voice and say ‘No, no more! Nobody’s going to get hurt.’”

“We don’t close our eyes to the problems.”

Offenders as Community Members

As communities began the process of breaking the silence and confronting the resistance, there was recognition of the need to take ownership of the problem of sexual abuse. It was emphasized that both victims/survivors and offenders were community members and that we can not separate ‘them’ from ‘us’.

In keeping with Aboriginal teachings and philosophies, all individuals, families, and communities are viewed as interconnected. Offenders and victims/survivors are members of the community and are entitled to compassion and acceptance. It is this perception of offenders as relations and a commitment to all relations that paves the way for the development of healing programs.

“We have to remember that for our relatives who are in the prisons and our relatives who have done things that have not been good for us or for them, that they are still our people. They still belong to us. We still have a responsibility for them and they have a responsibility to us and we need to make sure that we are not giving charity and that we



are not looking down there at those poor people who have done these things. The only thing that we are allowed to do is to have compassion for them, to have that caring for them. We don't know in the next generation whether it's our family that it could happen to or if it's our family that might do that. If that happened we would want that compassion for our family members and that caring for our family members. So, for me, what is important to remember is that they are our people and we can't separate them and we can't take them away from us."

"At the Lodge, we're very conscious of the fact that when people come into the Lodge these are all our relations, the people who come there. But these people belong somewhere. They belong to somebody's family and that we, as people there, see them as our relations."

"I think that one of the things that makes us, [as a] people, unique in the work that we do is that connection to family, that connection to community, and that connection to each other. No matter what's happened to our people, that's never been broken. That spirit is still there."

"I think it is going to be a real healing process for all of us and I think that was one of the reasons we needed to start. ... We knew that these people have to come home and we have to face them and we have to deal with them."

"It's not like in treatment centres where, if people goof up, they're discharged or if they don't follow parole or whatever, they can be reported and sent back to jail. We don't have that. We don't have anywhere to send our people because they're our people. Where are we supposed to send them?"

Initiating the Healing Process: Where to Start; How to Start

With all this being said it can be an intimidating task to take on the challenge of initiating the healing process. Participants described ways in which they and their communities began to break the silence and began the healing. They also talked about the importance of not just learning what other people and communities are doing but developing programs and methods that fit their own community.

Getting Started

One participant provided a detailed account of the process that they and members of their community went through to begin addressing sexual abuse. They discussed how they began to look at the problem, how they prepared themselves to work with it, the steps they took to engage other members of the community and, finally, how they identified the challenges and the motivating factors that kept them going.



“What we did back home when we started to work on sexual abuse, we first worked on ourselves. All of us had been victimized as children so we all had stories. For the first time we were talking about them in our late twenties, thirties. What we did was we used a circle and we just cried, and cried, and cried. I think that first week that’s all we did was cry. Through that we started to get a handle on all of those emotions and we became stronger and stronger and over time we were able to talk about what happened to us. From there, we decided that we would target the fringe groups in the community and we would share our stories with them. And that’s what we did. We had gathered the local leadership in one setting and a lot of those men that were in as Chief and Council, all of them were extended family and they knew what happened to me and in our family kinship. So they couldn’t deny my truth and it was because of that relationship we have, it’s easier for them to acknowledge when a person from one of their own family kinships is talking. I think it’s easier for other families to deny what I’m saying, but my family cannot deny it because we all come from that same family. That’s how we did it. Another time we gathered the hidden leaders of family groups. We brought those in a circle and we formed small circles and we told our stories, shared our stories, and all of us touched every family in the community. So, that’s how we did it. The last group that we worked with was the school children. We sat with the children and we shared our stories with them. Those little ones were the ones who had the courage to do something about their own stuff. It almost felt like we gave them permission to talk about what was happening to them because all of a sudden we were flooded with disclosures. It’s always the children who have taken us to the next step. Once you give them the message that it’s okay to talk about this, that you will be there to support them and you will be there to believe them, then that’s all children need, someone to believe when they say this is what’s happening. There were times when we wanted to just give up because it’s really hard working in your community around this issue. It has always been the children who have come to remind us, you know, ‘Way back then you said you were going to be here,’ and so in subtle ways they come and remind us. They’re the ones that really challenge our way of thinking about healing. Like, ... one young victim, she was fifteen years old. She kept insisting that she had to work with her father and it was through her that we started bringing victim and offender together. So, it has always been the children who have challenged us and kept us moving, not giving up. I think they’ve really taught us that if we give up now, we’re knowingly passing down a mess to them, to the next generation. If we stop now it’s going to be that much harder for them to open this up in their time. So, it’s always a reminder that we can’t stop. But that’s how we did it.”

Other comments stressed similar themes of needing to begin to meet, talk, discuss what needs to be done, talk with other people who have begun the process and then make the effort.



“What we’ve done is sit around and talk about what’s wrong with this picture and we discuss change, how to bring about change. We just brainstorm ideas and then say, ‘Okay, we’re going to go out and we’re going to do this.’ It might not work out, but we’re working towards that change, not just one of us but four or five of us.”

“You really have to look at your own community. You’re the only person who knows the problems as well as the solutions in your community. ... You begin to look at solutions by those other people who are interested in change, talk [with people] who you’ve seen who have made changes in their lives and who are sincerely working towards that change. You discuss, ‘How do we do this?’ because that’s the biggest thing. You know, everybody works in isolation and everybody has their own mandate. The province has a mandate. The Band has their own mandate. The treatment center has their own mandate. Okay, how can you get your mandate going and how can you work best for the community? You have to really brainstorm. ... You have to take a look and discuss with people who want the change, ‘How do we do this?’. Work towards that and bring it out from your community outward and once you get working towards it you can reach to find other sources of information to help you, but your vision has to be really strong.”

“It’s good to talk to other people who are doing it. We don’t necessarily have to use their model, but it’s just a matter of connecting with them and talking to them. I think that helps. It’s not trying to adapt to their model. It’s just a matter of having a connection.”

Meeting the Community’s Needs

While the importance of talking and connecting with other people who have begun the healing process was noted, participants discussed the importance of having programs develop and evolve to meet the particular needs of one’s own community. It was agreed that while the needs and the process of healing may be similar across communities, there are still important differences that need to be attended to.

“You can come to us. You can go to Hollow Water. You can go to Peguis. You can go to wherever and get some of the information about how to do it. Obviously, your community is going to have its own way of ... developing and ... how you implement that.”

“What we found was, all the programs that were in the community, they were all designed outside and they all come in neat little packages to the community. What people were trying to do was to fit the needs of the people into the program. The programs isolate people because they come with their own little confidentiality clauses. So what we did was to break down those barriers, those artificial barriers, and we just



kept calling people together. We had to focus on the common needs because we all had the same needs in the community and we did our own needs assessment of the whole community and then we started to break down the programs and fit the programs to the needs of the people. But it's really hard to get people to see that at first. So, we just kept calling meetings to address the needs of the people and breaking the programs apart to meet the needs of the people."

"It's helpful to look at other communities, ... but what works in Hollow Water will not work in Peguis because they are two different communities. What I can get from Hollow Water might be one or two really, really helpful things, but their model will not work here. So, if the model is going to work in your community, it has to come from your community. Like was said, these programs that are put in our communities, we try and fit in them. Never have our own ideas been developed and that's why things aren't working."

"You have to know what you want out of your community. You have to know what you want to change and that's really, really important. It has to come from within your community. It cannot begin from somewhere else because what works somewhere else. It won't work here."

Other Suggestions to Support the Start of the Process

A representative from the Solicitor General's Department offered examples of some of the things their department has attempted to do to help support communities beginning the healing process.

"There are a few things we know about that can help communities. We've produced a technical series that gives communities a sense of what the issues are and how they can be addressed. Eventually there will be a film on Hollow Water produced by the National Film Board that can show communities what is happening in another community. The *Nitinaht Chronicles* is another NFB video that is about what a community has to go through to begin the process of healing and what individuals have to go through. But at the end, you actually see something has happened there. I think communities have the right to know that this is not just implementing a program. It's a process that takes time and really goes to the core of the individuals in the community. Visiting communities that have worked on those issues is useful so you can actually see it happening in a community in real time and talk to people going through the same steps you want to and maybe provide some guidance and sign posts about, 'Don't go down this road because this will just lead you to more grief,' or 'This is how we worked with the Chief and Council,' and 'This is how we dealt with the police in the community,' to give communities ideas. And that's another level of expanding your knowledge. Another one is to start to take it to another level and that's to look at processes like what Waseskun House is doing with their network which is actually trying to bring



communities together to talk about issues on a regular basis so that, via computer, you will be able to talk to people and you don't feel like you're working in isolation. That's always been a problem. I go around Canada and I can talk to communities and after a while you can almost see where they're at, where they are along their healing path. Some are moving faster and some are moving very slowly. Some have got a long way to go before they can actually think in terms of healing. The recognition that you are not alone is, I think, important. There are supports out there that you should know about and be able to use."

Accessing Funding

Discussion also focused on ways of funding treatment/healing programs. Overall participants talked about the need to forge forward and implement what needs to happen in one's community with whatever resources can be pulled together. One participant talked about developing proposals and submitting them for funding as a way to supplement and build program resources.

"Another thing that can pry money away from the government is a good proposal, something that will make a name for the government, something that is going to put something in the paper. I've been doing some research into proposals. I've been working on a project right now and that's the kind of message that I'm getting. If you can make the government look good, they'll give you the money that you need."

Treatment & Healing: Attitudes and Approaches to Addressing Sexual Offending Behaviours

Philosophies and Attitudes about Treatment/Healing

As people in the circle discussed the process of change, key philosophies that form the foundation of treatment and healing emerged. Participants discussed approaching change and treatment through a healing approach that was based on a perspective of hope and a positive expectation for change. Restoring balance and the importance of having a cultural approach to healing were stressed. It was also noted that a healing process must not only work towards addressing the existing problems, but strive to reduce and prevent such problems from occurring in the future.

Message of Hope/Healing

The healing journey was described as one of hope where there was a strong sense that people can get better, change and grow. People who had been sexually abused were not seen as damaged victims who did not have the potential to grow, heal and to move beyond. People who offend were seen as

capable of healing and were not viewed as the sum of their offending. The potential to manage risk and to move away from a life of offending was viewed as both possible and probable.

