



nato' we ho win

Exploring Protective Factors to Engage Resiliency



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Intention

nato' we ho win (Cree for "The Art of Self-Healing"), is a process presented by Barb Frazer who was mentored by Willie Ermine and Norma Rabbitskin. The process was identified by Willie Ermine and is the term that captures the heart of the project. nato' we ho win is an innovative intervention program that addresses the mental and physical health needs of Indigenous women who have experienced intimate partner violence. Participants engaged in trauma-informed, artistic, and cultural programming designed to increase stress management skills, social support networks, and knowledge of traditional Indigenous culture focused on addressing health and social issues related to colonization.

nato' we ho win is a project of the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS), funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Connection

PATHS member agencies, domestic violence shelters and counselling centres in Saskatchewan, serve women who are fleeing violence and their children. The majority of clients in Saskatchewan's domestic violence shelters are Indigenous. Indigenous women who seek support at domestic violence services in Saskatchewan have often experienced multiple traumas, such as family violence, sexual violence, and/or childhood sexual abuse. As well as domestic violence (often including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and financial abuse), many Indigenous women suffer trauma stemming from Canada's history of colonization and residential schools. Whether the women themselves attended residential schools, or members of their family did, the trauma exists across generations.

The nato' we ho win intervention program aims to decrease trauma-related symptoms and improve health outcomes for Indigenous women who have experienced domestic violence, as well as other trauma-related experiences.

Relationships

The nato' we ho win program is designed to align with a trauma-and-violence-informed approach that realizes the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma, responds by integrating this knowledge into the structure and practice of the intervention and above all, resists re-traumatization. The following key principles served as a framework for all aspects of this intervention:

- Safety
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Empowerment, voice, and choice
- Peer support
- Cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity

The group manual was designed by an Indigenous Knowledge Educator who is also an Indigenous (Cree) Knowledge Keeper. Teachings to inform nato' we ho win were given to the Indigenous Knowledge Educator by two Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, male and female. Before implementing the nato' we ho win program, a full-day workshop on trauma-and-violence-informed practice was held for current team members (researchers, artist facilitators, Elders, and Domestic Violence Advocates).

The program manual is designed in such a way that the themes can be covered each week, leaving flexibility for the facilitator to bolster the content with their own teachings and skills. The program may look different if taught by an Artist/Facilitator or an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper or Elder. Three separate groups were facilitated in each of Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, Regina. Each group was led by an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper in two communities whereas the other was facilitated by a trauma-and-violence-informed artist. Three team members are present at every nato' we ho win session—the Facilitator (artist or Knowledge Keeper), an Elder, and a Domestic Violence Advocate are present at every group session. Nato' we ho win consisted of a 3-hour evening group session once per week for twelve weeks; research activities included in the present study (a total of 13 weeks).

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How do culture, expressive-arts, and sharing circles serve as protective factors to engage women's resiliency in recovering from trauma?

Nato' we ho win participants were asked, in focus groups (conducted in sharing circle format), about the ways in which they increased their resilience and improved aspects of their lives while participating in the group. In total 65 women participated in a total of nine focus groups, held during week 12 of the 13-week program.

Women shared the ways in which the artistic and cultural activities helped them to increase their self-awareness and develop new strategies for managing stress and challenges related to healing from trauma from intimate partner violence.

The social connections established through sharing within the group helped women to overcome isolation, facilitate healthy boundaries, and develop a sense of community with other women. Nato' we ho win offered women a sense of connection, especially important for those mourning the loss of relationships and children.

"I'm glad I came here. I came to these groups, to be around other Native people. And learn the culture and practicing it. It makes me feel better. It makes me feel whole again. And it helps every day, I take care of the kids, I go to school, and I'm able to handle stresses."

"When I think of resiliency, I think of that inner strength. It makes me start thinking about where that strength comes from. And for me it's a lot of my spirituality. It's in the morning when I smudge. It's in the prayers I say throughout the day when I'm driving. It's in the experiences and relationships that I have with everyone and everything. So my strength comes from much more than the gap."



