



NATO' WE HO WIN

THE ART OF SELF-HEALING

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES
OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING WHILE
RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA

An innovative intervention program supporting Indigenous women who have experienced intimate partner violence by promoting self-healing through a culture and arts model of care.



NATO' WE HO WIN

nato' we ho win (pronounced “na ta way ho win”) is Cree for “the art of self-healing” (as translated by the Knowledge Keepers). Supported through the Public Health Agency of Canada’s investment *Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence* (2016- 2020), *nato' we ho win* is a partnership between the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS) and the University of Regina (research leaders Drs. JoLee Sasakamoose, (M’Chigeeng First Nation) (Educational Psychology & Counselling) and R. Nicholas (Nick) Carleton (Psychology).

nato' we ho win was piloted in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan in March- May 2017 and ran three times in September, January, and September in Moose Jaw, Regina, and Prince Albert concurrently until the end of 2018. Women who participated in these nine intervention groups also participated in research, consisting of quantitative self-report measures and focus groups, designed to determine the effects of participation in *nato' we ho win* on Indigenous women's sense of well-being.

Ana kâ-naskomot (Cree for “the one who responded”) refers to the women’s voices in this report. *Kehte-ayak* (Cree for “Old Ones”) refers to the Elders or Knowledge Keepers.

RESOURCES

nato' we ho win is a 13-week trauma-and-violence-informed program that incorporates expressive art and cultural activities that promote resilience and facilitate healing for Indigenous women who have experienced Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The Program Manual, Facilitator Guide, and community reports are available at pathssk.org/natowehowin.



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HEALING JOURNEY

The *nato' we ho win* program integrates culture and art as essential components of women's healing and recovery journey. The cultural focus of the *nato' we ho win* program is much more than simply a way to engage an Indigenous demographic. The culture and art itself are part of the healing journey. *nato' we ho win* participants used cultural and artistic expressions to build resiliency by relating to their Indigenous culture, artistic creativity, and a supportive community. Women sought their truth and strengthened their voice through cultural activities, and expressing stories of understanding and healing.

THE HEALTH OF NATO' WE HO WIN

How do identity, tradition, and spirituality link with women's experiences of health and well-being while recovering from trauma caused by intimate partner violence?

IDENTITY STRENGTHENS RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES

For many of the Indigenous women in the *nato' we ho win* group, forced disruptive assimilation practices and cultural genocide almost eliminated community beliefs and customs that formed their community and personal identity. Results from the intervention research indicate that *nato' we ho win* challenged colonial and racial stereotypes and increased knowledge of traditional Indigenous culture, social support, and fostered resilience among Indigenous women healing from IPV, reforming their Indigenous women identity. *Ana kê-naskomot* speaks about teachings and identity as an Indigenous woman:

“IN OUR CULTURE, IF YOU KNOW SOME OF THE TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS AND OUR WAYS, IF YOU’RE RAISED WITH THOSE [TEACHINGS], 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 MANY OF OUR GIRLS DON’T EVEN KNOW THAT ANYMORE.” ANA KÂ-NASKOMOT

Reclaiming identity through cultural programming influenced the ability to move away from disruptive factors and build a sense of purpose and meaning. Longitudinal mixed methods consisting of validated quantitative self-report measures, combined with focus groups (conducted in a sharing circle format) encompassed the intervention research study. One measure used was the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) which assessed five factors to post-traumatic growth (new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change).