“We say things like ‘victims are damaged for life’. That’s not a message of healing for people. We say ‘sex offenders will always be dangerous,’ and ‘They must always be aware,’ and ‘They must always do these things and if they don’t then they will revert back to this behaviour.’ That’s not a message of hope, nor a message of healing potential.”

“If we treat people as they are, they are going to remain the same. If we treat them as who they can be, then there’s all that potential for health and healing and change and hope and community and all those qualities.”

“What I have learned living in Aboriginal communities is the knowledge that change can happen and, when given the opportunity, will most likely happen.”

Restoration of Balance and Accountability

The foundation of healing was described as the restoration of balance both for the individual and in the individual’s connections and relationships with others and their community. It was also noted that this movement towards balance is the responsibility of the individual, even though many people need to help him/her along the way.

“We need to be a part of helping to make it right because when we do things that are wrong an imbalance has been created and we need to provide a safe environment, an environment where they – not us, they – can restore that balance. ... We have to do it in a way that allows them the dignity and allows them to regain their own strength and their own power to be able to do that because, in my language, there’s no word for things like charity. There’s no such thing. Because if you give me charity then our relationship is not balanced because you have given me something and I don’t give anything back so already there’s an imbalance in our relationship. So, in my language there’s no word for that. We can’t do that. It always has to be a balance so we have to allow people the opportunity to also give that back and to restore that balance because it is theirs to do that. It’s not ours and we can’t take that away from them.”

“Restoration of balance for all parties is needed.”

“In our culture, the offender just doesn’t offend himself, he offends the House groups [his own and his victim’s] and that could be anywhere from five members to 200 members. They have to work together to restore that balance, that peace and harmony.”



Inclusion of Culture

For the most part when discussing the process of healing, participants talked about cultural and traditional healing and the importance of returning to the teachings and the ceremonies. The importance of Elders in the healing process was also stressed. Although it was acknowledged that there were psychological treatment techniques and strategies that are important to understand and be able to work with, the necessity of pursuing treatment in a cultural context was highlighted.

“I think it would be very important for people who work in this field to recognize that [an understanding of] one’s culture is a way to promote healing. If you don’t do that something will be lost and healing might not even occur.”

“By bringing in the spirituality and dealing with this problem ... maybe, just maybe, there’s a start there that they can head it off and teach them how to control that behaviour. It has to stop somewhere – the abuse, the anger, the criticism, all that the pipe teaches what not to do.”

Prevention

It was noted that it is not sufficient to address the damage that has already occurred as a result of sexual abuse within communities, but that it is important to get to the root of this problem and conduct healing work that will minimize the chance that sexual offending behaviour will occur again.

“We must start with the children and let them grow up to be adults who don’t have that confusion about sexuality and about how to treat our women.”

“Our efforts not only have to be to try to heal those persons who have been damaged by sexual abuse, but also to look at what the causes are and going back to those causes and trying to cut back on the abuse and prevent it so there’s not so much pain and suffering.”

The Process of Healing

Participants also talked about key elements that are part of the process of healing, things they felt needed to be in place in order to work effectively towards healing. Creating a sense of safety, taking on a caring, nurturing, non-judgmental approach, and being willing to show kindness to the people you are working with were seen as necessary components for healing to occur. It was also stressed that a healing process needs to be client-centred and meet the needs of the client rather than trying to fit the client into a pre-established treatment program. While participants also talked about the importance of clients accepting responsibility as a necessary component in the process of change, they also highlighted

the need for helpers to also take responsibility for the roles they play and their interactions with the people they are working with. Finally, it was noted that it is important to be creative in approaching healing and to try and use different methods that will engage and benefit the people you are working with.

A Safe Place to Heal

Participants discussed the reluctance and fear associated with disclosing sexual abuse. One of the most highlighted treatment strategies presented by participants was the need for a safe place for victims/survivors and offenders to talk about their secrets of sexual abuse.

“We still have not been able to reach our men. It’s still not safe for them to talk about what’s happened to them. It only comes out in situations where they’re forced and it’s almost like they have to offend first before they can deal with the pain that they carry. So it’s still not quite safe for men to disclose about the abuse.”

“What I find in my community is the need to build a safe community. I think for all victims and offenders that’s the main thing. Somewhere where they can feel safe, where they can expose all their secrets.”

“I think it boils down to safety, setting up a process where people feel safe to deal with what they need to deal with.”

“If there’s alcohol or drug abuse, they have to leave. If there’s any violence or threats ... Those are things that are non-negotiable because it has to be a safe place.”

A Caring and Respectful Approach to Offender Treatment

The teachings and experiences shared by participants emphasized the importance of treating all people with respect, dignity and compassion. In this regard participants described viewing offenders as human, having problems with sexual offending behaviours, rather than labelling them ‘sex offenders’. Consistent with this, and with a traditional approach to healing, participants talked about a holistic approach to healing within the individual in which the person must strive to balance the four dimensions: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. In this regard, participants recognized the importance of addressing sexual offending behaviour but stressed the need to acknowledge and attend to all aspects of the individual. Participants emphasized acknowledging the positive qualities of people who engaged in sexual offending behaviours and the need to recognize, identify and enhance these qualities. It was felt that by empowering people to feel better about themselves there would be an increase in their ability to manage their problems.



“We have to offer them that same chance to have respect and to have the honour and the dignity and all those qualities that each of you have talked about here in this circle.”

“The acceptance of people as individuals having done hurtful things [is important], but that’s not who they are. That is one of their actions, not all of them.”

“There are many ways, and much less judgmental ways ... of accepting, valuing people, appreciating people, and all of that person.”

“At the Lodge it’s our belief in that spirit that all of our people still care, no matter what they’ve done. They feel remorse. They know what they’ve done wrong. There’s no question that they know what they’ve done wrong. We don’t need to beat them up with it. They already know that.”

“The people who are doing the offending, they’re not sexual offenders, they’re people. They’re the people of our community. What they’re doing is something bad, but they’re still people who are members of our community. I think that’s the part that we try to hold on to and we try to help them to see again that they are worthwhile human beings and that we care about them. We don’t like their behaviour and we won’t accept that behaviour, but we want to encourage them as people. We try to really bring out their skills and talents and use what’s good about them so that they can feel better about themselves. That part seems to be working. When they feel better about themselves, then there’s less reason for them to use that behaviour that made them feel better in the past. These guys all have great talents and great skills and all we have to do is bring them around and encourage it.”

A Client-centred Approach

There was a consensus among the participants in the circle that healing had to be client-centred. In this regard the focus of the healing had to meet the needs of the individual if healing was to be successful. This translated into two primary approaches to treatment/healing. First, not all offenders could or should be considered the same; therefore treatment planning needs to be individualized. There was less of an acceptance of ‘canned programs’ that provide the same programming to all people with little flexibility or responsiveness to the individual. Second, there was a strong belief that the clients should be part of the treatment planning process and active members of the treatment team since they are the ones who are the focus of the change process. Participants noted that by not placing ourselves, as experts of others’ treatment/healing, and by allowing individuals to guide and direct their own healing, we help people to engage in and be empowered by the process of change.

“Often when people call us for a treatment plan or a guide on how to work with offenders and a guide to how to work with victims, it’s not easy to get because you



don't treat all offenders the same; you don't treat all victims the same. They all have different issues and how they cope is different. It's such a difficult question to answer when people ask, 'How do you work with offenders and victims?'. So, we do a lot of case conferencing and assess the case and come up with a treatment plan for each individual case."

"That fellow should be there.' They call that client-centered. They have to have a sense of ownership to be taught accountability and responsibility."

"We have individual counselling with our clients and, like I said, we try to allow the clients to say what they need, let them guide their own healing, let them say what they need because they know themselves best. We never ever claim that we're experts. We're just community members who want to ensure that the abuse stops. We've got skills but there's always this misunderstanding we get from the community that says that we're experts. We're not. We're just learning as we go along too."

"I think one of the reasons why we do have success in this area is because we work together [with the clients]. It's really about responding to the needs of the men that we work with."

"[You need to] respond to their needs. He's telling me how he wants to work and it's up to us to respond to that."

"I've never seen more success than when you have that person you're working with be there, right there, involved from day one."

Client Responsibility

A client-centred approach demands individual accountability. There was recognition that for the healing process to begin, the individual must have some desire and motivation to heal and must take responsibility for him/herself, his/her behaviour, and his/her involvement in the healing process.

"Well, one thing I have to say, no treatment in the world is going to help anyone ... unless they want to help themselves."

"There's something that you hear here, 'Take it with you. If not, just leave it. Don't take it with you.' and the first question I say, 'Are you here for yourself or are you here to beat the court system or what?' And a lot of them say, 'Yes, I really need the treatment. I need to go.' I ask them, 'Why, why? Is it for you or is it for something else?' And that's the whole thing. You have to want to do it."



A Creative Approach

Consistent with not having set and standardized programs that are expected to fit every individual was the sentiment that people needed to be creative and willing to explore different ways to try and help people heal.

“The other thing I would encourage, certainly, is creativity – going outside the mould of the mental health profession and looking at ways of engaging people when ways that they’ve tried haven’t worked, and feeling a sense at your gut level that you can try something different. In many cases it works.”

The Power of Simple Acts of Kindness

Consistent with the messages of treating individuals who engage in offending behaviour as people who are greater than the sum of their offending, and taking a caring and respectful approach to healing, participants talked about the importance of showing concern and caring through simple acts of kindness.

“Just simple acts of kindness and caring are things that so many people didn’t have and they need to re-learn that. We are the people who have a responsibility to give that back, to give that nurturing, to have that understanding of how we care for each other because we are related, because we are relatives. We find that works more than a lot of the punitive stuff that we’ve tried before.”

“[A loving approach] is something that they don’t practice in the mainstream treatment center. They would never go and give one of the patients a hug; never look happy to see them. They think, well, these are just patients and we’re here to treat the illness. If they could get to the person behind the illness, recognize that there is a human being there, and reach out at the most elementary level, that, to me, would get you more results. I’ve seen that happen time and time again.”

