

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon: Healing Through Ceremony

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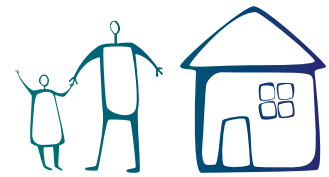
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Article abstract

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon (*Healing through Ceremony*) is an audio-visual learning experience created in ceremony and in relationship with knowledge-keepers, wisdom-holders, language speakers, and the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their descendants. In ceremony and in language, the authors met with 23 knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members who shared their experiences of “healing through ceremony.” Through protocol and relationship, the knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members gave permission to the authors to have the teachings and stories recorded and documented. The audio-visual learning experience came to be understood as an experience of kiskinowapahtam – to heal, teach, and learn by watching and doing. The teachings and stories shared in isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon guide social workers toward understanding how to support Indigenous communities in healing from the legacy of Residential Schools and the lasting intergenerational impacts of colonization. isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge regarding healing and ceremony and directly impacts current and future generations through providing this knowledge to social workers serving Indigenous communities. From this teaching experience, the knowledge-keepers, community members, and authors share a collective vision that Indigenous children, families, and communities encounter social workers who understand, honour, and trust the healing that happens in ceremony.

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isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon: Healing Through Ceremony

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 [Watch](#)¹ 23:32

Abstract

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon (Healing through Ceremony) is an audio-visual learning experience created in ceremony and in relationship with knowledge-keepers, wisdom-holders, language speakers, and the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their descendants. In ceremony and in language, the authors met with 23 knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members who shared their experiences of “healing through ceremony.” Through protocol and relationship, the knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members gave permission to the authors to have the teachings and stories recorded and documented. The audio-visual learning experience came to be understood as

1 <https://youtu.be/HUIb9kWWqhg>

an experience of kiskinowapahtam – to heal, teach, and learn by watching and doing. The teachings and stories shared in isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon guide social workers toward understanding how to support Indigenous communities in healing from the legacy of Residential Schools and the lasting intergenerational impacts of colonization. isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge regarding healing and ceremony and directly impacts current and future generations through providing this knowledge to social workers serving Indigenous communities. From this teaching experience, the knowledge-keepers, community members, and authors share a collective vision that Indigenous children, families, and communities encounter social workers who understand, honour, and trust the healing that happens in ceremony.

Keywords: isihcikewin (ceremony), nâtaiwihowêwim (healing), Indigenous child welfare

Introduction

This document is intended to be a resource guide that complements an audio-visual/written (av/w) learning experience created and designed to share collected teachings and stories exploring the vital connection between Indigenous healing and Indigenous ceremony. While this resource guide does not align with the methods of research and knowledge mobilization commonly employed in an academic research context, the resource does reflect an Indigenous method of wisdom-sharing. Our intention is to share the teachings and stories in the same manner as they were shared with us.

The teachings and stories of ceremony and healing, shared directly by knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members, can be found in the av/w experience entitled “*isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon*” which, in the *nêhiyaw* (Cree) language, means “healing through ceremony.” The purpose of this resource guide is to complement the av/w learning experience and affirm the teachings and stories shared regarding the importance of the connection between ceremony and healing within Indigenous communities. Through this audio-visual learning experience and resource guide, we hope to challenge Western definitions and concepts of trauma-informed care and support a movement toward a focus on Indigenous ceremony-based healing. It is our belief that once we become trauma-informed, it is important to ask ourselves “what happens next?” and for Indigenous communities, the response is *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon* – healing through ceremony.

Our intention is to honour and place at the forefront Indigenous pre-contact teachings on ceremony, and how healing from the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the intergenerational impacts of colonization requires ceremony. In this resource, we begin by discussing the background and development of the av/w learning experience, followed by an exploration of the foundational importance of ceremony, and conclude by discussing teachings, stories, learnings, and *nêhiyaw* worldview concepts that affirm healing only occurs within the context of ceremony.