Participants completed this measure before beginning, after completing *nato' we ho win*, and one year later. Participants self-reported a statistically significant increase in post-traumatic growth overall, and on the new possibilities and spiritual change subscales, one year after completion of the intervention. 12 week and one-year focus groups echoed the statements measured by the PTGI such as developing new interests, a new life path, new opportunities, and changing things that need changing. *Ana kê-naskomot* reflected on her journey in the program:

"RECENTLY, I STARTED THINKING, 'WHY AM I TAKING THIS COURSE? WHY AM I GOING TO SCHOOL? IT IS NOT A PASSION. I MORE OR LESS PICKED IT SO THAT I COULD CHANGE MY CAREER. I WANT SOMETHING DIFFERENT; TO CHALLENGE MYSELF.'" ANA KÊ-NASKOMOT



At the beginning of the program, most women reported concerns about change and new interests. At the end of the 12 weeks and in the one-year follow-up, participants were changing their life goals. *Ana kê-naskomot* shared,

I think with me, because I'm ready to be in a relationship now, I've been ready for a while, but I was always making excuses. I came up with an affirmation- I forgive myself for believing that struggle is a part of me; all these years I don't know who I am without it. Because I do good, but I struggle. I need to let go of that and it's time to move on and I'm ready to be loved and I'm ready to be in a relationship. I'm excited about it; it's a new phase in my life because I was always making an excuse, "Oh, I'm gonna wait until I finish my degree." And I did. "Oh, I'm gonna wait until my grand baby's older." But now

*I'm running out of excuses and I just have to get my sh*t together and find Mr. Right!*

In the focus group conversations, women shared that reclaiming their identity was also linked to this growth. *Ana kâ-naskomot* revealed the following,

Being brought up by white people, you lose [your traditional identity]. You lose part of yourself, not knowing what your own people are talking about. But I'm proud of who I am. This class makes me more stronger. And I want to be stronger for my classmates and the friends that I made here.

Many participants expressed that they felt happier and stronger when they were making difficult choices; feeling that they were not alone in their situation and knowing they could rely on others if they needed help. Their self-reliance increased in that they were making decisions on their own and not relying on their partners to make decisions for them as explained by *ana kâ-naskomot*,

“I FEEL LIKE MY BOUNDARIES ARE MORE FIRM IN REGARDS TO RED FLAGS AND STUFF LIKE THAT. BUT NOT EVEN THINKING ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS FOR NOW. EVEN FRIENDSHIP WISE TOO, MY BOUNDARIES HAVE BECOME A LOT STRONGER.”
ANA KÂ-NASKOMOT

Participants shared that they were once uncomfortable setting limits and allowed their friends and partner to create disruptive situations. Lending money, drinking, and fighting were situations where the women felt distressed but did not feel strong enough to stop those incidents. A reformed identity may support them in setting boundaries, become more self-reliant, and be adaptable to change in incremental ways.

TRADITION PROMOTES HEALTH, HARMONY, AND WHOLISM

The traditional activities and the teachings offered through the program gave the women resources that balanced their health and increased harmony with self and others. For some, there was a feeling of wholism. At the beginning of the program, self-reported anxiety and depression were correlated with self-reported symptoms of PTSD. A statistically significant reduction in depression and anxiety were reported by the women across the three data collection occurrences.

In stories shared during group end and one-year follow-up, participants recounted

