



Maine-Wabanaki REACH

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Healing Circles in Maine Prisons:

*Connecting Native People with
Community and Culture*

Maine-Wabanaki REACH
Rachel C. Casey, PhD, MSW

Incarceration of Native Peoples

In the current era of mass incarceration in the United States, unjust policies have disproportionately impacted Native people, resulting in their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.^{1,2} The most recent data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that approximately 24,000 Native people are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, while another 9,000 are incarcerated in local jails.³ These numbers likely underestimate the actual extent of Native incarceration since documentation of Native status varies greatly across systems and institutions.²

The incarceration of Native people can be understood as an extension of colonization insofar as settlers—people responsible for the development of laws and public policies, the vast majority of whom are white⁴—have orchestrated the “economic and sociocultural deprivation” of Native people through institutional confinement.^{5,6} Although the criminal justice system does not ostensibly target Native people, the disproportionate incarceration of Native people effectively replicates the colonizing effects of Indian Residential Schools by removing Native people from their tribal

communities, often for minor offenses.^{7,8} Native incarceration thus compounds the “long legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief” that Native people have endured as a result of colonization.⁹

Healing Circles

Native communities employ many traditional healing practices to counter the devastating effects of colonization. In the context of many Native spiritual traditions, the circle is considered a sacred symbol representing many aspects of cultural knowledge.^{10,11} Building upon this sacred symbol, Native communities have long used the talking circle as a ceremony to bring people together “for the purposes of teaching, listening, and learning.”¹² Healing circles, sometimes referred to as peacemaking circles, represent a specific type of talking circle intended to restore relationships through truth-seeking and reconciliation.¹³

During the healing circle, participants sit in a circle to demonstrate that all are valued members of the community.⁷ The facilitator of the circle opens with a prayer, spiritual reflection, or meditation. Participants may then practice smudging, the Native custom of burning sacred herbs to cleanse energy.¹⁴ An object, such as a stick, stone, or feather, is introduced as the talking piece for the circle; only the person holding the talking piece speaks, while all others listen without interrupting.¹⁵ Participants pass the talking piece around the circle in a clockwise

direction, perhaps several times, until the circle comes to an end. Another important aspect of circles is storytelling, which serves as the mechanism by which Native history and culture are taught.

While Native people have been holding circles for thousands of years as part of their traditional practices,^{7,10} there has been a recent trend in the use of circles by both Native and non-Native people as an evidence-based practice to promote restorative justice and healing across a variety of contexts. For example, healing circles have been incorporated into treatment services for substance abuse and trauma.¹⁶⁻²⁰ Healing circles may also ameliorate the suffering of those impacted by crime or wrongful conviction.²¹⁻²³ Activists for criminal justice reform promote the use of healing circles and other restorative justice practices as alternatives to incarceration, especially for youth ensnared in the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline.”^{24,25} Despite the employment of healing circles across these various contexts, seemingly few attempts have been made to use healing circles to promote the healing of currently incarcerated people.²⁶

Maine-Wabanaki REACH in Maine Prisons

Members of Maine-Wabanaki REACH initially held healing circles with incarcerated Wabanaki people as an extension of the truth-seeking efforts of the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was formed in 2013 in response to ongoing difficulties around the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978.²⁷ Central to the work of the TRC was the gathering of statements from Wabanaki

people about their experiences in the child welfare system, and REACH circle facilitators sought to include incarcerated Wabanaki people in this process. Recognizing the need for continued healing among incarcerated Wabanaki people, REACH circle facilitators have maintained a regular schedule of healing circles in correctional facilities across Maine since 2015.



The healing circles are offered in 12-week sessions twice per year, in the fall and spring. Healing circles are held every other week during the session, following the format described above. Circle facilitators, who are Natives themselves, also integrate multiple cultural elements into the circles, such as Wabanaki language lessons, drumming, and history discussions. Since 2015, REACH circle facilitators have held a total of 44 sessions comprised of 264 individual circles across five correctional facilities in Maine. These facilities include: Bolduc Correctional Facility, Mountain View Correctional Facility, Maine State Prison, Maine Correctional Center, and the Southern Maine Re-entry Center.