By creating an av/w learning experience, we are inviting viewers, listeners, and readers to directly share, from the Elders, the teachings and Indigenous worldviews of ceremony and healing. From this

process, it is our hope that Indigenous children, families, and communities encounter social workers who understand, honour, and trust the healing that happens in ceremony.

Background

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) documented Canada's legacy of genocidal policies toward Indigenous peoples, and social workers were among the professionals who implemented these policies. The TRC Calls to Action (2015) tasked social work educators with ensuring that students are "properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools" (p. 1) and "the potential for Aboriginal [sic] communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing" (p. 1). The urgency of social work's obligation to support Indigenous healing is heightened against the backdrop of the profession's historic complicity with colonization and its enduring negative relationship with Indigenous communities (Leduc, 2018; McCauley & Matheson, 2018).

Social work education and professional practice continue to rely on assessment tools and interventions that pathologize symptoms of transgenerational trauma (Blackstock, 2017) and privilege Eurocentric ideas about family structure, attachment, child development, parenting, health, and healing (Blackstock, 2017; Choate, 2019; Makokis et al., 2020a; Simard, 2019; Sinclair, 2019). It is increasingly apparent that these strategies offer minimal cultural insight and are likely to be harmful when imposed on Indigenous families and communities (Blackstock 2011; Freeman, 2017; Makokis et al., 2020a; Sinclair, 2019; Turner & Bodor, 2020). Adapting Eurocentric social work practices to be "culturally sensitive" is similarly problematic as this both reinforces the existing paternalistic relationship and disqualifies Indigenous knowledge and practices (Gone, 2013; Ormiston, 2014).

An understanding of the history of colonization and its devastating impacts on Indigenous communities is slowly being incorporated into current social work education. However, prioritizing only the post-European contact narrative invites social workers into a deficit-based understanding of Indigenous communities and inhibits their recognition of the depth, complexity, and vitality of pre-contact Indigenous sciences, wisdoms, and healing practices (Absolon, 2019; Choate et al., 2019; Sinclair, 2019; Simard, 2019). For the profession to survive as one that can effectively support Indigenous peoples, social workers must increase their understanding of methods and approaches developed from and within Indigenous worldviews. In addition, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges, cultures, languages, teachings, and ceremony into social work theory, education, and practice is critical decolonizing work (Duthie et al., 2013; Lindstrom & Choate, 2016; Sinclair, 2019). Makokis et al. (2020a) specifically identify "the need to focus on ceremony-informed healing or ceremony-focused care rather than trauma-based practice" (p. 40). To move from trauma-based practice to ceremony-based healing is to move from a stance of deficit-based understanding to a place of celebration and healing.

Unlike individual- and cognitive-based Eurocentric interventions, Indigenous approaches to healing are holistic, spiritually focused, communal, and land-based (Barker, 2020; Hoffman, 2006; Ross,

2014). Ceremony is the living embodiment of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as teachings, worldviews, relationships, stories, and languages are all incorporated into the experience, and is viewed as essential to health and healing (Makokis et al., 2020a; Ross, 2014). Preparing social workers for ethical practice must include providing them with opportunities to understand, respect, and honour Indigenous ways of knowing and healing through the experience of ceremony. As of yet, few social workers have experience in this crucial area of learning and practice. Settler social workers must have an understanding of ceremony-based healing, the connections and relationships with Indigenous communities to access knowledge-keepers and ceremony-holders, and be willing to participate in (and be guided by) ceremony with Elders and service users while always remaining aware of and deeply respecting boundaries.