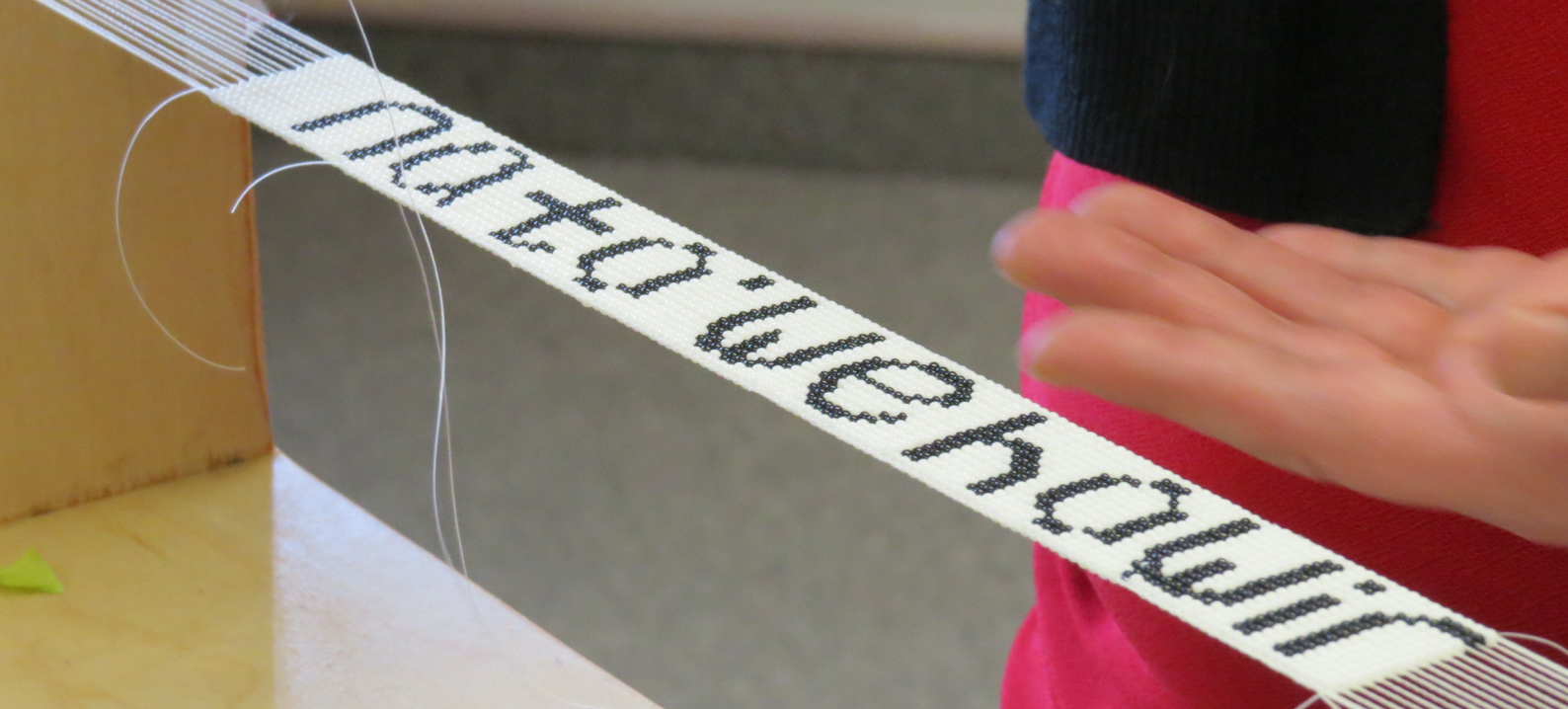
incidents where they experienced less nervousness, worry, and irritability.

I don't know, it just feels good to just worry about me and my daughter, and not worry about him and always trying to make him happy; and putting his happiness before mine.

When asked, the participants affirmed that the cultural activities and teachings positively impacted their health.

“YEAH, I DO FEEL SO MUCH BETTER. I’M DOING GREAT AND I LOVE IT.” ANA KÂ-NASKOMOT

“I CAN SLEEP GOOD NOW, AND I’M EATING WELL, AND I’M MANAGING MY LIFE AT HOME.” ANA KÂ-NASKOMOT



Everything offered [was helpful]. It brings out the good in you, the calmness, patience. Sometimes you lose that in the world when you're out and about, but this class brings a genuine [sense] of our culture.

Many participants continued engaging in the activities and shared the teachings with their children, family, and friends. *Ana kê-naskomot* stated that,

“WHEN I GOT INTO BEADING, IT KEPT ME AWAY FROM THAT BOREDOM. BEING WITH MY KIDS AND MY HOME, DOING THESE HOBBIES WITH THEM, AND TEACHING THEM THESE TEACHINGS THAT I KNOW, THOSE ARE ONE OF THE THINGS THAT I’VE BROUGHT TO MY FAMILY.”
ANA KÊ-NASKOMOT