“I recall this person saying to me ‘I don’t remember the last time that somebody just touched me because they cared about me. The only touch I’ve ever known is sexual’. They started crying and everybody started talking about their experiences.”

“People who aren’t bonded and attached to their own people typically, when they’ve come from abusive backgrounds, need to be reintegrated into the touch. ... In every session touch a shoulder or make some sort of physical contact to facilitate the bonding. I do the same thing with my kids and I would support that sort of touch and hug.”

Therapist Accountability

While often the focus is on the offender and his/her need to take responsibility and to meet a certain level of expectation, discussion also noted the importance of accountability on the part of treatment providers, the need for them to meet certain expectations, and the reasons for this.

“If we say we’re going to do something, we better do it. We can’t just leave at 5:00 when we said we’re going to do something or check up on someone. I find a lot of it will work for you, a lot of it is nurturing and expectations.”

Language

The importance of language and the need to understand and allow for people to heal and to process their feelings in their first language, which may not be English, was highlighted by participants.

“I deal with a lot of different people who come from different backgrounds – Cree, Lakota, also Ojibwa. Sometimes it’s very interesting and sometimes it’s very hard. The hardest part is ... they can’t express themselves in any other way than their [own] language.”

“Yesterday morning, I talked to a boy there who couldn’t speak English. I made the mistake of speaking English.”

Participants described some of the differences between the Aboriginal language and English:

“We don’t have technical language. We don’t talk about breakthroughs or anything like that. We deal with it very straight forward, from our heart.”

“It’s a whole lot different than the way it’s expressed in the English version. There are no swear words out there in that language, just a general description of how they got involved, why they got involved, why they’re conditioned that way, what they thought was the normal way of doing things.”

“I find that in our language you can’t sustain that anger, you can’t sustain that rage. So, it’s much safer to work through that anger and rage in my language because I can process quicker to the hurt. If I use the English language I tend to get stuck in my rage and I can’t go beyond it.”

Participants described the importance of knowing the abilities and language of the person you are working with and the need to try different ways of communicating with people to be able to help them.



“I tried to talk to him in those terms but he didn’t understand a word. He came to talk to me after and gave me a cigarette and apologized for not being able to understand. ‘I didn’t understand what you said to me.’ I really felt bad about that because I didn’t realize that there are some people back there that are still following the Indian tongue. To me, they are fortunate that they can still talk the language. I learned from him. I learned how to be humble in that situation so now I guess from that point I have to change my approach to find out who I’m talking to first, right from the start, [without] flying off the handle and going on and on. I have to see who I’m talking to first.”

“Many native Elders use the circle of life to try to help rectify the lives of sex offenders. We found that many of these sex offenders could not relate to you explaining the circle of Life so consequently we drew pictures. People can relate to a picture very readily and many of the men that we worked with only had a grade three or four education. Many didn’t speak English, but it worked out quite well with that system.”

“If I could go and take a general language course, this person might feel more comfortable talking in his own language. To me, that’s really exciting.”

Understanding and Responding to Client Resistance

The issue of resistance was an interesting area of discussion during the gathering that generated lots of interesting and important thoughts about resistance. Comments focused on how best to respond to resistance and an understanding of the origins of resistant client behaviour.

A Caring Response to Resistance

It is not appropriate to view resistance in negative terms and judge resistant individuals as unmotivated. Rather, difficult clients who are not willing to address their personal issues resist as a response of fear and mistrust. Resistance was also seen as a way of testing the treatment provider to see how they will respond. As a result, supporting someone to work through resistance takes patience, persistence and caring rather than a punitive approach.

“I think part of that resistance is a test to see if you really care, ‘Do you really, really mean that you want me to be a part of this? I don’t believe you because no one else has ever done that.’ They will deliberately sabotage what you’re trying to do just to test to see if the care and support is really there. So it requires that persistence.”

“One of the things that really works is being persistent and never ever giving up, not giving up on them. They do that very thing, the testing, and one of the most effective ways that I found that works for me is that loving approach.”



“You have to connect the mind with the heart, the feelings, because a lot of times people don’t do that and it’s easy to justify and it’s easy to make excuses because it’s all up here. When you’re not dealing with what’s happening ... people mostly talk with their head and not with their heart and you have to break those walls. Because there’s no person we can’t work with.”

“So, when you do the things that we were talking about, whether it’s the nurturing or the persistence, it’s not only good for us, it’s not only good for the people we work with, but all the people who are around it. It’s so powerful because their resistance starts to come down and their attitudes start to change.”

Part of the caring response to resistance also involved increasing the level of both support and monitoring for individuals who were challenging the healing process. This was interesting as there was an awareness and appreciation that there needed to be closer attention paid to the individual, but again this was placed more in the context of additional supports rather than through punitive measures.

“Instead of trying to punish them, we simply tighten that support circle and put a little more monitoring with them, and support. We pair them up with somebody who is doing better so they have a buddy in the community, so they would have their own mentor who is also in treatment. By bringing in more people for support and getting more involved they see that we do care and we’re trying to help. As well, there is a sense of monitoring what they do. The more people they have who could say, ‘Do you really want to do that?’ would help challenge the destructive thinking where they would try to sabotage their own work and treatment. For many that worked pretty well.”

Involving Family in Breaking Down Resistance

Another important point in dealing with resistant clients is family involvement and the importance of them being aware of the client’s risk factors and wellness plans.

“I found working in a community setting that it’s very difficult to try to get a resistant person involved if the family isn’t there – his wife or whoever he considers his significant people – because a lot of times when these guys come out only they know what they’re supposed to do. They won’t tell their partners, their relations, the people in the family system, what they’re supposed to do. So, how do the family help them? Sometimes they call it ‘tough love’ if they don’t know. So, one of the things that really has to happen, and maybe the fellow may not want the family to be in on it, but it seems to help a great deal when they can be involved right from the start and in terms of what they call case work in the community.”



Balancing Responsibilities to the Client, the Criminal Justice System and the Community with Resistant Clients

At times responding to resistance can become more complicated when there are parole conditions or probation orders that stipulate what the individual is required to do and what behaviours they cannot engage in. As well, when there is ongoing probation/parole supervision, treatment providers can be in a position of being responsible for providing care to the offender as well as having to be accountable to parole/probation and for community safety.

Participants raised the challenge of dealing with relapse and aspects of offenders breaching parole and returning to prison. They raised the concern that incarceration is not a place of healing and expressed an understanding of the difficulty in changing behaviours and lifestyles. Participants acknowledged that they did not want to send members of their community back to prison as well as the responsibility they felt towards addressing these challenges in a supportive manner. Suggestions were put forward about dealing with more higher risk situations.

“Yanking them out and putting them back into a prison setting would do nothing but feed the anger and the mistrust for the system.”

“If we breach them, those who are on probation to us, ... all the system has to offer is to put them in jail. That’s the dilemma we face.”

“We’re in a much more difficult position because men in our treatment program are typically on parole. So, when you have someone who is really resistant or who is really struggling and has done all sorts of things they’re not supposed to be doing, we’re always grappling with what do we do with this because we’re in the middle. What do you tell a parole officer? What don’t you tell the parole officer? What’s serious? What’s not serious? How do you build support? I mean, I think it’s easy to get into the whole punitive side, it’s easy to report somebody and say, ‘Well, they’re not complying,’ but it is more of a challenge to try and work with the resistance. I think in 11 years we’ve terminated three people from treatment so our hope is always to find a way to engage them.”

While individuals sometimes struggle whether or not to breach a client, it was identified that we as helpers have to be honest in our approach. It is our responsibility to hold individuals accountable for their behaviour.

“We have to be honest in what we’re doing. What they’re doing [when being resistant] is not being honest. They say they’re going to do this and they’re not doing it. Well, we have to be honest in our approach and to really deal with it if we feel that they’re not doing the things that they said they were going to do. That’s the role we have, a place



we don't like to be, but we do it. With one particular person, he's been through the system many, many, many times and he hasn't changed. He's gone through all the programs. He knows it all but he hasn't changed. He's still not getting it. ... He's not supposed to drink and we end up being at the same place because he's drinking and he's doing it just flagrantly and we can't sit back and just pretend it isn't happening because then we're doing exactly what has happened for years. So I think we finally decided that we have to inform his probation officer and then it's up to her what she decides to do. Otherwise we're not being honest and we're not breaking the silence either. That's one of the ways that we look at it. We have to continue to be honest with ourselves and with them but we also have to show that we still care. If he goes back to jail we'll still be there when he comes back. Even if we believe that people don't do anything in jail, and I'm sure that's not true, people are still thinking, feeling, human beings. Something happens in jail. It may not be good, it may not be bad, but they do some thinking. People don't stand still and maybe that can be helpful, especially when they know that we're still there when they come back."

Confronting Resistance through Breaching Probation or Suspending Parole

While people agreed that it was important to work with rather than punish resistance, it was noted that at times individuals did have to take responsibility for their decisions not to cooperate or to work on themselves and at times the consequences of this was being returned to prison. While the participants at the gathering were concerned about the incarceration of community members and questioned the rehabilitative potential of correctional facilities, some examples were provided where a return to prison had an effect in breaking down resistance.

"Sometimes guys will tell you that [being returned to prison]was important, that the message was important, the time out was important, having the structure and time to re-think where he was going."

"The point is not to just say, 'Oh, he didn't do well, so let's get him,' and then send him back to prison. The trick is to conceptualize why you feel this action is necessary, what you hope will happen because of it, and what you are going to do next. We were working with a fellow who we found out was stalking kids and he was using lots of pornography of children. His behaviour was out of control. His choices were obviously really, really bad and the decision was to have him go back into the institution but not to just leave him there and forget about him. He was there for a period of two weeks, but in that two weeks a lot of stuff was done in terms of working with him in the institution and planning his coming back out and how that could happen in a safer way. Sometimes that needs to happen."

"They're choosing to be part of our program or they're choosing to do something else. If they choose not to be involved in the things that we're doing, we have breached some



of those people and they have gone back to jail. But one of the things that we do is that we maintain that support. We visit them in jail and we say, ‘You know, we’re still here if you’re interested in our program and we’ll still be here when you come back out. We still care about you.’ ”

Ways of Teaching and Healing

Traditional Approaches to Healing

When the participants began to discuss the ways in which healing occurs, the focus was on traditional forms of healing. Approaches included storytelling, use of humour, self-disclosure on the part of the helper and healers, prayer, Medicine Wheel teachings, and ceremonies.

