

STAMSH SLHANAY LLHWAT – WARRIOR WOMEN HEALING CULTURE AND CEREMONY: PREVENTION AND HEALING FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

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Background: This study captures the experiences and wisdom of a group of Indigenous women from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) in the development of a culture- and land-based, intervention/wellness program for urban Indigenous women which includes strategies for identifying the cause and prevention of substance use, infectious diseases such as HCV/HIV, as well as chronic diseases prevalent amongst those living in the DTES.

Methods: Four iterations of Elder-led sequential sharing circles, a cultural activity day, and a land-based retreat – all grounded in culture and ceremony – were held with 23 Indigenous women who reside in the DTES. Data collection and analyses were guided by Indigenous research methodologies that ensured a safe space for the women to share their experiences. In total, 18 sequential sharing/research circles were conducted with each hosting up to 8 women.

Results: Indigenous cultural practices and ceremonies, families and meaningful relationships, and the creation of safe spaces for Indigenous women are paramount in order for them to address substance use issues. Cultural and land-based practices show powerful and beneficial promise for Indigenous women in the DTES on their journey to wellness.

Conclusion: The underlying impacts of the intersection of colonialism, systemic racism and gender significantly affect their lived realities. These findings reveal the importance of resilience and determination to lead and direct cultural-based intervention and harm reduction programming for urban Indigenous women. Such programming and intervention can effectively assist the women to achieve and maintain wellness in a high-risk environment.

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