

**Beading the Wounds: The Healing Power of Traditional Arts and Ceremony in Indigenous
Men's Rehabilitation**

by

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Abstract

This capstone investigates how traditional Indigenous arts and ceremonial practices function as healing interventions for incarcerated Indigenous men. Drawing from narrative inquiry and grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, the research reviews literature, federal evaluations, and community-based reports to examine the impacts of culture-based programming within correctional settings. It explores how colonial systems such as residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and carceral institutions have disrupted Indigenous identities, attachment systems, and *wahkotowin* (a Cree term meaning “kinship” or “relatedness”) networks across generations.

The research shows that traditional practices, such as beadwork, drum-making, sweat lodges, and Elder-led teachings, support emotional regulation, strengthen cultural identity, and contribute to relational healing. Arts and ceremonies are understood not as supplementary, but as central to restoring balance and well-being. Culturally grounded programs show potential to reduce recidivism, increase self-awareness, and promote community reintegration.

The analysis points out key themes including historical trauma, disrupted attachment, cultural disconnection, and the role of arts and ceremony in identity restoration. It also identifies barriers such as underfunding, limited access, and misaligned evaluation frameworks. Recommendations include expanded investment in Indigenous-led correctional programming, incorporation of land-based healing and cultural mentorship, and shifts in policy to recognize Indigenous knowledge as foundational to justice and rehabilitation. This research examines the need for Indigenous-centered justice approaches that center culture as both prevention and healing.

Keywords: Indigenous healing, recidivism, intergenerational trauma, traditional arts, ceremony, identity restoration, relational accountability, Cree worldview, Nehiyaw Iskwew (a

Cree woman), cultural reconnection, embodied healing, trauma-informed care, land-based practices

Dedication

This capstone is dedicated first and foremost to my late grandson, Tristen, whose life was far too short and who never had the chance to attend school as we had planned—your memory has been a quiet but powerful force throughout my journey. To my late parents, both survivors of the residential school system, who were denied the opportunity to pursue education but supported and encouraged me in mine—your resilience and love have shaped everything I do. To Blaine, who spent countless hours helping me write papers and tirelessly search for articles—thank you for your steady support during the most demanding parts of this academic path. To my best friend Wanda, my biggest cheerleader, who stood by me with unwavering emotional support through every high and low. To my children, Avery, Aaron, Shawnee, and Morgan, thank you for your patience and understanding as I navigated the challenges of this journey, always striving to be a role model. And to my grandchildren, Abby, Emma, Taye, Amea, Xavion, wâpakwaniy, and Noah—may my path show you that if I can do it, so can you. To Ricardo, for your strength and support through my roller coaster of emotions as I worked toward this goal, and to Adrian, for keeping me nourished and always encouraging me to keep going. To my Elders, Vicky and Dave, thank you for trusting me with your traditional teachings and believing in my ability to carry on the sacred work you began with the men and women in federal institutions—your guidance continues to light my way. To the many federal offenders who entrusted me with their stories, your courage, honesty, and strength gave meaning and purpose to this work. To these men who did not make it back to the red road: Tyrone, Gage, and Lloyd thank you for recognizing the work we did together and maintaining respect by calling me Auntie rest in peace. And finally, to my Creator, thank you for giving me a second chance at life so I could walk this path in service of your people.

Land Acknowledgement

As a proud descendent of the Papaschase First Nation and the Metis Nation of Alberta, I acknowledged that I live, work, and gather on Treaty 6 Territory, ancestral and ongoing lands of the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, and the Metis Nation. These lands have been home to Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial, and they remain central to our identity, culture, and survival.

I especially honour the history and spirit of the Papaschase people, whose displacement and continued struggle for recognition are part of my own family's story. I also recognize the deep and enduring contributions of Metis people to this land, including my own ancestors who lived, loved, resisted, and thrived here.

This acknowledgement is more than words; it's a living expression of my connection to the land, to my relatives, and to the responsibilities I carry. I commit to continue walking in a good way, grounded in respect, truth, and a vision for a just and sovereign future for all my relations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Indigenous Epistemology

Prologue

I am a Nehiyaw Iskwew (Cree woman)—a mother, and a psychology master's student, raised by matriarchs who stitched memories into moose hide and raised children in the shadow of residential schools. My own family has carried the weight of that legacy. The trauma did not end with my grandparents; it shaped my home, my relationships, and the healing I continue to seek. I come to this work not as an observer, but as someone shaped by the very systems I aim to challenge.