“I always like to give teachings in story form.”

“I express to them how I felt in the situation.”

“I try to teach them through the different groups that you go through, the different walks of life starting from the baby, to the youth, to the marriage state, to the guardian state, to the Elder state.”

“I try to teach them from the pipe.”

“The common thing we do is we have circles with the clients.”

“The standard we offer is circles with the team bi-weekly for offenders and victims and group work is offered.”

“We are working towards doing some victim/offender mediation.”

“We are looking at a very holistic model for our treatment program. We’re now working with couples and we hope in the near future to extend that to families because people need to hope and to heal holistically.”

Introducing Men Who Offend to Traditional Healing and Spirituality

It was noted that typically the men who have engaged in sexual offending behaviour do not have much familiarity with their culture, native spirituality or healing. Sadly, it was noted by some, that the first exposure to this comes from having been incarcerated where they are able to access Elders and ceremonies as part of prison programming. Participants talked about the importance of introducing

people who are healing from sexual abuse to the traditional ways and to teach them how to become involved.

“It made me think of one old man, an Elder, who said, ‘For many years we’ve been taking the wrong medicine. You know, a doctor said you can’t take someone else’s medicine,’ and I said, ‘Well, maybe you’re right.’ He said, ‘Why don’t we let our culture lead us, bearing in mind that many of our men that we work with today had never been exposed to Native culture.’ ”

“To me, these men are still boys because they’re still learning the ways. By participating in the sex offender program – basically that’s what I deal with – there are a lot [of offenders] coming over [to traditional healing and spirituality]. They’re quite curious about what we’re doing, by the way we approach their problems, about how we handle treatment here. There are a lot that are coming over, to come and learn. A lot of those people come from foster homes, from adopted homes. A lot of them don’t even have their own names. They have adopted names and they’ve never had the opportunity to participate in the ceremonies like this. They would be very curious about this ceremony because they’ve never seen it before. And there are a lot of people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who are coming to join the program, the circle, because they feel it’s a way that they can release that tension that they have, the burdens that they are hiding.”

“When I first went to [the prison] none of those guys knew how to sing. Now, at the end of close to six months, now they’re starting to. When they start, already you can hear them sing. So, the guys are learning. But that’s something they want to do for themselves. That’s how I told them, ‘If you want to sing, you have to do it yourself. I can’t sing for you. I can’t get inside your voice, inside your head and sing for you. You have to do it.’ And it’s the same way with the spirituality of the ceremonies. They have to do it for themselves and I know once they’ve got some place to go and to do these things and be able to help themselves, it can work.”

Openness and Honesty in the Circle and Ceremony

The Elders talked about the importance of teachings, ceremony and rituals. They discussed the power of holding the eagle feather and how this encourages self-disclosure and truth. They also noted the importance of people talking in the circle or in ceremony and how this can help others in the circle open up or see some of the similarities between their lives and those of others on the healing path.

“He was holding the feather and the medicine was burning. He said, ‘I’ve been dishonest with you. I haven’t built up my trust but I want to tell you why I’m in here. I’m in here for sexual assault and it was my niece.’ And I was waiting for reactions from the other men. ... And then all of a sudden some of the other men started disclosing about



how they had been sexually abused and they had never ever disclosed, not even to their case workers or anybody. It was never on file. So, when you are really sincere working this way, especially spiritually and using medicines, it really works.”

“I just want to say that’s always amazed me about the circle: the more people talk and express themselves, it seems their journeys are so similar. If they’re not, there’s such a perfect reason that people are there sharing this information.”

Everyone is Equal on the Sacred Grounds

One of the themes of the circle was the need for respecting others and not being judgmental. This was raised both in terms of not differentiating sex offenders from other types of offenders and not discriminating between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders when it came to participation in traditional healing.

“We don’t discriminate. Anybody can come here to these grounds for whatever purpose they’re here for – spiritual help, healing.”

“I don’t know if I’m working with sexual offenders or not because I don’t ask. I don’t know what it’s like out west but in the east they’re integrated. Everybody’s equal, no matter what your charge. So, when we do our sweats, when I go in with the conductor, everybody comes out of the lodge friends. When we’re on those grounds, we’re all equal. We’re all the same. There’s no hatred; there’s no nothing. What happens off those grounds I don’t know about, but while we’re on those grounds, I stress to the guys that we’re all equal.”

Elders Teachings

Over the course of the gathering Elders provided a variety of teachings. These teachings focused on how we as helpers can take care of ourselves, grow and stay strong. The Elders also shared teachings that they felt were relevant for people who had engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviours. The following include a number of the teachings provided during the gathering.

Not Harboring Bad Feelings

The importance of not holding in feelings, talking about feelings, and being able to move forward from difficult feelings, was related.

“In the ceremonies, the circles, the lodges that we participate in, I recommend to these guys to leave it there. They talk about their problems in there. ...You leave it there.”

Keeping Strong/Songs

The importance of songs was discussed. Songs were identified as a way of maintaining, strengthening and carrying on one's sense of personal identity. They were also viewed as a way to lift one's spirits and to feel better about oneself.

“The songs are as old as the hills, maybe older. We haven't changed them. We follow them year in and year out. The songs that I follow are my grandmother's songs on one side, and my grandfather's songs on the other side. The struggles ... even though we feel bad, we still carry those songs to lift us up and to lift up people.”

Importance of Prayer

Prayer was identified as a basic way of communicating with the Creator that anyone can do. The Elders talked about the importance of prayer, of seeking strength and guidance from the Creator, and of knowing that anyone can pray.

“Our job is the prayers,’ one Elder told me. ‘If you don't know how to talk to the Creator, you can always make up a prayer. Make one up. You can do it.’ And that's how I learned. Nobody came and taught me how to pray.”

The Importance of Truth, Understanding, Respect and Knowledge

One Elder highlighted the importance of the teachings of truth, understanding, respect and knowledge and described how these teachings are connected and their role in the healing process.

“So, when we go in there and I talk to them, I say that the first teaching we give to you is *Truth*, and when we deal with Truth we deal with everything. They admit that they committed an offence. That goes to everybody that teaching of Truth. Some of us don't want to deal with Truth. It's a long journey to deal with the first step and the first step is Truth. Those that were affected by the abuse, they've got to deal with it and they've got to make it come out. The next teaching that comes from that is *understanding*. You have to understand what Truth is, whether it's within yourself or within the community. You have to understand what it is. The third teaching is *respect*. You have to respect that Truth, you have to respect that understanding. You can understand and respect. And the fourth one is *knowledge* that you know how well the other three work with the one.”

Treatment/Healing Targets



In addition to the above teachings, other areas were identified as being important to attend to in the treatment/healing of individuals who have engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviours.

Learning to Replace Deviant Interests

It was noted that for some people their offending behaviours are strongly ingrained and they have developed a sexual deviancy in which they demonstrate a sexual interest in children or are not inhibited by sexual aggression. For these individuals it was noted that, as they work towards letting go of these unhealthy and hurtful interests, they must learn something new to replace them.

“The people there that have sexual deviancies, that behaviour, when you deal with and you change that behaviour, I think you have to replace it with something because they made that as part of themselves, that sexual deviance that they have. So, if you take something away from there you have to put something back in so we’ll have to come up with some kind of a plan or action to replace that –something that’s good.”

Healthy Sexuality

Participants discussed that not only is it important to address sexual offending behaviours but we need to teach and focus on healthy sexuality.

“We have a human sexuality group that is for offenders who are charged with sexual assault.”

“Because of all of the influences ... healthy sexuality, healthy relationships, caring, respectful relationships don’t exist very regularly and we tend to focus on unhealthy sexuality rather than talking about what might be a caring, nurturing relationship. So we’re trying to focus on some of those areas and allow and create opportunities to have people learn and to be supported in that process.”

The Need to be Open and Responsive to Culturally Appropriate Healing

As noted earlier, a cultural approach to treatment/healing was described as a fundamental component of the process of change. The need to be open to cultural ways of healing was highlighted. Participants who did not initially consider this talked about the evolution in their thinking and practice. Other participants talked about the way in which cultural issues can be misused, abused or ignored, resulting in a negative outcome.

Learning Over Time

While many of the Aboriginal members of the circle were aware of the importance and value of traditional healing practices, some of the non-Aboriginal participants highlighted the need for treatment to be culturally responsive. These individuals discussed their own personal growth from not appreciating the importance of culturally relevant interventions to seeing the value and significance of them.

“When I started working in Florida there were many people from different cultures and I didn’t recognize the sensitivity I should have had to those cultures. I think back to my early career and how much damage I probably did by not recognizing people and their culture, and providing effort to understand them, but things change and I’ve changed too.”

“When I first started working with sexual offenders I thought that religion or spirituality did not play a role. It also did not matter what race you were as the treatment was focusing on a specific problem behaviour – offending – that needed to be addressed. Today, I would say I believe the opposite. It is necessary to understand where people come from and the context of their lives when you are working with them. And now, instead of saying spirituality has no place in treatment, I would say that spirituality and one’s spiritual beliefs provide the foundation for treatment and healing.”

One member of the circle spoke about how, growing up, not only was he not taught about his culture and traditional ways, but was told that this way was wrong and harmful. He described coming to terms with this and having an inner feeling of the importance of a traditional path, even though this had been discouraged.

“I began to go to teachings and I would sit back because I was scared of these Indians because I was taught all my life that it is pagan, devil-worshipping, [and that] people will hurt you. They’ll put bad medicine on you. So, I always stayed far, but whenever I heard that drum I could feel it in here. I could feel it pulling me and drawing me and I would think, ‘Oh, oh, is it bad medicine that’s drawing me there or what is it in me?’ I would start to feel ... inside of me ... this new thing and I kept going closer and closer until finally I was really beginning to connect with it.”

Disrespect for Traditional Healing and the Impact of Abuse in this Area

The seriousness of disrespecting cultural ways was noted and was an area of much concern. One aspect of cultural abuse and disrespect discussed was the inappropriate use of traditional symbols.