***kiskinowapahtam* – The Teaching and Learning Resource**

isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon (Healing through Ceremony) was created in ceremony and in relationship with knowledge-keepers, wisdom-holders, language speakers, and the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and their descendants. The av/w resource is understood within the *nêhiyaw* context as a learning process of *kiskinowapahtam* – to heal, teach, and learn by watching and doing. The av/w resource is a themed collection of teachings and stories from Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who have experienced healing through ceremony and have gone on to provide ceremony-based healing to others. The main purpose of sharing these teachings and stories in this context is to assist social workers in understanding how to support Indigenous communities in healing from the legacy of Residential Schools and the intergenerational impacts of colonization.

The development and creation of *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon* was funded by the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) Trust Fund through the University of Calgary and in partnership with *kihêw waciston* – MacEwan University. The teachings and stories shared in the learning resource were gathered from 23 Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who willingly shared their experiences and understanding of ceremony and healing. It is important to note that this resource was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and our wisdom-seeking (research) team followed all health protocols and guidelines to keep ourselves, the knowledge-keepers, and community members safe.

Most of these teachings and stories shared in *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtauihon* are from members of the *nêhiyaw* community, however, we also heard from members of the *Nakota* and *Dakota Sioux* communities. This sharing experience affirmed that ceremony is the heart of many Indigenous communities. While protocol and language may differ between First Nations, almost every community has ceremony, suggesting that the stories and lessons shared here may resonate for other Indigenous communities.

Our wisdom-seeking team reviewed the hours of video- and audiotaped teachings, stories, and quotes that were collected to identify themes and ultimately create a 25-minute audio-visual teaching resource that provides a deeper understanding of healing and ceremony. The identified

themes were shared with and accepted by the participants prior to further development. It should be noted that after 25 years of wisdom-seeking within the *nêhiyaw* community, we have created long-term, ceremony-based relationships with knowledge-keepers and community members, and as a consequence, the knowledge-keepers and community members provided us with permission to record and document their teachings and stories. This recording is acknowledged and respected as a way to preserve and ensure Indigenous knowledge is available for healing current and future generations while also educating *wichitasowak* (non-Indigenous helpers and allies). *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon* supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge regarding healing and ceremony in order to directly impact current and future generations by providing these teachings and stories to social workers and others connected with Indigenous communities.

One aspect of our long-standing relationships within the *nêhiyaw* community has been our learning that healing happens only through ceremony. The certainty and clarity of that learning has led us to strongly suggest to social workers and others that if one is unable to support and be involved with ceremony and healing when in a helping role, perhaps one should not be working with Indigenous children, families, and communities. In response to the unfortunate yet often-repeated statement that “there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in child welfare” (or justice, or health, for example) our team has created the more accurate perspective that “there is an overrepresentation of Western world views, values and beliefs in the lives of Indigenous peoples” – and *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon* was developed to address that overrepresentation.

kîkwây ôma isihcikêwin – What is Ceremony?

isihcikêwin (ceremony) is the heart of an Indigenous worldview and there is ceremony for every aspect of Indigenous life. Ceremony provides structure for the community and is a source of knowledge where teachings, philosophies, and traditions are shared (Makokis, 2001). These sources of knowledge, accessed through and in ceremony, include the *kiteyahk* (Elders – ceremony holders), the *oskapewisak* (ceremonial helpers), the land, the animals, and the ancestors. *isihcikêwin* creates the opportunity for knowledge sharing and knowledge transmission. Ceremony enables both the connection to ancestral knowledge sources and the process of sharing of that knowledge by the ancestors. Ceremony creates experiential learning within a spiritual and relational process (Makokis et al., 2020a).

Ceremony is an Indigenous way of education, and this understanding is reflected in the teachings of *nêhiyaw kiskinohamâkewin*, which means to teach by “doing” or through observation, mentorship, participation, and guidance that occurs in a ceremonial, spiritual way. Ceremony is not an isolated, singular event; rather, ceremony is lived across the lifespan, integrated into every aspect of daily living, and vital for growth and development (Makokis et al., 2020a). This integration of doing, living, teaching, learning, mentoring, and guiding affirms that ceremony is a way of being. In understanding ceremony, it is important to remember that we are not just “in ceremony” but rather are “living ceremony.” Living ceremony entails a different way of being in that connection is created between

mind, body, and spirit balancing the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical ways of being (Makokis et al., 2020a). This way of being, in turn, is how *miyo pimatisiwn* (the good life) is lived.