For several years, I worked inside correctional institutions, offering cultural support to Indigenous men. I saw firsthand how deeply disconnected these men were, from language, ceremony, nature, and from themselves. Yet, I also witnessed something else: transformation sparked by culture. I watched men sit in ceremony for the first time, bead their first medallion, hear a drum, and remember who they were beneath the hurt. Those moments stitched something back together—not only for them, but for me, too.

This capstone emerges from these experiences. As a graduate student in counselling psychology, I have spent my studies exploring how culture, ceremony, and identity shape mental wellness. This capstone brings that learning into conversation with lived experience, exploring how engaging in traditional arts and ceremony can offer a sense of healing, identity, and connection for Indigenous men who are incarcerated. This question is not just an academic one; it is a plea born from love, grief, and responsibility. The goal is to explore how traditional practices support rehabilitation by restoring identity, relationality, and spiritual balance.

To help those unfamiliar with Cree worldview feel more grounded in this work, Indigenous terms used throughout this capstone are gently defined in Appendix A. For example, the concept

of *wahkotowin* reflects sacred kinship and the interconnectedness of all beings—central teachings that guide both healing and relational responsibility.

Drawing on Indigenous research methodology, this work centers relational accountability and thematic analysis rooted in story and experience. I aim to weave together evaluation data, community reports, and voices from those impacted. The intention is to offer insight not only into what works, but why it works. Because when healing happens through culture, it reaches places colonial interventions cannot.

Personal Grounding & Positionality

My hands were first taught by my Kohkom. She stitched and beaded with intention, her fingers moving with the memory of generations. What she gave me was more than craft; it was a way of remembering, restoring, and reclaiming. I did not know then how medicine could travel through moose hide or glass beads. Now I do. In our communities, we know that culture is treatment (Marsh et al., 2015). We also know that prison often breaks what is already bruised (Cunneen, 2011; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022).

Indigenous knowledge systems are holistic, understanding that healing happens not just in the mind, but through spirit, body, and community connection (Hart, 2002). These teachings travel through generations via land, language, and the hands of our relatives. Indigenous research must be rooted in what Shawn Wilson (2008) calls “relational accountability,” which is the understanding that knowledge lives in memory, blood, and practice, and that researchers are responsible to the communities and people whose stories they carry. In that sense, what I write here is ceremony, and I am accountable to my kin, my mentors, and the men whose healing I have witnessed.

Culture-based mental health support opens pathways to transformation for Indigenous people carrying intergenerational trauma (Rowan et al., 2014). Federal evaluations demonstrate that Indigenous-led corrections programs incorporating cultural programming achieve measurable improvements in identity restoration, community reintegration, and reduced institutional incidents (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Programs including Elder-led teachings and land-based practices show particular effectiveness in addressing trauma and substance use (Rowan et al., 2014), especially when intergenerational grief, attachment disruption, and cultural loss form the underlying wounds (Correctional Service Canada [CSC], 2024).

Cultural elements such as sweat lodge ceremonies, beading, and drum-making offer embodied healing methods that reach places conventional talk therapy cannot touch (Rowan et al., 2014). These practices reawaken identity and instill pride, fostering resilience that supports sustained wellness beyond incarceration (France, 2020). When I use the term “embodied,” I mean healing that happens through the body—through hands creating, through breath in ceremony, and through movement and touch that helps process trauma stored in our muscles and nervous systems (van der Kolk, 2014).

As both a helper and a granddaughter shaped by ceremony, I understand healing through the circle, through shared breath, and through the medicine of making. I have witnessed Indigenous men in correctional institutions learn to bead, speak their truths in healing lodges, and connect with Elders in ways that transform their posture, their language, their very spirit. This experience is not an anecdote; national data confirms that culturally grounded programming produces statistically significant reductions in recidivism while increasing emotional regulation (Public Safety Canada, 2021). When cultural elements are removed, identity loss and

institutional conflict increase. When they are prioritized, Indigenous men discover strength, belonging, and purpose (CSC, 2024).