There is a sense of pride in the participants when reiterating stories of sharing the teachings. After learning how to make ribbon skirts in the program, one woman made a ribbon skirt for her toddler. To assist with her own sobriety, another participant made lanyards for her friends and family. Several participants were living with or healing from addiction. This group supported their efforts in living a good life. One participant spoke about wanting to continue to engage in their own healing and sought a Narcotics Anonymous meeting after the program finished. While participating in *nato' we ho win*, she realized that the program was beneficial in maintaining her sobriety. Many participants expressed their appreciation for traditional and artistic activities, which helped them to focus their thoughts. For some, the activities were not as important as the teachings and sharing circles. Reinforced by the participants was the need to have non-judgmental circles that focused on Indigenous traditions and teachings. The women stressed the importance of reforming their identity and reclaiming a strong Indigenous woman role through the teachings.

SPIRITUALITY DEEPENS RELATIONSHIPS

Health is described as balance, harmony, wholism, and spiritual relationship. The spiritual domain honours the spiritual needs of love and belonging, meaning and purpose, creativity and hope, and forgiveness (LaVallie, 2019). The traditional teachings and activities from nato' we ho win reinforced approaches to address these spiritual needs. When given a chance to express what helped contribute to strengthening spirituality, the participants pointed to the importance of connecting to other women experiencing similar situations, finding purpose in being an Indigenous woman, forgiving themselves and others, and accessing teachings and supports that offer them hope for the future; all aspects of the spiritual domain.

Responses on the PTGI, which address the spiritual domain, mirror the stories shared by the women during the focus groups. Stories from the 12 week and one-year focus groups demonstrated a deeper relationship with their spiritual self or reconnection to meeting personal spiritual needs. As taught through the medicine wheel, everything is interdependent and connected, not individualistic. The participants learned that they are connected to each other and thus have a sense of responsibility. Many women contacted each other through social media or text messaging outside of the gatherings. If someone was missing, another participant would try to locate them or would know why they were away. There was a strong sense of belonging.

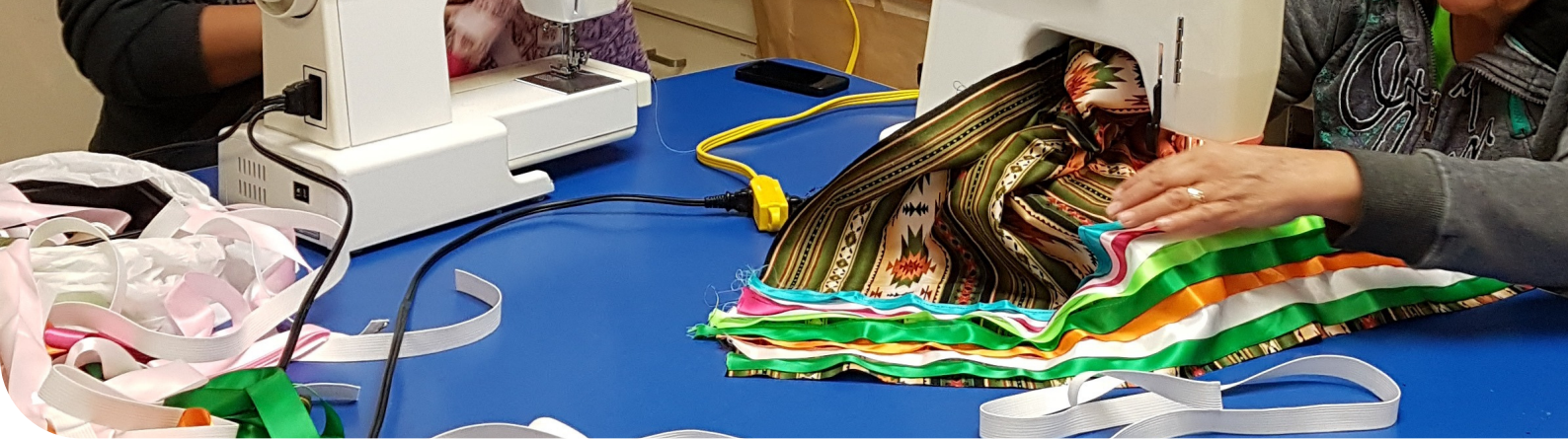




Participants questioned their professional and academic activities, seeking a more purposeful existence. They expressed the importance of maintaining connection and finding a purpose. Their responsibility to each other created a sense of purpose in themselves.