By recognizing ceremony as education and as a way of being and living, social workers can begin to appreciate the magnitude and importance of ceremony for Indigenous communities. However, in our years of work, it has often been a challenge to explain and describe ceremony to (mostly non-Indigenous) people who have not witnessed or experienced ceremony. Our response has often been that people have to experience it to understand it. One of the knowledge-keepers who shared with us, Francis Whiskeyjack, echoes this message in his own sharing: “Ceremony is a practice, a way of life that people follow to come to know themselves. It’s a sacred ceremony, it’s a practice, a belief. Until you practice it, you will not understand it.”

Explaining ceremony is often a challenge as it is difficult to describe something that is spiritual and creates connection in ways that are not seen or tangible and instead are visceral and universal. In recognizing ceremony as the heart of community, our team often describes ceremony using a metaphor of a heartbeat. There are processes and mechanisms that keep our hearts beating that we are unaware of – unless we specifically focus our intention on them. We do not necessarily “know” our heart is beating, but we sense and feel our heart beating:

We are rarely conscious of the beat of our heart, and we do not have to make an effort to make our heartbeat. Ceremony is like our heart and our heartbeat – it is there all the time, often not consciously, working hard to keep us alive. (Makokis et al., 2020a, p. 7)

The same is true for ceremony; there are protocols we engage in to practice ceremony and we can come to understand the teachings behind these protocols, but ultimately, we do not “know” what will result from ceremony. However, in a spiritual context, we live in relationship with ceremony and protocol, and consequently, ceremony becomes life.

When it comes to “living ceremony” or the notion that “ceremony is lived,” it is also difficult to explain and describe that sense of “living” and the “life” that is gifted to us in ceremony. The act of breathing can provide another metaphorical understanding of how ceremony is life. The specific process of breathing is complex; however, if we are breathing, then we are aware that our breath gives us life and without it we cannot survive. Indigenous teachings share with us that breath is one of the four sacred elements (air, fire, water, and earth), each of which has a role in ceremony. Ceremony is like breathing; ceremony gives us life and without it, we cannot survive. When we pass on, we give our breath back to the ancestors.

Our intention of creating *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtawihon* is to share what it means to “be and live in” ceremony in order to convey the healing that happens only within the context of ceremony. In this written guide, we continue to discuss ceremony and healing based on the teachings and stories shared in the audio-visual resource. This discussion will further support social workers with the integration of ceremony into practice with Indigenous children, families, and communities.

In the audio-visual resource, many of the knowledge-keepers and community members, through the use of teachings and stories, describe ceremony by sharing their own personal healing and it is not uncommon for knowledge-keepers to answer a question with a story or a teaching. The stories and teachings shared here honour the practice of *nehiyaw kiskinohamâkewin* and exemplify how ceremony is lived and is similar to the beating of our hearts.

***isihcikêwinihk ekwa nâtaiwihon* – Ceremony and Healing**

In *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon*, the knowledge-keepers and community members shared many thoughts about colonization, the Indian Act, Indian Residential Schools, the government-sanctioned outlawing of ceremony, the Pass System, and many other mechanisms and forces of assimilation, oppression, and trauma. When reflecting on this history, Arnold Alexis shares, “That’s why all our communities suffer, because that was taken from us... they need to understand that... we need that back for our young people, for our grandchildren, to follow prayer again.” Cynthia Cowan adds to this message by sharing, “[There are] so many broken people out there, they need to understand... the things our ancestors stood for.” These teachings reinforce that it is vital for social workers to understand ceremony and the importance of children and families experiencing ceremony, where they are connected to spirit, in order to heal from the generational impacts of colonization and assimilation.