What I bring to this capstone is not academic neutrality; it is commitment born from ceremony and kinship. Seeking *mino-pimatisiwin* (the good life, or living well) means moving beyond mere survival into wholeness. During COVID-19, Corrections Canada acknowledged Indigenous ceremonies as essential services because of their protective effects on mental health and behavior (CSC, 2024). Cultural practices are not add-ons to clinical care. They are primary medicine holding our teachings, laws, and memories (Rowan et al., 2014). When correctional institutions ignore this, they interrupt healing (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Colonization and Incarceration: A Continuum of Harm

Incarceration is not a new concept for Indigenous peoples in this land; it is a continuation of colonial control (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). This continuity begins with the legacy of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and legislation like the *Indian Act*, which systematically targeted Indigenous kinship systems, cultural lifeways, and self-determination (Arsenault, 2015). The structure of modern corrections mirrors these earlier institutions, reinforcing powerlessness and cultural suppression (Macdonald, 2016). Today, Indigenous people make up over 32% of the federal prison population, despite representing less than 5% of the total population in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2021). This overrepresentation is not a statistical fluke; it is the outcome of generations of institutionalized colonialism (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022).

Evaluation findings from Indigenous Community Corrections projects show that the overwhelming majority of federally incarcerated Indigenous men come from family systems directly impacted by residential schools (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Trauma is embedded in

these stories; not just emotional pain, but spiritual dislocation and disrupted identity (Spear Chief, 2021). Many men enter correctional facilities having never had access to ceremony, cultural teachings, or even the language of their ancestors (Ross, 2006). In this context, incarceration becomes a compounding wound (Matheson et al., 2022).

Intergenerational trauma lives in our nervous systems, in our families, and in the absence of what should have been (Maté, 2010). The trauma of residential schools continues to shape health and wellbeing, manifesting in depression, anxiety, and high rates of substance use (Bombay et al., 2014). The carceral system does not recognize these as symptoms of colonial harm; instead, it criminalizes Indigenous survival (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). When a man who never had the chance to grow up with his language, his land, or his teachings ends up in prison, we must ask not only what he did, but what was done to him (Cunneen, 2011).

Colonial trauma disrupts spiritual balance and identity (Matheson et al., 2022). Inside correctional walls, this rupture is often reinforced. Men are cut off from their families, their culture, and their ceremonies. The very interventions that could support healing—sweats, songs, stories—are treated as extras, not essentials. Healing from historical trauma requires a return to Indigenous knowledge systems (Felix, 2023). When these are denied, the harm deepens.

Relationship-based programming is often the turning point (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Evaluations have shown that when Indigenous staff, Elders, and helpers create spaces where men are seen as relatives—not criminals—healing begins. One Elder described it as “bringing them home to themselves” (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Programs that restore kinship values, respect, and accountability see deeper engagement and longer-term change (CSC, 2024). These truths are well-documented. Indigenous-led approaches foster connection and reduce recidivism

not because they are novel, but because they are rooted in relational worldviews (Monchalin, 2016; S. Wilson, 2008).

And yet, there is hope. When programming is led by Indigenous communities, rooted in cultural values, and focused on relationships rather than punishment, outcomes change (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Men reconnect with who they are. They begin to see themselves not as offenders, but as relatives, as helpers, and as people with purpose (CSC, 2024). These programs show us what becomes possible when healing is guided by those who carry the knowledge and live the experience. Culturally grounded rehabilitation fosters not only accountability, but a deep return to spirit and community (Linklater, 2022). And yet, these programs remain underfunded, often forced to justify what communities have always known: that culture is not complementary—it is central (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). The way forward lies in weaving Indigenous and Western ways of knowing in a respectful, balanced way; one that honours sovereignty, relationships, and the medicine already at work (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this capstone is to explore how traditional Indigenous arts and ceremonial practices support the rehabilitation and cultural reconnection of incarcerated Indigenous men. Grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, this inquiry is shaped by the understanding that cultural practices are not add-ons or rewards, but essential interventions that hold space for healing, identity, and renewal (Hart, 2009; Kovach, 2009). It challenges dominant behavioural models rooted in colonial thinking, and instead calls for approaches grounded in *wahkotowin*, relationality, and spiritual balance—ways of being that continue to sustain our peoples despite ongoing systemic harm (Absolon, 2011; Linklater, 2022; S. Wilson, 2008).

The guiding research question is: How do traditional Indigenous arts and ceremonial practices function as healing interventions for incarcerated Indigenous men?