“I’m going to share another thing with you, too. There was this one case worker ... she never came to sweats or did anything spiritually, but she knew how the guys would open up if you burn sage or sweetgrass and smudged. So, [one of the men on her caseload did] something wrong so what does she do, she lights the medicine and he



smudges. Of course, he believes that she knows. Well, anyhow, he was being really honest with her too, but of course he went ‘down river’ [moved to a higher security institution]. He told me as he was leaving, ‘so much for honesty.’ He told me what the caseworker did and what could I say? So, that’s some of the damaging things; how some people start to learn our culture and, to me, it’s twisted. To me, that’s spiritual abuse.”

Another example of disrespect was the failure on the part of people in helping positions to consider and acknowledge the importance of cultural and spiritual practices in the healing process.

“I asked to be sent back to the institution because I wasn’t allowed to do the circles. I wasn’t allowed to go to sweats. I wasn’t allowed to do any of that because the parole office didn’t know anything about these things. They didn’t understand my ways.”

Difficulties Experienced by Elders Working in Prisons

While the need for Elder involvement and traditional healing in correctional institutions was stated, there was also a sense that there was little understanding of the role of Elders or how they work within corrections. At the same time, it was noted that Elders often did not have an appreciation for the concerns and needs of corrections staff working with offenders.

“Sometimes Elders will get flack in the institutions because people don’t know what they do.”

“When I was working at the [prison], the Elder I worked with, a beautiful man, was disrespected when he first came through the gate. They told him to open up his case. He was okay with that, but this woman was trying to handle his pipe and I told her, ‘No, don’t touch that.’ She said, ‘What do you mean? Everything has to be checked out.’ I said, ‘Well, I think you better call up that fellow in Programs.’ I know I had to stop them at different times when they were trying to touch the medicine bag. ... It used to annoy me too that some of the staff weren’t respectful.”

“One time they told me to get rid of the sweat rocks. They said the men were going to use those as weapons and I said, ‘I would like to see that chalice removed from the church. That can be used as a weapon. It’s metal.’ I was trying to [give an example] so they would see it my way too.”

A Blended Approach to Treatment/Healing

There was some discussion about efforts to try and provide people with both a contemporary psychological treatment approach and a traditional healing approach in an effort to try and best meet the needs of the client. This approach was seen to have strong potential, but also had its challenges:

“We began a process that we’ve called ‘blending’, trying to learn the best of what the contemporary field has taught us about working with men who have this problem and trying to learn the best of the traditional wisdom and teachings and recognize the importance that ceremonies have in terms of healing.”

“I found that my position was sort of sitting in between. Although I’m not a psychologist and I’m not an Elder, I consider myself on that journey to understanding what both those fields are about.”

Challenges of a Blended Approach

One participant gave an example of the learning that must take place for psychologists and therapists to work with Elders and healers and how a lack of understanding of each other’s ways can lead to problems but can also be resolved through good communication and open working relationships.

“Everything that was being said, the psychologist was writing down, which I know is necessary but when I’m burning my medicine there and you’re holding the eagle feather and you’re sharing from your heart and somebody is writing that down, to me, that’s not right. So, he and I had a talk about that. I said ... ‘As a psychologist, you have your code of ethics, don’t you?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘As a pipe holder, I have my code of ethics. To me, you have your code of ethics and so do I. What the men are revealing when they are holding that feather and the medicine’s burning, I don’t want to see that on paper. When they’re talking openly without the medicine and without the feather, then you can write it down.’ So, that’s the way we work effectively.”

Punishment & Reintegration: Thoughts and Experiences Related to Incarceration and Community Reintegration

Challenges and Difficulties of Incarceration and Community Reintegration

Many individuals who engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour are charged and convicted for this criminal behaviour. While, at times, individuals receive sentences served in the community on probation, often sentencing for sexual offences involves some period of provincial or federal incarceration. Participants discussed their feelings and thoughts about incarceration, the difficulties associated with healing while incarcerated, and offered some alternative means of addressing individuals who offend



other than through incarceration. The difficulty of community reintegration and the importance of community support were also noted.

Attitudes Towards Incarceration

Negative Feelings about Incarceration and the Impact of Incarceration

There was a strong feeling among the participants at the gathering that incarceration was not helpful to community members, did not support the process of healing, and could have a detrimental effect on individuals.

“It’s not an environment that promotes health or healing or understanding or dignity or respect or the many things that I hear people talking about since I’ve been here. Prison promotes the opposite of that.”

“You don’t get anything in jail. You go to jail and you come back and you’re angrier than ever.”

“We have a position paper on incarceration and we don’t believe that people go to jail to heal so that’s not an option yet.”

“[Prison] creates horrible attitudes.”

“In our community we also don’t believe in incarceration.”

One participant noted that while they did not view incarceration as optimal, they did note that there have been changes and improvements in the correctional system.

“It’s just a warehouse to me, you know. They’re changing, though. The prisons are changing big time.”

Healing in a Correctional Environment: A Difficult Task

One participant described an experience of healing within a correctional institution environment. He made the point that coming from a medium or maximum security institution, it is difficult to maintain treatment healing gains if one is returned to their parent institution after a period of time in a treatment center.

“The treatment center broke me down where I used to cry every night with the staff. I got to call the staff on a first name basis and I really let myself go. I really took my mask off because, when I was in the institution, I had to show I was tougher than anybody. I



released that mask and I started realizing. I started talking to the staff there. I go to this treatment center and they break me down. I'm a different person and then two days before I'm going to graduate, they have a big party, a celebration. I had completed the course. Right on. I really feel good about myself and they said, 'You'll be going back to [your parent institution],' and I thought, 'Whoa, why, why?' ... I got back to the jail and one of the guys came up to me and said, 'so, how was it?' I said, 'It was good.' 'Do you want to get drunk? I got brew,' and I thought, 'Oh, shit.' He looks at me, 'Are you better than me because you just went to that treatment center?' I didn't know how to take it. But what? Here I am. I thought I was fixed. I released everything and then they ship me right back to where I came from. It was within a week I had knives, and I'm thinking, 'If anyone comes in, I'm going to stab him.' That was the atmosphere that I got thrown right back into."

Alternatives to Prison

Participants felt that there needed to be another way to address individuals who engage in criminal behaviour other than through incarceration. Although there were not many alternatives identified, the use of sentencing circles as a method of hearing cases and coming up with alternative sentencing and the use of camps versus incarceration were suggested.

"The Inuit community, for the past three years, has been very involved with doing sentencing circles. ... The sentencing circles are done without any court involvement. Recommendations are then taken to the court and, to my knowledge, have usually been accepted. There are very few people now being sentenced to incarceration."

"In more serious cases, one thing that I thought about – and this is just a thought, we haven't done it – is to develop something similar to a camp, a retreat somewhere. Somewhere where you take the person out of the community and you look at them and their behaviours and, whether it be for six months or a year, they're there. Then, in a way, it's like a punishment because they are removed from their families; they are removed from the community. Everything that happens there is focused on them and what they did, what they're doing, why they did the things they did."

Community Reintegration

After being incarcerated, individuals go through a process of transition and reintegration into the community. For individuals who are known to have committed sexual offences this can be a difficult process as the public may react to their release in a hostile manner. It was also noted that, whether there is public reaction or not, it is very important to have community support in place to help individuals make this transition.



The Difficulty of Community Reintegration

Participants noted the difficulty associated with reintegration into the community for some men convicted for sexual offending behaviour.

“Whenever there is a sexual offender coming to one of the halfway houses, they seem to drop the abortion signs and pick up the other signs. Somebody said maybe they just switch them around. It seems to happen [every time]. Every time they get a sexual offender, the community is right out there picketing up and down.”

“When I first went to the community they didn’t want me in their community at all. A lot of people spoke behind my back and I would walk by and I would hear their comments, ‘We don’t want your kind around here’. There were a few guys that got out recently that had the same thing happen to them.”

Community Support

The importance of community support for individuals being released was highlighted. There was much discussion about the lack of support, why support is important, and the type of support that is helpful.

“In our city there’s really nothing there to support them.”

“You’ve got to have a support system. You have to have somebody out there – family, friends, anyone – because otherwise you can’t make it.”

“I stress that the first thing that these people have to know, if they’re coming out, is [that they have] support. ... that there are people there who are going to help them. That’s the biggest thing I see. I think if people see that, you’re going to see change and you’re going to see more guys going for parole if they know they have support in the communities.”

The Helpers and the Healers: Issues Related to Individuals Supporting the Process of Treatment and Healing

The Helpers and the Healers

During discussions in the circle, much attention was given to issues relating to the individuals who are working within the healing process and attempting to support the process of change within individuals. This was wonderful as this is a topic that is often neglected. Participants discussed a range of issues including the characteristics of a good therapist/helper/healer and the preparation and training required

to work with individuals in the area of sexual abuse. The importance of the role of women in confronting sexual abuse and in leading communities to healing was also noted and discussed. Participants also voiced and tackled the difficult issue of needing to identify and focus on the problem of Elders who are not practicing healthy behaviour. This included talking about experiences with Elders who have abused their position of power and authority and have been abusive in their behaviour, the need to break the silence and no longer be inhibited by the status of Elders, recognizing that Elders are humans who may also experience problems and be in need of care and healing, and discussing possible solutions to address the issue of unhealthy Elders. Finally, the impact of working in the area of sexual abuse was discussed. Participants identified the stressors and personal impact associated with their work and related ways in which they cope with the difficulty of being part of the healing process in the area of sexual abuse.

Qualities of Treatment Providers

There was a recognition that it took some degree of personal strength to work with individuals who had engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour and that people taking on this challenge needed to have some personal qualities to facilitate their ability to be helpful and effective. Participants described personal qualities and values that helped them in being able to encourage the process of healing and empowering people. These attributes included being hopeful for change, non-judgemental, respectful, caring, accepting, and compassionate.

“It takes a special person to want to work with sex offenders. You have to be a very forgiving, compassionate person and not be judgmental. I say that because you’re dealing with people who have great loads of emotional baggage who don’t know how to get rid of it and it’s your job to help these people unload the shame, the anger, the pain, the sorrow, the remorse, all of these things. It can’t be done in four years. It’s going to take a while before that person feels well and healthy again.”