The Indigenous knowledge-keepers and community members who shared their stories conceptualized healing as a shared and collective journey. The teachings of healing and spirituality support the need to integrate ceremony into the practice of social work. Cynthia Cowan explains, “The stuff that I know about should be shared everywhere because ... how are people going to understand our people if we don’t talk about it... I always want people to go [to ceremony], I’ll always hope that they connect with that spiritual part, because I definitely think that our ancestors wanted these things to still be here.”

This message reminds us that, as social workers connected with Indigenous children and families, we have a shared responsibility to grow our understanding of ceremony and to embrace, practice, and trust the healing that ceremony and spirit creates. Although this message was stated earlier, it is again important to emphasize that, as social workers, if we are unable to support and be involved with ceremony and healing in a helping role, perhaps we should not be working with Indigenous communities.

***nâtaiwihowêwim* – Stories of Healing**

Throughout the *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon*, the knowledge-keepers and community members share their own personal stories of healing through ceremony. These stories illustrate that when in ceremony, connected to spirit, one also learns about who one is as an Indigenous person. From the knowledge-keepers’ and community members’ stories, it is evident that the experiences of being in ceremony and connected to spirit were humbling, life-changing, and stripped away the years of

colonization and assimilation. Bob Cardinal describes his experience of participating in his first *matosan* (Sweat Lodge) ceremony: “I stayed four rounds, that is where I change my life, I found something there, or it found me.”

Many of the knowledge-keepers and community members describe ceremony as a safe place for healing through experiencing love and connection to spirit. Teddy Bison shares “what ceremony has done for me; it has created a safe place.” Jordan Gadwa adds that, in ceremony, “there is no other thought but love, it makes you feel at home, your spirit, it gives you that good feeling.” With regard to colonization and the continued suffering Indigenous communities face, finding a safe place to learn about identity and spirit is paramount to healing, and that space is created in ceremony. Ashley Waditaka shares that “when you are in ceremony, there is no sexual abuse, there is no hate, there is no evilness, there is no horrible things that make you feel terrible, that bring out the worst in you.” When you are in ceremony, adds Priscilla McGilverly, “you go into calmness and that’s where healing happens. It needs to be in a calm place, in a place of love – *sâhkitowin* space. When there is love, there is no shame and judgment and that’s when spirit comes into help.”

The knowledge-keepers and community members describe ceremony as “life” or being “a way of life” that we commit to on our human journey. Bill Waditaka shares that “it humbles me, this way of life, how it keeps me sober” and Cynthia Cowan adds, “I definitely credit ceremony life to helping me be strong with not drinking and not doing drugs.” These teachings reiterate that ceremony is lived, and it is a path we commit to learning and living our entire life. Francis Whiskeyjack explains that this life of ceremony begins by “being involved in ceremony and being able to start from there on that holistic path and all of that with a lot of help from the mentorship of Elders.” As Bill Waditaka shares, “we all know how important it is to get our education, but to actually learn the medicines will actually take us longer.” Harry Watchmaker affirms that “a life-time learning the sacred teachings takes time, it is life-time learning, there is no ending.”

Ceremony has been described as “a way of being” and as “a way of life” throughout this resource. For social workers, this teaching is a reminder that ceremony and a “life of ceremony” entail commitment. Finding ways to offer and bring ceremony into practice with Indigenous children and families is more than a form of intervention; it is a sacred, spiritual, and relational commitment to life-long healing. As Makokis et al. (2020a) state, “ceremony is not something you ‘do’; rather, it is a process that you participate in and experience in relationship with others” (p. 17). Ceremony is healing, and healing and ceremony are life-long. As social workers connected with Indigenous children and families, it is important that we begin in ceremony, that we return to ceremony, and most importantly, that we commit to *staying* in ceremony.