Indigenous Epistemology: Knowledge as Relationship

Indigenous ways of knowing are rooted in relationships, with the language, the people, with land, and with spirit (Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Knowledge is not extracted but received through experience, ceremony, and community (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). This perspective means that methodology must also be a living process (Absolon, 2011). As Shawn Wilson (2008) teaches, relational accountability demands that we enter every research exchange with respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. In this worldview, knowledge is not owned; it is held with care (Absolon, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Unlike Eurocentric paradigms that privilege objectivity and generalizability, Indigenous epistemologies recognize that knowledge is specific, contextual, and often deeply personal (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It flows through generations, carried in story, song, and practice (Absolon, 2011; Green, 2021). This document centers that understanding by grounding itself in narrative and culturally situated knowledge (Landry et al., 2019). I draw from my experiences and observations while working with the Indigenous men in a federal institution, along with community-based evaluations, Indigenous scholars, and program documentation (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2023). According to France (2020), these experiences and observations are what reflect the voices of those most closely connected to the experience.

Narrative Inquiry: Story as Method and Medicine

Stories are not data points (Absolon, 2011; Landry et al., 2019). They are sacred medicine bundles of truth (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Narrative inquiry allows for the kind of meaning-making that aligns with Indigenous worldview (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). As

Kovach (2009) describes, stories carry theory, teachings, and spirit. They reveal not only what happened, but what mattered.

In the context of Indigenous men who have experienced incarceration, stories offer a way to understand the depth of harm and the possibilities for healing (Indigenous Services Canada [ISC], 2023; Linklater, 2022). Through stories shared by the elders of drumming and singing, of beading, of sitting in ceremony, this research explores how people come back into themselves (Absolon, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). The literature, while often framed as evaluation, contains stories, too—stories of programs that opened doors, of Elders who made space, of men who learned they could still feel (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). This capstone gathers those narratives and places them in relation (Lavallée, 2019).

Two-Eyed Seeing and Cultural Humility

The guiding principle of Two-Eyed Seeing, introduced by Elder Albert Marshall, informs this work by offering a way to hold Indigenous and Western knowledge systems together without diminishing either (Bartlett et al., 2012). One eye sees the strengths of Indigenous knowledge, and the other with the strengths of Western methods. This lens is not a compromise; it is like threads in motion and a way forward (Marshall, 2015).

Through this lens, federal evaluation data (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021) is not dismissed, but interpreted in conversation with community wisdom. Culturally grounded evaluations (France, 2020; Lavallée, 2019) are elevated as primary texts. Cultural humility is not just a value; it is a practice (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association [CCPA], 2023; College of Alberta Psychologists, 2023). It means being aware of one's location, power, and history. It means knowing when to speak, and when to listen (Richardson & Murphy, 2018).

Methodological Commitments

This capstone is not based on original interviews but synthesizes existing knowledge gathered through Indigenous-led programs, federal reports, and academic literature grounded in Indigenous perspectives (Asadullah et al., 2023). The texts were selected based on relevance to the research question: How do traditional Indigenous arts and ceremonial practices function as healing interventions for incarcerated Indigenous men?

Priority was given to:

- evaluations of Indigenous cultural programming in corrections (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021),
- Indigenous scholars writing on trauma, healing, and justice (Green, 2021; Hart, 2002; Nabigon, 2006), and
- community-based research rooted in ceremony and arts (France, 2020; Lavallée, 2019; S. Wilson, 2008).

The methodological stance is not neutral. It is relational. It honours that the knowledge shared in these sources comes from lived experience, and that writing about healing must itself be a respectful act (David-Chavez et al., 2024). Analysis was conducted thematically, identifying recurring patterns across sources related to healing through arts, ceremony, kinship, and cultural identity (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019).

Positionality and Relational Ethics

As a Nehiyaw Iskwew whose own people have survived colonial institutions, I carry both fire and grief into this work (Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). My community elders taught me to speak plainly, to trust my heart, and to keep my medicine bundle close (Absolon, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). That bundle includes

teachings, stories, and responsibilities (Absolon, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It is important to note that I am not outside this research—I am within it (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019).

Relational ethics means I do not use knowledge that was not freely given (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). Every citation, every paraphrased story, has been offered through sharing of experience, publicly through research or evaluation (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). But even still, I approach each one with care. These are not numbers. These are our relatives (Absolon, 2021; Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Contribution to the Field

This project contributes to the growing body of Indigenous scholarship advocating for justice transformation rather than justice reform (Monchalin, 2016). It centers Indigenous knowledge systems as sources of healing, identity, and strength within institutions that have historically dehumanized and disconnected our people (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). By documenting how traditional arts and ceremony serve as interventions for incarcerated Indigenous men, this capstone shifts the conversation from one of pathology to one of potential and from risk factors to relational reconnection (France, 2020).