Continuing past the program end, with beading, smudging, ribbon skirts, journaling, and attending ceremony are examples of accessing creativity through the spiritual self. The focus group discussions produced many examples of finding hope in moving through their experiences: resiliency and personal growth. Like many concepts, hope is hard to express as *ana kê-naskomot* articulates,

**“I THINK THAT OUR LIFE IS A
JOURNEY AND I FEEL LIKE I’M
GROWING. I’M WORKING ON MYSELF.
I CAN’T PINPOINT WHAT THIS GROUP
DID FOR ME, BUT I KNOW I’M
MOTIVATED BECAUSE I’M STILL
GROWING. I’M STILL TRYING TO KEEP
GROWING, BECAUSE WE HEAL UNTIL
WE DIE; IF THAT’S HOW WE
CHOOSE.” ANA KÊ-NASKOMOT**



Able to access feelings of hope and creativity, the participants could sense they were stronger and that their overall health was more robust. Discovering how to love themselves and others, they connected with their spiritual self through acts of forgiveness of themselves and in others. Learning a little bit about the residential school system helped participants understand the generational effects of trauma on their parents and extended family. In reclaiming her identity and wanting to deepen her spiritual self, *ana kâ-naskomot* decided to study her language

I guess my overall [improvement] is in a spiritual way. You have to understand that I was in a residential school, and I'm a great grandma now and my granddaughter, she got an award today, and she's going to university into Indigenous studies. I want to really take time now to learn my language 'cause that's what [our facilitator] talked about, the language. You should pass it on to your family, younger generation, and that's what I'm doing.

Hearing other stories and using them as teachings, *ana kâ-naskomot* found that she had a better understanding of her mom and their relationship:

My relationship with my mom has always been a little bit rocky, but I've actually been able to go and sit and talk with her about things that have happened in our childhood. We had our cry and we had our long-night talk. She's been living with guilt all this time, and we were able, that night, to let those things go and actually forgive each other. I feel like this group is so empowering. We've been using everybody's stories as a tool to teach one another. That's what our vulnerability is about in here. To be able to use our stories and our experiences as a teaching tool for each other and ourselves.

Sharing stories and hearing other's experiences without judgement supported the women in shedding feelings of guilt and misunderstanding. The teachings afforded the women an opportunity to put situations into perspective and learn to forgive while also setting boundaries. *Ana kâ-naskomot* shared the following change in perspective during a focus group:

Family was everything. My grandpa was faithful, you know? And that's how I was raised. So, I was faithful. I didn't realize how much I can't forgive. I can't really forgive. And I didn't realize that. I still have respect for him

[partner]. I still ... I love the guy. We are starting to grow; we're starting to talk more. It'd be different if he was a serial cheater. This only happened once in the three years that we were together. So, I can forgive him.

Ana kê-naskomot's initial reluctance to forgive created a barrier in moving forward with or without her partner. Overtime, she was able to explore her feelings by listening to stories of infidelity and forgiveness. Able to process her thoughts during the activities portion gave her quiet time to reflect on the teaching and ask the Elder or *Kehte-ayak* and others for guidance when needed. Many participants identified that the prayer and smudge each week helped center them and their spirit, shifting their thoughts and behaviours each week. Ana kê-naskomot, suggests that the biggest enjoyment was the prayers and stories:

Yeah, definitely the praying and the Kehtehi coming in and sharing her story and all of us like sharing our stories with each other, just them, women empowering women. I really, really enjoyed that.