“It takes a great deal of strength and courage to be able to work in your community.”

“You’re part of the group teaching people to be given back their dignity and self-respect and honour. So, you have your hands full. You know what your purpose in life is – not only to help yourself but those less fortunate than yourself. I guess that’s why I respect and honour each and every one of you. I realize it is not a career, but it’s meaningful to you inside deep down.”

Preparing for the Work

In keeping with the philosophies of the psychoanalytic school of therapy and Aboriginal teachings, it was noted that in order to be of assistance in a healing process one must address their own personal issues first. This was identified as particularly important for those individuals who had, either directly or



indirectly, experienced abuse issues. Participants emphasized the need to address healing in their own lives before being in a position to provide treatment services to clients. Participants shared their personal stories and experiences of their own healing and training in their field. They perceive personal development and training as connected to the process of healing for themselves and as providing the foundation for their ability to listen to, support, and facilitate the healing process for others.

“How can we help other people if we can’t even help ourselves?”

“I think that’s so important to know how much our own personal journey is connected to the work we do outside.”

“One of the things that they have to do in the training program is they have to be in therapy.”

“I went for five years for the training and it was very, very difficult because I had to work on myself. I had to resolve my own issues through my own abuse before I could begin to even work with anybody else.”

“For me, I perceive treatment and training ... our own personal journeys and the work that we do as very much connected.”

“One of the things that I had to do was about forty sessions of therapy. That was part of my training and I thought ‘Why do I want to go to forty sessions of therapy? I’m okay.’ I never realized how much garbage I had. Once I started going further and further down, looking at my childhood and my life and all I had been through... I didn’t realize I had so much pain and so much tears and so much anger.”

Some of the advantages identified by participants of doing one’s own healing and training was that helpers felt stronger, empowered and better able to manage issues of abuse when they arose.

“We want [therapists] to work through their stuff first. That’s what makes them unique, because then they can handle anything that comes up. If it’s abuse, or whatever, they’re okay with that because they’ve already done their own work.”

“[Training/therapy] empowers you to feel really good about yourself and makes you realize that, yes, you can rise above all of that and still do everything you’ve ever wanted to do and believe in yourself. That’s a big thing.”

In addition to going through therapy as part of the training process, participants talked about the importance of participating in traditional healing activities and of maintaining their own spirituality as part of their own healing process.



“One of the things that we had to do before we really started the program was we went through two years of training. Most of that training was healing circles for ourselves. We had to do our own work before we could really start doing any work with the people that we wanted to help. We still have to do that and we keep forgetting about it and keep putting it off because the business keeps getting in the way, but we know that we have to get back to doing healing circles for ourselves. It’s really the most important part for me of what we do. Even though people go for counselling, and I think that’s really important, a lot happens within the circle. People do their own work in their own time in a circle and they hear what other people are doing and it makes such a big difference in how we move forward.”

“I, myself, can’t sit one-on-one with a therapist. I just can’t. I need a circle and I need a lot of support, a lot of people that care for me. That’s when I can go inside and do that ugly stuff and face that stuff in there. One-on-one is so traumatic for me. I tried it and maybe I went to the wrong person. I don’t know. ... In a sweat lodge, that feels safe – where there’s people around.”

In discussing the importance of continued healing and growth for helpers, participants noted that at times they faced community resistance and a lack of understanding about what they were doing and why this was important for them.

“We try to maintain our spirituality too in the work we do, but lots of times we get flack from community members when we try to go to ceremonies and use that as a training for us. They don’t recognize that we need to go to functions like that just for our own healing and to learn.”

Participants described that while formal training is important and valued, it does not provide the opportunity to explore your own healing, nor does it develop the much needed skills of how to listen and talk to people.

“As children we weren’t listened to and we weren’t able to talk about how we felt. So how were we able to sit with somebody who was sexually abused and listen? We have this mask on and we’re crying our eyes out and then they ask us, ‘How can you help me? You don’t even know what’s going on.’ So, we got this process started and I find that it’s really, really been helpful because we’re learning how to communicate. We’re learning how to listen and we’re not doing it by using other people. We’re using it by going inside of ourselves and saying, ‘I deserve to be listened to. I have hurts and I have feelings and I have issues and I have to deal with those before I can help anybody else.’ That’s something that formal training cannot give you.”



“No way am I going to send people to the BSW program when it teaches you academics. It teaches you those kinds of things. It doesn’t teach you how to listen to people.”

The Role of Women in Addressing Sexual Abuse and Healing

One of the wonderful gifts within the gathering was the presence of very strong women. There were women who were well along in their career path who offered insight and wisdom from their experiences and there were young women who were at the early stages of their career journey who brought an enormous amount of energy, fresh ideas and insights and a strong determination to see better things for their families, their communities and their people. The women who participated in the gathering were truly an inspiration and a source of power, strength, warmth, and hope. Over the course of the gathering, participants discussed the importance of the role women play in the healing process and in taking a leadership position in confronting and addressing the problem of sexual abuse.

“I’m extremely proud that, in my community, traditionally the women governed our community a long, long time ago. Today, dealing with abuse, it’s the women that are taking a leadership role in the healing of our community. I think that’s right.”

“It was the women in our community who felt that we needed to address sexual abuse.”

“I think that it’s the women that have the strength to deal with these kinds of problems and can give some hope to the people there.”

“We’ve been told lately that it’s the women that are going to lead the Nation because we’re the healers, we’re the strong ones.”

“We need people, grassroots people. The ladies in our community, they’re the ones that are stepping forward.”

“I like what the ladies are doing, like, the women’s movement. The women are strong. They stand up against injustice ... its women and there’s a movement there to correct [sexual abuse].”

Along with acknowledgement of the important role women are playing in providing strength, leadership and direction for healing, one participant noted the powerful impact women could have within ceremony and how this also supports a strengthened healing process.

“I don’t know how many sweats I’ve been in and when it’s a mixed sweat, it’s twice as powerful because the women can tolerate anything and it’s going to be us who lead. You can have the men up front doing all the talking but they’re not going to get the

support if they don't have the support of the females and it's us that will heal our Nations."

One of the Elders spoke of some of the teachings about respect for women, as they are warriors, the center of the family, and life-givers. Also, he spoke with a sense of humor about women making things right:

"We, as adults, have to protect our children. We can't allow these things to happen. We have to become warriors and there are warriors of many different kinds. Our women are warriors. The pain that they go through to bring our children into this earth, that's a great amount of suffering. They're warriors. They are the center of the family. So, we start with our women. Let's treat our women good. Let's respect them. The pipes, the ceremonies, all come from women and water comes from women, so they are the givers of life. I always say that the time has come, the time is upon us now where the women are coming back with the stick to swat the men on their rear ends saying, 'We put the sticks aside but we're going to take them back now and make things right.'"

Unhealthy Elders and Healers: Acknowledging and Addressing the Problem

In discussing the role of culture, traditional teachings and ceremony in healing, much emphasis was placed on the importance of Elders and their involvement in the healing process. While initially the focus was on the respect and regard that must be provided to Elders, the discussion began to shift. Participants brought forward some of their experiences, struggles and concerns about individuals who have the title of Elder yet demonstrate unhealthy behaviour and attitudes. This dialogue began slowly and cautiously and was clearly a difficult and sensitive subject area. It was as if the group was about to undertake an important discussion on a topic that had typically remained silent. However, as people began to bravely speak out and share about their experiences or knowledge of mistreatment and abuse by Elders, the discussion became more open and animated. Participants raised concerns about unhealthy Elders, or what one participant described as "sleeping Elders". They also discussed the negative impact associated with unhealthy interactions with Elders which left people with feelings of mistrust, fear, anger and, at times, a desire to give up the pursuit of their spirituality. While these concerns were expressed, compassion was demonstrated for Elders with unhealthy behaviours and there was a hope and vision that a means could be found to provide accountability for Elders and opportunities for unhealthy Elders to heal. However, there was some sense of powerlessness in how to address these issues.

The group discussed the need to think about who actually has the gifts to be identified as an Elder, the need to be less accepting of this status without questioning the individual's credibility, the need to shift from a position of placing Elders on a pedestal, and the need to hold Elders accountable for their behaviour. As well, the group discussed how the conduct of Elders might be better monitored and



methods for addressing concerns about an Elder's behaviour. This conversation was viewed as very important as it was an open acknowledgement that, while there is much to learn and gain from healthy Elders, it was also important to accept that some individuals in this role will have problems that need to be identified and addressed rather than ignored and allowed to continue and result in harm to others.

Identifying the Reality of Unhealthy Elders

The first part of this difficult discussion was the acknowledgment that there were Elders who were unhealthy and inappropriate in their conduct.

“I ran across three [Elders] that weren't working in a very good way, ... trying to take advantage of me.”

“I started to find that our Elders were sick.”

“I know we had a case in our city with an Elder who was doing Sweats and using the Sweats to approach the women and touch the women.”

“There is a big name Elder who is totally respected all across Canada and I have counselled the women that he has abused in the sweat lodge and in medicine meetings. [He has taken] them all into the bush to teach them something and proceeds to try and rape them. Meanwhile this guy is so well respected all across Canada. That really makes me angry, to know that this guy is getting away with that.”

“I know there's so many out there that are called the 'sleeping Elders'. They're into ceremonies. They do know what love means, but yet they're asleep. They haven't fixed themselves inside yet.”

The Difficulties in Disclosing Unhealthy Conduct by Elders

Individuals discussed how difficult it was to discuss and disclose the unhealthy behaviour of Elders. Issues of being taught to respect Elders, placing Elders on a pedestal, and fear were cited as the primary reasons that holding unhealthy Elders accountable for their actions has been such a difficult issue.

“It's like everybody has this fear of [acknowledging the existence of unhealthy Elders] but it's a very big concern. I'm really glad we brought that out.”

“We did put our Elders on a pedestal and I think it's very sad for many of us to realize our Elders [were unhealthy], but I think that was a good thing though because we get to remember that those men and women are still whole human beings. You were right that

a more careful and cautious [approach to Elders] is perhaps what we needed but we couldn't bring ourselves to do this because of that pedestal."