The work challenges colonial frameworks of rehabilitation that rely on individual behavior modification but instead offers a model grounded in cultural resurgence, community accountability, and spiritual healing (CSC, 2019). It affirms that culture is not an “add-on” to conventional therapy; it is the therapy (CCPA, 2023). This perspective is critical for practitioners, policymakers, and program developers seeking to engage in meaningful, ethical, and effective work with Indigenous communities impacted by incarceration (CCPA, 2023).

Summary

This chapter opened the circle by grounding the work in Indigenous ways of knowing and the lived realities that shaped this inquiry, guided by relational accountability and story as method (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008). In tracing the links between colonial violence and incarceration, we begin to see what many already know in their bones—that culture, not punishment, holds the roots of healing (Hart, 2010; Linklater, 2022). What follows is a deeper exploration of how traditional arts and ceremony help us answer the central concern of this capstone: how healing happens when Indigenous men inside are reconnected with who they are, where they come from, and the spirit of what still lives within them (Absolon, 2011).

The next chapter turns to the literature to deepen this understanding and show why these cultural practices are not just meaningful but essential.

Chapter 2: Literature Review, Analysis, and Evidence

This literature review focuses on the impacts of colonial incarceration, embedded trauma, and the power of cultural reconnection through traditional arts and ceremony (Ansloos et al., 2022). Organized by thematic patterns found across contemporary research and community knowledge, this review examines the voices, findings, and Indigenous-led models that validate what communities have long said: culture is not rehabilitation, it is restoration (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). A growing body of work insists that healing is not a Western intervention but a cultural remembering (France, 2020; Green, 2021; Nabigon, 2006).

Historical Trauma and the Legacy of Carceral Colonialism

The numbers tell a devastating story (ISC, 2023). Indigenous men are incarcerated at rates nearly 8 times higher than non-Indigenous men (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022, 2024). In Alberta, Indigenous people comprise 72% of provincial inmates while representing

only 6% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2022). These are not abstract figures. They represent thousands of our brothers, sons, and fathers whose paths to prison were paved by policies designed to destroy Indigenous nations (Macdonald, 2016).

The legacy of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the *Indian Act* created a pipeline of trauma that flows directly into today's correctional systems (Macdonald, 2016). Residential schools, child welfare apprehensions, and correctional institutions share structural continuities designed to separate Indigenous people from their families, cultures, and lands (McKenzie et al., 2019). These systems operate through what scholars call "carceral colonialism," which is the use of confinement as a tool of cultural genocide that extends far beyond prison walls (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022).

Federal evaluation data confirms that over 78% of federally incarcerated Indigenous men come from families directly impacted by residential schools, creating cascading effects of attachment disruption, cultural disconnection, and institutional dependency that increase criminogenic risk factors (Public Safety Canada, 2021). The intergenerational transmission of colonial trauma creates what researchers term "historical trauma response," which emerge as symptoms such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and difficulty with emotional regulation that passes from generation to generation (Brave Heart, 2003).

What becomes clear is that Indigenous overrepresentation in corrections is not a failure of individual choice (DeCillia, 2023). It is the predictable outcome of systematic cultural suppression (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). When children are raised in institutions, languages forbidden, ceremonies criminalized, families torn apart, the resulting trauma creates vulnerabilities that colonial systems then exploit through criminalization (Lucchesi, 2019).

Understanding this history is essential for developing interventions that address root causes rather than merely managing symptoms (Rowan et al., 2014).

Disrupted Attachment and Intergenerational Trauma

Many of the Indigenous offenders carry histories of being disconnected from their parents, culture, and then from self (Lucchesi, 2019). The literature review confirms that detachment experienced like this is not accidental but is the product of colonial systems designed to break familial bonds (Waters et al., 2024). Evaluations from Public Safety Canada (2021) show that over three-quarters of federally incarcerated Indigenous men come from families affected by residential schools (Lucchesi, 2019). This trauma manifests in insecure attachment patterns, difficulty with emotional regulation, and a baseline of institutional dependency (Waters et al., 2024). What might appear as “risk” in a Western lens is often the symptom of unresolved grief and relational rupture (Richardson & Murphy, 2018).

Programs that center attachment healing, not just through counselling but through cultural engagement, show promise (Waters et al., 2024). Projects that treat clients “as family, not offenders,” created a stronger foundation for reintegration (Public Safety Canada, 2021, p. 22). Attachment theory applied in this context suggests that culturally congruent relationships modeled by Elders offer not only healing but also a blueprint for relational accountability (Wilkinson, 2019). Restoring the capacity for secure attachment requires attention to kinship, story, and identity (Waters et al., 2024). Many participants learn of their cultural lineage for the first time behind prison walls, revealing how deeply assimilation policies have interrupted basic self-knowledge (CSC, 2024). These are not just psychological concerns—they are spiritual ones.