Photo: Barb Frazer



Beaded projects completed by nato' we ho win participants.

Art activities helped women to relax and increase feelings of calm in their lives. Some women also reported that cultural artistic activities, such as beading, provided a positive activity to fill their free time at home, where they may have previously turned to negative coping strategies. In addition, some women reported that while they found learning new skills to be challenging, it ultimately led to them increasing their patience and bringing about self-awareness in a new area.

"It taught me patience, and taught me that I can make something beautiful just from my hands."

"I believe that beading is a great stress reliever. I believe every one of these beads is a prayer and a positive thought to my friends and family and my loved ones and all you ladies who have taught me so much about myself and also yourselves as well. This group and traditional, this beading, is a part of all of us, and I'm just so happy and thankful I got to complete it and I'm done, and I just want to say thank you to all of you because this is us. This is a little bit of everybody in this medallion and I want to thank you all for letting me be a part of it and being a part of my life as well as me being a part of yours. Thank you."

Nato' we ho win participants reported that they gained strength from connectedness to Indigenous culture and incorporating practices, such as smudging, into their lives. These practices also added to a sense of stability.

Pursuing Truth

"Knowing that there's lifelines out there helps me. I felt alone in the beginning. Made some friends on the way. It's a good group. Now I see more things clearer, and understand our spiritual way of the class. It's taken me 48 years to know some of these teachings. It feels good. It feels safe. And it makes me feel ... Makes me a happier person. Makes me happy, and humble."

"In our culture, if you know some of the traditional teaching and stuff and our ways. If you're raised with those, as a woman you're already proud of being a woman because you understand your power. You understand your connection. You understand your abilities and the power that you hold and so many of our girls don't even know that anymore."

It also emerged that the cultural and expressive arts activities and sharing circles within the groups did not only benefit the women participants, but their children. Women reported increased parenting efficacy and positive relationships with their children and shared that they planned to pass the skills learned in nato' we ho win on to their children.

The support and skills gained in nato' we ho win helped women to feel more independent, which was a protective factor for living free from violence. Women reported that they felt they now had the strength and support to avoid returning to abusive relationships and to focus on themselves without searching for a new relationship.

"Being in the group now has helped me see I'm not alone and that we're all at different stages in our lives, and it does make life bearable. There are some issues that happened during the group, and being here really, really, really helped me emotionally and mentally to let go of that and have a safe circle where you can share that information, and feel supported, so I do feel a lot better being in the group."

Overall, participants reported feeling happier and experiencing a more positive outlook. They expressed an improved sense of balance and clarity in their lives and reported improved self-care practices and improved management of their daily routines.

"Well I know I've become a better person from the first group attending; stronger; more independent; there are some things, but it's better."

"I think I'm sleeping better too; 'cause I wasn't really sleeping before. If I was, I would wake up all the time. I'm not quite as sad like I said like I was before. I feel like a lot of heaviness has been lifted, and that's due to just having everybody around here and just feeling all the positive energy and promoting that positive energy bounces off on the rest of us and helps us going through that healing process. I still have a few things to start over the year here, but hopefully I'll keep feeling more positive like I am now. I came in not positive, and now I'm positive."

The stability and safety of the group setting was also a protective factor that helped women to increase their resiliency.

"Well it's the stability, I guess. It's the security of having this group because some of us don't have that security and the stability. Not so much... There's stability, consistency. Some of us need that. I sort of do; my house is chaotic."

Future Direction

The developed nato' we ho win intervention manual will be available for community and organizational use to provide ongoing implementation and support for women experiencing intimate partner violence. In addition to the intervention manual, individual accessible community reports will be developed. These community reports will be available in print and digital versions to be shared with the participants, facilitators, knowledge shareholders, communities, agencies, and organizations.

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