***ahcâhk* – The Importance of Spirit**

When discussing ceremony and healing, many of the knowledge-keepers and community members expressed the importance of spirituality to the wellbeing of Indigenous children, families, and communities. Priscilla McGilverly shares that “as human beings, we are vessels from which spirit

works,” and Harry Watchmaker adds that “it’s a mystery we are spirits, even all these kids are spirits.” The understanding that children are spirits is embedded within *nêhiyawewin* (the Cree language). The term *awâsis* is understood to mean “child” – “however, embedded in this term is the root word *awa*, meaning animate, and the suffix *sis*, which indicates a smaller version of the root word” (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50). When these terms are brought together, *awâsis* more accurately means “a small animate spirit” or “a small spirit engaged in a human journey” (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50). Makokis reminds us of this teaching, including the importance of language, by sharing that “*kisê awâsisak*, these are our orphans, these are our kids that are taken, *kisê* means higher than us...which means that child is above us ... that means we have to take responsibility for that child, totally love that child” (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50).

Many of the knowledge-keepers and community members shared how they are living the responsibility of nurturing the spirit of the child based on the meaning and teaching of raising an *awâsis*. Daphne Alexis emphasizes how crucial it is to “never abandon your post, those children are there, they need you, they are dependent on you, that mother bear will kill you if you touch her cubs, that’s our mentality.” This message aligns with the *nêhiyaw* teaching of raising children spiritually well:

or *miyo ohpikinâwasowin*, where *miyo* means good, *ohpiki* means to grow, and *awasow* means to warm oneself over a fire... these concepts reflect the spiritual role of raising children and how one warms their own spirit so they can then nurture the spiritual fire of the *awâsis*. (Makokis et al., 2020b, p. 50)

Cynthia Cowan shares that, for her children, “as soon as they got home from the hospital, that night they were in ceremony, they got their name that night, when their belly button fell off days after, we took that and put it in those lodges.” Cynthia is referencing the Turtle Lodge Teachings which, in our context, have been shared as *nêhiyaw* stages of development or rites of passage that encompass many teachings, ceremonies, and celebrations that are vital to practicing *miyo ohpikinâwasowin* (Makokis et al., 2020b). One key teaching, ceremony, and celebration is the naming ceremony, where the *awâsis* receive their spiritual name that reflects their gifts and purpose and is meant to guide and protect the *awâsis* on their human journey (Makokis et al., 2020b). Harry Watchmaker further adds that naming ceremonies are imperative because “it is through our spiritual names we connect to our spiritual realm.”

These teachings on children or “small spirits engaged on a human journey” are critical to understanding the importance of spirit embedded within ceremony and healing. Bob Cardinal reminds us that as social workers, “we forget one thing here when we talk about these little ones, I never heard you say anything about the spirit of that child.” In social work education, Western theories on development focus on mental, emotional, and physical development and often neglect the spiritual development of children, families, and individuals. As social workers connecting with Indigenous communities, it is crucial that we constantly ask ourselves, “what about the spirit of that child?” It is only through ceremony that the

spirit of the *awâsis* can be honoured, and according to Harry Watchmaker that is our responsibility, to “honour each student, each kid... because each one of them has a spirit.”

Conclusion: Ceremony in Social Work Education

It is critical that social work education create space to explore the meaning and understanding of ceremony and the healing that only ceremony can bring to the lives of Indigenous families, children, individuals, and communities. *isihcikêwinihk kâkî nâtaiwihon* brings forward foundational knowledge of how ceremony is integral to Indigenous healing. As ceremony is experiential and ceremony is lived, we hope that this av/w resource supports social workers in embracing ceremony and the teachings. By sharing the importance of ceremony, this project validates that Indigenous communities hold the knowledge and learning required to create healing. This knowledge and learning are embedded within spirit, and we connect with that spirit in ceremony. George Desjarlais affirms that “it’s not us losing our culture, it’s us losing ourselves, our culture has always been there.”

Ceremony has always been there.

ay ay, ekosi maka – thank you, that is all for now.

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