Identity Reclamation Through Traditional Arts

There is something sacred in the act of creation. Beading, drum-making, stitching together moccasins and clothing. They are not crafts; they are conversations with ancestors (Landry et al., 2019). Traditional arts are more than therapeutic outlets; they are neurological medicine, activating sensory memory, grounding identity, and repairing the body's relationship with itself (France, 2020) and cultural art programming fosters emotional regulation and belonging (Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024).

Projects that incorporate embodied creative practices help restore a fragmented self (Green, 2021). Such interventions are not simply activities; they are healing acts embedded in ancestral memory. As Lavallée (2019) argues, Indigenous knowledge systems are often communicated through creative practice, and healing cannot be separated from expression. Studies from CSC (2024) report that participants who engaged in cultural arts showed enhanced institutional behavior and a deeper sense of purpose. The literature affirms what Elders have always known; creating with the hands helps heal the heart.

Cultural Disconnection as Core Wound

The deepest wound carried by many incarcerated Indigenous men is not knowing who they are. This disconnection functions as both a pathway to criminalization and a barrier to healing (Day et al., 2023; Sue, 2006). Many Indigenous men enter correctional facilities having never had access to ceremony, cultural teachings, or even knowledge of their tribal affiliation (Public Safety Canada, 2021). The systematic suppression of Indigenous languages, spiritual practices, and kinship systems has created what researchers describe as “soul wounds”—injuries to the collective spirit that manifest in individual pathology (Duran & Duran, 2019).

Cultural disconnection manifests in multiple ways within correctional settings. Men report feeling isolated not only from mainstream society but also from their own Indigenous communities, creating what researchers describe as “double alienation” (Waldram, 2021). They may carry Indigenous ancestry but lack cultural knowledge, creating internal conflicts about belonging and authenticity (Archibald Q’um Xiiem et al., 2019). This disconnection intensifies in prison environments, where access to cultural practices is limited and Indigenous identity may be reduced to stereotypes or gang affiliations (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022).

Research demonstrates that cultural reconnection functions as a protective factor against criminal recidivism (CSC, 2024). Indigenous communities with stronger cultural continuity (measured through land rights, self-governance, cultural facilities, and language programs) show significantly lower rates of youth suicide and adult criminalization (Chandler & Lalonde, 2023). This impact is validating in terms of the importance and relevance of traditional knowledge and connection to land and ancient ways (Wilkinson, 2019).

Programs that prioritize cultural reconnection show measurable therapeutic outcomes. Indigenous men who participate in cultural programming demonstrate improved emotional regulation, reduced institutional incidents, and stronger post-release community connections (CSC, 2024). These outcomes occur not through behavioral modification but through what Elders describe as “coming home to yourself” —a process of remembering who you are beneath the trauma and incarceration (Landry et al., 2019).

Ceremony and Land-Based Healing

Ceremony brings the spirit home (Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Whether it is a sweat lodge, a pipe ceremony, or a land-based retreat where circle process occurs with the medicines, prayer, and traditional songs, these practices are not supplemental—they are

essential (Spear Chief, 2021). CSC (2024) reports that during COVID-19, Indigenous ceremonies were preserved as essential services due to their demonstrated mental health benefits. This is not anecdotal. Public Safety Canada (2021) data confirms that men who participated in ceremony showed improved institutional behavior and post-release transition.

Ceremonial practice re-establishes spiritual regulation that Western rehabilitation fails to address (Nabigon, 2006). Rooted in traditional cosmologies, ceremonies remind participants of their roles, responsibilities, and connection to the sacred (Landry et al., 2019). They support the return to *mino-pimatisiwin* (the good life), which is central to Indigenous teachings (Landry et al., 2019). These practices offer not only healing but belonging (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). France (2020) describes how ceremonies help individuals “come back into themselves,” integrating fractured parts of identity disrupted by carceral environments.

When Indigenous men in prison are given regular access to ceremony, it creates a steady rhythm in their lives and helps to ease the deep sense of disconnection that comes with being locked up (David & Mitchell, 2021). The support from Indigenous elders is helpful in maintaining grounding and balance inside (France, 2020). This kind of healing is essential for coming back into the community, and it is something that regular behavior programs just cannot replace (CSC, 2024).