"I've always tried to treat people the way I want to be treated through the years, but during that period I put Elders on a pedestal."

"We were all taught that you respect Elders, but you don't talk about them, and you don't question what they're doing. That's especially true at a time and in certain places where the people who were working with the Elder had nothing and so anything was seen as good."

"There was a while when you would have instant Elders, people just cropping up saying that they had the right to do ceremonies and demanding the respect – and in many cases the money – from the community or from the institutions. For a long time that was noticed, but nobody said anything out of respect."

"We had a client who was an Elder. He used the culture, too. I mean, he lived by it. He claimed he did, but my other co-workers couldn't confront him. They could, but they wouldn't, because of that 'respect your Elder' thing."

One comment focused on how disclosing the behaviours of unhealthy Elders is not only difficult for individuals and communities, but also for agencies and institutions that may employ Elders.

"I think this is also a big issue in terms of Elders working in agencies and correctional institutions. Often they don't really understand Elders and what they do. If there are concerns, there is a lot of caution and reluctance to check them out or do anything to sanction them. There's probably a lot of fear about the political ramifications and what happens if you deal with it."

The Impact of Unhealthy Elders

Individuals who had experiences or knowledge of inappropriate conduct by Elders were able to discuss some of the ways in which they were affected, or felt, as a result of these contacts. Feelings of fear, mistrust, helplessness and anger were identified.

"That Elder used fear on me and I really fell right into that."

"He made me feel really obligated to him. It was like he always wanted more from me all the time. I had to keep giving."

"I thought, 'Well, who can I tell? What can I do?'"



“When I was listening to you talking about those Elders ... I have a really hard time trusting Elders too, because of what I’ve been through and what I’ve watched.”

“I feel angry about it.”

“Because of what I experienced and saw with a number of Elders, I thought ‘If this is what spirituality is about, I’m going to quit,’ because I was getting turned off.”

Addressing the Problem of Unhealthy Elders

A range of suggestions were brought forward regarding how to address unhealthy Elders and abuse by Elders. Issues relating to what children are taught about Elders, the way in which Elders are selected to do work for communities or agencies, and a process for holding Elders accountable for their behaviour were all discussed.

Teaching Children to be Safe

Participants discussed that the way in which children are taught about how to interact with adults, older people, and Elders may make them vulnerable. One person commented about the need to change the way in which children are taught so they can better protect themselves from mistreatment and abuse.

“Sometimes we have to be careful how we use the term ‘respect your Elders’ because that’s what we were told when we were growing up. ‘Respect your Elders and do what they say.’ So, that set us all up for abuse. Many of us said, ‘Okay, well, this is an Elder.’ I know there were a lot of old guys on our Reserve who were abusers and they were all Elders. We were told to respect them so they were always touching you and doing things to you that they shouldn’t have been doing, and we were confused. This is an Elder and we were told to respect and do what they were saying. What I teach my grandchildren is, “Yes, you respect the old people, but they do not have the right to touch you or do anything to you that doesn’t feel right.”

Duty to Substantiate an Elder’s Status and Credibility

Another participant related that it is important to verify an individual’s standing as an Elder and to attempt to gather information about Elders’ abilities and conduct even though this may be uncomfortable and difficult to do.

“Those of us who have to be part of the process of bringing [Elders] in, [it is important] for us to do our homework and research. I have to do that where I come from and it’s a very hard thing when you’re asked to check someone out and we all know what that



means. We talk to people in the community. What you're looking for is a consistency of the same opinion of that person's skills and abilities and his reputation. That consistency, positive or negative, is very important. As hard as it is for you, it's information you would take to someone to help them render that decision."

Holding Elders Accountable for Inappropriate Conduct

There was a strong consensus among the participants that there needed to be accountability among Elders and that there needed to be a process for addressing inappropriate conduct on the part of an Elder. Opinions on how this might be done, however, were varied. Some suggestions included the development of something parallel to a professional ethics committee; others felt it was necessary for other Elders to take leadership and responsibility for monitoring their peers; still others discussed the need for individual people, communities and agencies to shift from a position of silence to holding Elders responsible for their behaviour.

"So, having some kind of process of having people whose job it is [to oversee the conduct of Elders] ... It happens in different disciplines. Social workers have committees. If their behaviour is unethical or inappropriate, they're held accountable. So are physicians and psychologists."

"It needs to be somebody on the same level. A group, not just one, but a group of Elders who will confront this man and say, 'Hey, this is not okay. You can't do this.' "

"I think that the Elders themselves should sort that out because they [should be] policing themselves."

"I think it's very healthy for all of us to hear Elders speak out about the abuse by people who call themselves Elders."

"In the last couple of years, I've certainly heard a number of Elders stand up and publicly say that we as a community, as a people, have to watch for these people. You have to be careful in the Elders that you select to ensure that you have Elders who do have the right to do those teachings, that have gone through that healing themselves, and can reflect the teachings of their own lives. I think that's really positive."

"It's very hard still for somebody my age or younger to talk to Elders, or about Elders, but I see when the old people themselves are questioning. It almost gives us the responsibility and the right to be more cautious about who we call an Elder and invite into our communities or to the institutions."



One participant described people's reluctance to take on the responsibility of challenging and holding Elders answerable for unhealthy behaviour. The participant described an experience where they took on this task and talked about what helped them to do this in a constructive and positive manner:

“I said we could respect him, but we also have to address his behaviour. He's not really doing anything for himself. We can't let it go. And they all didn't want to say anything. So, here I am in the circle with this Elder, with other co-workers, and I looked at everybody else and I went, ‘Oh, I don't know, I feel like I have to do it.’ So I did. I told him straight, ‘Do you know what you're doing? You're hiding behind your culture. I'm not being disrespectful but I have that right to confront you.’ And he was just quiet, but it was done. I think he was okay about it. He just nodded his head and didn't have much to say after that. But if you don't take that step, it'll never get done. If you erase that ‘Elder’ thing off them and just look at him as a human being who is no higher than you, then it is easier. You have to get past how you're feeling about how you should treat people. If you've got as your focus that you're not going to stand for children being hurt, or wives being hurt, you can get a lot done.”

While there was strong agreement about the need to hold Elders accountable, there was a frustration about the lack of successful response to this issue to date.

“I feel angry because I've tried to make the changes and I know I can't.”

“I talked to some Elders and they say, ‘Well, I think what's going to have to happen is there is going to have to be a panel of Elders who will be strong enough to confront him.’ But that was three or four years ago and they say they're going to do it, but... Then I heard another one say, ‘Oh, they're going to start this panel of Elders in Winnipeg who are going to screen all of the other Elders and you can go to them and say, ‘How about this person?’.’ That hasn't happened.”

“I feel frustrated about that too. What do you do when you've already sought help from Elders and you listen to other people say, ‘Yes, we're going to start this group of Elders so that whenever you want to use an Elder, you can bring the name there and say, ‘Is this guy okay?’ or ‘Is this woman okay?’ and ‘Are they safe to use?’.’ I think that would be great, you know, that we would be able to do something like that. But when does it start?”

Supporting the Healing Process for Unhealthy Elders

While there was concern about unhealthy Elders, there was a consensus that these individuals needed to be supported to address their problems through healing. Overall, people felt that other Elders need

to be involved in the healing process for these individuals and that the process must be a compassionate one that allows the unhealthy Elder to pursue healing while maintaining dignity.

“Our Elders needed that help because, in a sense, they weren’t Elders because of their hurts and their issues.”

“I guess how to help our Elders, especially the ones who were on a spiritual path and were doing ceremonies, how to help them deal [with what is] inside themselves ... it’s very sensitive. I think another Elder would have to go and talk to the Elders, to help them on that process of healing so then there’s not that shame. They can be on the same level.”

“I think your idea that you mentioned of having other Elders who would perhaps take care of what’s going on inside them, to somehow approach them, is good.”

“[Elders] have their circles. People may not know about them, but they’re in place. They want to be very careful too, because it’s not their job to strip [Elders] and leave them without dignity, but to help in such a way, the kindest possible loving way, so that a person can deal with themselves. You don’t know what’s down the road: that Elder may have needed to help them to get better, to help someone else and truly be an Elder and a healer.”

The Need to Support Self-Care for Elders

The conversation about unhealthy Elders shifted to discussing the need to provide support and to attend to self-care for those healthy Elders who are providing spiritual care. It was recognized and discussed that Elders can spend long hours working as they may be approached at any time and be asked for assistance. The difficulty of saying no and the feeling of obligation, both when being asked for help and when presented with tobacco, further makes saying no difficult. While no solution was offered, the need to consider how to support Elders in taking care of themselves was noted.

“The Elders that I’ve fortunately had the experience of working closely with put in an enormous amount of time and it’s got to take its toll. You’re on all the time. I mean, you’re on at work, you’re on after work, people are coming to your door, you’re going to their houses. How do you help support people in terms of just taking care of themselves, taking time for themselves, having people know and appreciate what that job is and what it does?”

The Stressors Associated with Helping People Heal and Caring for the Care-Givers



The importance of managing stress and self-care was not only raised in relation to Elders, but to all those working in the healing process. Participants related that working in the area of sexual abuse, with both offenders and victims, was a difficult undertaking. Discussion focused on identifying the difficulty of the work, the major stressors associated with being a care-giver, the factors that moderate stress/distress and the ways in which people coped with the stresses associated with being a part of the healing process. These issues were noted to be important to discuss and attend to, as failing to acknowledge and address the stress associated with helping people heal from sexual offending behaviour can result in burnout and people leaving this work.

“Another problem that I see is when things start getting hot and heavy, the [workers] that can’t handle it get out of the program, quit their job, and move into another position. So there’s a big turnover in that area and we have to start over again sometimes. It’s almost a cycle for us.”

Factors Contributing to Burnout

In discussing the difficulty of this work, participants identified a host of issues that they felt contributed to job stress and could lead to distress and burnout among treatment workers and healers.

A Lack of Training

It became clear that, in many communities, addressing sexual abuse and sexual offending behaviour occurred at a grassroots level. In a number of instances, people were responding to an identified need in their community and took on the challenge of this work without training on how best to work with this group of people and with this type of problem.