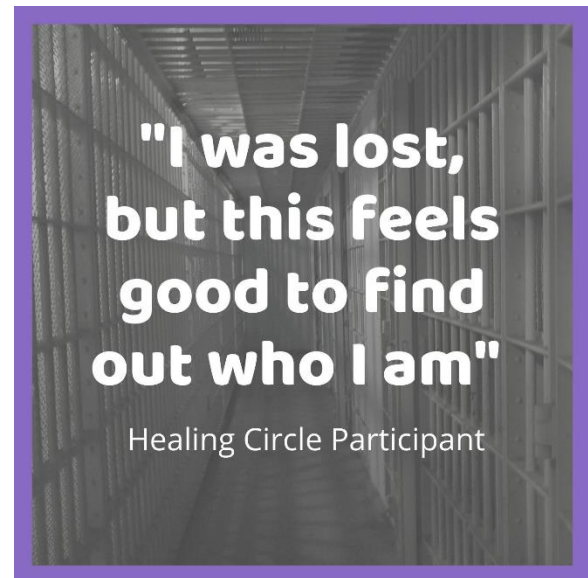
Facilitating Connection

At the end of each session of healing circles, facilitators solicited feedback from participants about their experiences. Participants identified three forms of connection developed through the healing circles: 1) connection with oneself; 2) connection with the Native community; and 3) connection with Native culture. Unless otherwise indicated with an endnote, the quotations below are from healing circle participants.

Connection with Oneself

Because incarceration separates people from many aspects of their life that provide purpose and fulfillment—such as family and work—incarceration can prompt distress and a sense of identity loss.^{27,28} The healing circles provide a space in which participants can process the traumatic impact of both incarceration and colonization through mindfulness meditation and other spiritual practices. When asked for feedback about their experiences in the healing circles, many participants emphasized the sense of peace the circles bring them. For some participants, the feeling of calm extends beyond their time in the circle, helping them feel more relaxed and present overall. Participants may feel increasingly at ease as a result of the circles because the healing circle encourages authentic sharing. When participants have space to, “speak freely without feeling judged,” they feel calm and can develop a deeper understanding of themselves. As one participant said, “I go back to my room with a better feeling of myself.” The grounding of the healing circles in Wabanaki culture also supports positive identity development among participants.^{14,30} In connecting with their

Native community and culture, as will be discussed below, participants also connect with themselves on a deeper level. One participant expressed this sentiment, “I was lost but this feels good to find out who I am.”



Connection with the Native Community

The healing circles provide important opportunities for incarcerated Native people to develop connections with one another, forming a positive sense of community within the correctional environment. Participants in the healing circles share a commitment to Native values of “unity, harmony, [and] honesty,” ensuring “the circles are a space to feel grateful, to feel safe and welcomed.” During a time when these folks are separated from their family and other existing connections to their tribal community, the healing circle becomes a meaningful source of respect and support. Many participants used the word “brotherhood” to describe the connections formed with others in the circles. The “sense of belonging” experienced in the circles is so powerful

that one participant stated, “it’s like a puzzle piece that’s been missing.” Participants’ connections with the Native community often continue after they are released from incarceration. Some participants become involved in other REACH programming, while others seek connections with members of their respective tribal communities. For this reason, one participant explained that a healing circle “impacts more people than [those] who are sitting in this room.”

Connection with Native Culture

When asked what participants value about the circles, many cited specific cultural elements, such as language, drumming, and smudging. Access to many Native cultural practices is limited during incarceration due to institutional security protocols,²⁶ so the healing circles represent a unique opportunity for participants to feel “connected to cultural beliefs and ceremonies.” Participants also learn information about Native history that was never included in their formal education. One participant stated, the healing circles “ground me in my heritage,” and many others echoed this sentiment. This connection with Native culture is essential for the healing of intergenerational trauma related to colonization.³¹ Through participation in the healing circles, incarcerated Native people experience, “the healing power of cultural resurgence, and how culture as healing is decolonizing.”³²

Conclusion

Feedback from participants emphasizes the profound impact the healing circles have had in their lives. This tremendous contribution to the Wabanaki community

was made possible through the consistent commitment of REACH, its staff and volunteers, and its resources. This invaluable work requires ongoing support—both monetary and logistical— from community partners as well. With this ongoing support, the connections formed through REACH programming have the power to promote healing during incarceration and beyond.

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