Indigenous-Led Corrections and Healing Lodges

The programs that are led by Indigenous communities operate from traditional rather than Western paradigms (Gone, 2013). Public Safety Canada (2021) and CSC (2024) evaluations both emphasize that community-run initiatives see higher participation, lower recidivism, and greater long-term impact. Projects that prioritize cultural identity, Elder involvement, and land-based

teachings succeed not because they are innovative, but because they are ancestral (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Healing lodges in particular reflect a reclamation of Indigenous justice philosophies (Landry et al., 2019). These spaces emphasize relational accountability, reconnection, and cultural knowledge transmission (Green, 2021). However, despite demonstrated success, these initiatives remain critically underfunded (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Many programs measure success through reconnection, relational harmony, and spiritual growth—metrics that remain invisible in Western accountability frameworks (Lavallée, 2019).

Cultural Programming as Reintegration Support

Reintegration must begin with restoration of identity (France, 2020). Studies show that when men reconnect with their culture while incarcerated, and continue those practices after, they are more likely to maintain sobriety, contribute to the community, and stay out of prison (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Reintegration supports that include Elder mentorship, access to ceremony, and cultural guidance reduce the sense of isolation that many Indigenous men face upon reentry (Landry et al., 2019). When community members receive returning individuals as relatives rather than former offenders, the reintegration process becomes relational, not punitive (Richardson & Murphy, 2018). Models like those documented in the Indigenous Community Corrections Initiative demonstrate that continuity of cultural connection across the incarceration continuum is critical to long-term transformation (France, 2020). These findings align with Indigenous knowledge systems, which view healing as a lifelong process, not a program outcome (Hart, 2002).

From Punishment to Restoration: Reading Between the Lines

This analysis sits with the stories behind the formal reports—the lived experiences often hidden between lines of policy and outcome data (Absolon, 2011). It listens for the human being inside the file, and the rhythms of reclamation that move through beadwork, song, and ceremony (Linklater, 2022). It draws connections between cultural reconnection and transformation, while also asking gently and critically what the literature might have overlooked (Landry et al., 2019). In doing so, it honours both what is written and what still needs to be heard (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008).

The Western correctional system is built on surveillance and punishment. Indigenous teachings are built on relationship and restoration (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). That tension is everywhere in the literature (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). Several evaluations noted that cultural programming inside prisons often happens in spite of institutional resistance, not because of it. Cultural work is seen as extra, not essential (Public Safety Canada, 2021). But what happens when it is centered? Men remember who they are. They build pride instead of shame, helping themselves as protectors rather than problems, shifting from offender to relative (Hart et al., 2017). It is neurological. Creative engagement, like drum-making or carving, regulates the nervous system and interrupts trauma loops (France, 2020; Lavallée, 2019; Nabigon, 2006).

Trauma Held in the Body, Released Through the Hands

Every source tells a version of the same story; pain is stored in the body, and culture offers ways to release it (France, 2020). Through art, men process grief that they do not have words from (Landry et al., 2019). One report described how men who could not speak in group therapy sat for hours beading in silence, then began to share (Lavallée, 2019). Emotional regulation was not a goal; it was a byproduct of cultural connection (Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024). Drum-making

programs showed measurable decreases in aggression and increased self-regulation (France, 2020; Public Safety Canada, 2021). Landry et al. (2019) include firsthand accounts from incarcerated Indigenous men describing feelings of calm and peace experienced through cultural engagement. One man said, "I didn't know I could feel peace in here" (Landry et al., 2019). This sentiment aligns with somatic trauma theory, which suggests embodied practices support nervous system integration (Levine, 2010; van der Kolk, 2014).

Ceremony as Intervention

Sweat lodge, pipe ceremonies, and teachings from Elders were described across the literature not as religious practices but as medicine (Spear Chief, 2021). One federal report highlighted how men with complex trauma histories began to regulate their emotions not after months of cognitive behavioral programming, but after one round of ceremony with an Elder (CSC, 2024). This change was not a miracle; it was medicine the system had forgotten to count (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019), yet evaluations still struggled to capture its impact. The language of outcomes does not always fit spiritual transformation (France, 2020; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Identity as Protection

The men who participated in cultural programs developed stronger identities (Day et al., 2023; Lavallée, 2019; Waldram, 2021). This reconnection to culture through language, kinship terms, and artistic expression reflects a deeper healing process that is not cosmetic but protective in nature (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). When a man knows who he is, he is less likely to return to prison (Public Safety Canada, 2021). The literature echoes this over and over; culture prevents recidivism not by teaching men to behave, but by teaching them to belong (Hart et al., 2017).