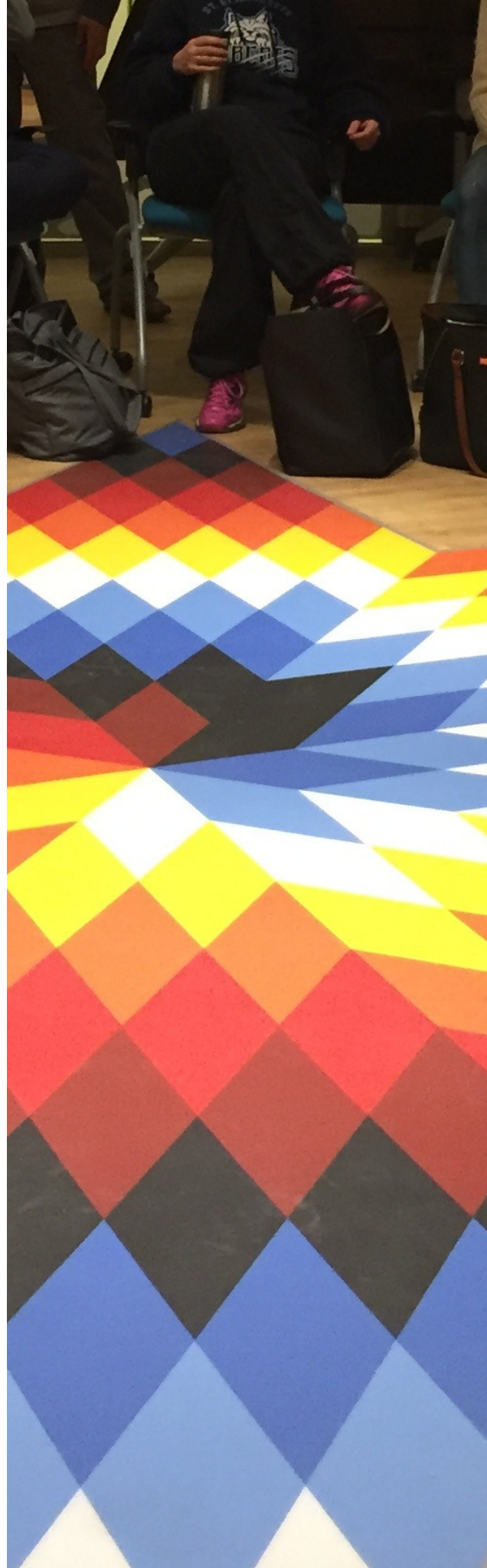
Significant decreases in self-reported anxiety and depression, and a statistically significant increase in post-traumatic growth overall supports that *nato' we ho win* was shown to positively influence the health and well-being of women who are healing from IPV.

References

LaVallie, C. (2019). *Onisitootumowin kehte-ayak (the understanding of the old ones) of healing from addiction* [doctoral thesis]. Regina, Saskatchewan; University of Regina Library.

Author Note

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“Women empowering women!”
An intention and strength of
nato' we ho win.



MEET THE TEAM

Partners include PATHS member agencies, Indigenous Knowledge Keepers (Barbara Frazer, Norma Rabbitskin, and Willie Ermine), and Dr. JoLee Sasakamoose and Dr. R. Nicholas Carleton from the University of Regina. Project teams in Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, and Regina communities consisted of *Kehte-ayak*, Facilitators/Artists, Domestic Violence Advocates, Childminding Organizers, Childminders, and Research Assistants.

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Project Lead



**UNIVERSITY OF
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Research Partner



NATO' WE HO WIN
Facilitation and Research Team



NATO' WE HO WIN: THE ART OF SELF-HEALING

nato' we ho win is an innovative trauma-and-violence-informed, artistic, and cultural intervention program from Saskatchewan, Canada developed to support Indigenous women who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV). This program brings in community support to guide women's self-healing through culture and arts.

The *nato' we ho win* intervention program manual is available to communities and organizations who wish to implement this program to support women who have experienced IPV.