“We don’t have the training in our area, but we know the needs. [We need to] come up with some solutions there.”

The Enormity of the Task

A significant theme that emerged was the enormity of the task of addressing sexual abuse and the amount of time people put into their work. Stressors were described as being overloaded in one’s work, taking on a range of responsibilities, not taking breaks from the work, feeling that there is no end in sight to the flow of work and to the work that needs to be done.

“I’m doing a lot of work. I sit on about four committees right now and sometimes I get about five or six people come to my door and they bring in some paper and say ‘sign this,’ or ‘read this’. My main job there is to counsel people and sometimes [the distractions] take me away from the focus of my job.”

“I work all year long. I wasn’t even planning for a holiday, but at the end of that year I was starting to get burned out.”

Working in One’s Home Community

For many participants the pressures of responding to the large task of addressing sexual abuse/offending, the high workloads and the tendency to become immersed in one’s job was greatly compounded by the fact that they worked in their home communities. As a result of working in the community, and with community members, treatment providers are faced with the additional stressors of not being easily able to get a break from their work and the difficulties of having to work with relatives, friends and people known to you.

“Our work is never done. It’s always there.”

“The hard part is we’re working with relatives.”

“What makes our work hard is that we all know each other in the community and we often have to work with our own families. In February, my father was charged with sexual abuse but, because I have the skills, I can sort of separate myself from reality – not reality, but I can be a worker and I can also be a daughter who is affected as a family member. So, some of us workers who have been directly affected – either we’re family of a victim or family of a sex offender – we’re such a small community there’s no getting away from it. It’s reality and we have to deal with it. For me, as a worker, my sister came over to my house one evening and she was all upset, just crying, and I didn’t understand what was going on. I thought it was her and her spouse having an argument or something. When you’re told about your father ... For me, I went through a period of shock for like four hours. I managed to separate myself from it finally. Being a worker, just automatically your role kicks in. I knew I was expected to start the process of handling the disclosure. [This means] getting the team together and ready, making an intervention plan and confrontation plan. Because of my belief that children need to be protected and that abuse shouldn’t happen anymore, I managed to keep my work hat on and get the workers together to work at what needed to be done. So, after I got the intervention going, I was released from my duties.”

It was also noted that by working in your own community you are immersed in the community’s problems. As a result, you face the knowledge of the prevalence of abuse, have to deal with the resistance to addressing sexual abuse, process the difficulty of the community coming to terms with disclosures and addressing the problem, and with the overall state of health of the community.

“It’s not just work that you’re carrying with you, it’s the community that you’re from that you’re carrying with you.”



Exposure to Trauma Material

It was recognized that hearing about all the stories of abuse and the hurtful things that people do to each other takes its toll on workers and can have an emotional impact.

“[When you have] just been through a day where you've just talked about sexual abuse, physical abuse, you get some kind of hopeless feeling [and wonder], ‘Oh, how can I get out of this now?’ ”

Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards Clients

Another identified source of potential stress and burnout was the way in which we see the people whom we work with. One person related that if we tend to see people as just “sex offenders” we can be negatively affected because we are more likely to have difficulty connecting with them and may hold feelings, like anger, that can cause hurt to ourselves. Participants again related the importance of treating people in a good way, not only for the benefit to them and their healing but also for ourselves.

“The other thing that I would say is that when I don’t, and those that I’ve met don’t, think of our clients as human beings and [don’t] treat them with that respect, then it negatively impacts us as professionals. Then we see the impact, the burnout: all the anger that we take in and don’t work with appropriately, all the stress, or all the things that one would expect you to take in when you’re working with this type of problem.”

Empathic Connections

At the same time that it was noted that seeing clients as only sex offenders could result in a negative impact, it was also related that an empathic engagement could also be a source of stress. It was clear that treatment providers and healers had a real commitment to the people they worked with. At times, the caring and becoming, or being, personally involved could be hard on the treatment provider.

“You do get bogged down and the pressure just gets too much because you care about other people’s problems.”

The Process of Healing

The journey towards healing from sexual abuse and sexual offending behaviour can be a long road that is traveled slowly, with many ups and downs. Sometimes it is hard to judge progress and the time and energy invested can lead to frustration if observable progress is not recognized.

“Once you get the offenders and victims on their healing journey, there’s no time frame. You can’t put time frames on the treatment. There’s going to be so many steps back,

you know, and [sometimes] you just feel like giving up, but you've just got to keep plugging away. You get a bit discouraged, but you can't give up."

Program Funding and Resources

A consistent problem that participants raised was that of funding for their communities and for their programs. They expressed their frustrations over trying to help their communities with limited resources as well as the lack of time and experience in writing funding proposals to obtain more funds.

"I guess the problem we're having is: where do we go for funding? We've asked different departments, "Do you have money? We have this proposal. We have this idea.' 'No, we don't have any money.' They refer us to another department and it's the same there. But there are a few of us who are not giving up on it. We're going to stick with it."

"It's been recognized throughout Canada that we're doing some good, yet when they come there are all of these things of community, but no facility. We don't have a facility – no treatment centre, no economic base, no housing."

"A lot of times you're involved in the frontline work and you don't have time to sit there and develop the ideas and the proposal and establish a new contact and to really sell the idea."

Coping with the Stress of Treatment/Healing with Sexual Offending Behaviour

Participants had lots to offer about how they as treatment providers and healers coped with the stresses of their work. The biggest form of coping appeared to be connecting with peers and helping each other along through working as a team, talking, supporting one another and having fun together.

Team Meetings

Most participants stressed the importance of working as a team and getting together as a team. What appeared to be most important was not only working and being together, but using this time to talk, vent and get things out so as to eliminate any bad thoughts or feelings and to feel stronger.

"We're really lucky. One of the things that we do is meet as a group and we try to formalize that so it does happen. We meet in different ways: we meet individually, each of the therapists with the supervisor, and then all of us meet as a team. That gives an avenue for talking and getting stuff out."



“That’s our venting time, time to allow yourself to feel that frustration and to help you calm down and regroup.”

“We also have team meetings every couple of weeks and they’re what somebody would call ‘bitch fests’. We just sit there. We complain about everybody from our board to our Executive Director to our clients and it’s just to get everything off our chests.”

Support from Colleagues

The importance of co-workers and the support from colleagues was stressed and described as a crucial component of managing stress and staying healthy and strong.

“It’s good because [my co-worker], she’s always there. When I feel in real despair, she talks me through it and she says, ‘Calm down. You’re doing a good job. You can’t expect to change the world in one night,’ and stuff like that. It really helps me to see that you have to go slow with this process and sure, things are not always easy and when things are most difficult, that’s when you know it’s working.”

“It’s very important that co-workers support each other.”

Therapeutic Support

Some participants noted that more formalized therapeutic supports were helpful and important for them so that they can address their own personal issues and job stressors on an on-going basis as part of their healing and personal development.

“I find that the best thing for me for self-care is having a therapist to help me through those days because it gets so difficult sometimes if you can’t find answers. Just talking [does not always help] because sometimes you just end up going in huge circles and you need somebody to stop you and say, ‘Now, how did that feel?’ ‘Where did that come from?’. You need someone to help you see that you are actually making a difference and that you have it in you to do it. That’s what I find the most helpful.”

Fun Meetings

While it was clear that there was an important role for serious meetings and a place to vent frustrations and to discuss concerns, it was also evident that having fun as a group and doing things unrelated to work was also an important part of coping and managing stress.

“We have popcorn at 3:30 every Friday for the whole staff. It makes a difference. Okay, Friday is going really bad and you’ve had a really bad week, so it’s a way to unwind so you’re not taking the garbage home with you.”

“What we do is we get together for dinner. We usually work a split shift, so during break we go out and have a meal and we don’t talk about anything related to work. We also gather with our bowling shoes and [go bowling together].”

Community Involvement and Connection

In addition to working and playing together as a treatment team, the importance of connecting with other people in the community doing different kinds of treatment and providing other programs was noted as helpful and rewarding.

“We had a workshop on suicide prevention [that included] not just the people from our office but the Band social workers and [workers] from the high schools. We found that we’re doing the same work, but we’re just not working together so none of us are getting anywhere individually. So we started having community meetings – we call them ‘community resource planning’ – where we all get together once a month and say, ‘This is what we’re doing,’ or ‘Do you need help with this?’. From that group of 26 people who took the workshop, we meet once a month, just to spend a lunch hour together. Because we all work for different organizations, different organizations put it up. It’s rewarding, working with other people, knowing that you’re not alone. It’s important, coming to things like this, knowing that our Nation is not alone in dealing with this issue, that it’s not just a [problem in our community] but that it’s a problem in our country. It really helps you too.”

Time Outs

Taking a break from the work and having some diversity in the things that treatment providers do was also described as a positive way to keep healthy and manage job stress.

“We’re always asked to come to things like this gathering or to go do presentations. There’s three workers so we actually all take turns going on trips to different areas.”

“I took a trip to B.C. It really helped to get away from my community. That was a way of dealing with it.”

Making a Difference: Recognition and Appreciation

Participants related that one of the primary things that maintains them in their jobs and helps them to deal with the stress of working in the area of sexual abuse is recognizing that they are making a



difference in the lives of others and in their communities and seeing the appreciation others have for the work that they do.

“What sustains me is knowing that you’re making a difference somewhere. It might not show right now, and it might not show next week, but [at some point you will see it]. When you get that hug from somebody saying, ‘Thank you for everything that you’ve done,’ it’s what keeps you going when you run into someone that is just taking forever to get through it.”

“The other way [to feel good], and supported, is when someone says, ‘Oh, you did a good job.’ or ‘It’s nice that you did that.’ You need that kind of connection with other Native people.”

“That’s why I like working: mostly because I want to have that voice for children, keep on being that voice and saying, ‘No, no more! Nobody’s going to get hurt.’ ”

An End Thought

Having had the opportunity to gather as a group to discuss issues related to the problem of sexual abuse and how to address and work towards the healing and prevention of this formidable social problem proved to be an important way of sharing, exchanging and gathering information on a difficult topic.

It is our hope that the wisdom of the participants, Elders and teachings gathered can help others move down the road to acknowledging and taking action against sexual abuse and to work with all those who are affected in a hopeful and healing way.