Cultural identity restoration was repeatedly linked to reduced institutional violence and improved reintegration outcomes (France, 2020; Hart, 2002).

The Neurobiology of Cultural Healing: New Scientific Validation

Recent neuroscientific research provides unprecedented validation for what Indigenous communities have always known about the healing power of traditional arts and ceremony (France, 2020). Brain imaging studies conducted with Indigenous participants engaging in cultural practices revealed specific neurological mechanisms that explain why beadwork, drumming, and ceremonial activities create therapeutic outcomes that conventional interventions cannot replicate (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2003).

When Indigenous men engage in traditional beadwork behind prison walls, their brains show increased connectivity between the prefrontal cortex (responsible for emotional regulation) and the hippocampus (the part of the brain where traumatic memories are stored; France, 2020). This bilateral brain integration helps process trauma stored in implicit memory, allowing healing that talk therapy alone cannot achieve (Dansiger & Marich, 2021). The repetitive, meditative nature of beadwork activates the same neural pathways as established trauma treatments like eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), creating therapeutic benefits through culturally meaningful activity (France, 2020; Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024).

Drumming produces even more dramatic neurological effects (France, 2020). Research shows that traditional drumming synchronizes brainwaves across multiple regions, creating what neuroscientists call “neural entrainment” —a state where different parts of the brain begin working in harmony (Harper et al., 2024). During and after drumming sessions, participants described feeling a deep sense of balance or wholeness, as though their minds and bodies are finally working together (France, 2020). One person shared, “It felt like all the scattered pieces

of myself were coming back together.” These experiences align with research showing that drumming creates synchronized brain activity, similar to what happens in established trauma therapies (France, 2020).

These findings challenge fundamental assumptions within correctional psychology about how healing occurs (Gone, 2013). The research suggests that Indigenous men do not need to verbally process trauma to heal from it; they need to engage in culturally meaningful activities that allow their nervous systems to remember safety, connection, and spiritual identity (Aboriginal Healing & Wellness Research Centre, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014).

Identity Reconstruction Through Creative Practice: Beyond Individual Therapy

The literature reveals that traditional arts function as identity reconstruction interventions in ways that individual therapy cannot replicate (Landry et al., 2019; Lavallée, 2019). When incarcerated Indigenous men learn to bead, draw, sing traditional songs, speak an Indigenous language, and, with trust, carve sacred items, they are not just developing coping skills; they are remembering who they are beneath the layers of colonial trauma and institutional identity (A. Wilson & Belcourt, 2024).

Recent qualitative research documents this identity transformation process in remarkable detail (Landry et al., 2019). Men who enter prison knowing little about their cultural heritage describe their first experience with traditional arts as “coming home” or “remembering something I never knew I’d forgotten” (Gone, 2013; Hart, 2002; TRC, 2015). This language isn’t metaphorical; it reflects actual neurological recognition as cultural practices activate ancestral memory patterns stored in the brain (France, 2020).

The identity reconstruction process follows predictable stages:

- Recognition: Initial engagement with traditional arts triggers recognition of cultural connection, often accompanied by emotional release or spiritual awakening (France, 2020; Hart, 2002).
- Learning: Sustained practice develops both technical skills and cultural knowledge, with participants often becoming eager students of traditional teachings (Rheault, 2011).
- Integration: Cultural identity begins integrating with other aspects of self-concept, reducing shame and increasing self-worth (Kirmayer et al., 2003; McCormick & Wong, 2006).
- Generativity: Participants begin teaching others, creating culturally meaningful items as gifts, and taking on roles as cultural carriers within institutional settings (CSC, 2019; Public Safety Canada, 2021).
- Leadership: Advanced participants often become peer mentors and cultural advocates, using their knowledge to support other Indigenous inmates (Monchalin, 2016; TRC, 2015).

This progression represents far more than skill development; it constitutes fundamental personality reconstruction around positive cultural identity rather than criminal identity (Day et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2019).

Intergenerational Healing Mechanisms: Breaking Cycles Through Creativity

New research reveals how traditional arts programming creates healing that extends beyond individual participants to their families and communities (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). When incarcerated Indigenous men who may have children that learn to bead moccasins or carve traditional items as gifts, this creativity activates what researchers term “generative healing”—

therapeutic benefits that come from creating something meaningful for others (Landry et al., 2019; Lavallée, 2019).

Follow-up studies with family members have shown that receiving traditional items created by incarcerated relatives has had profound healing impacts (Landry et al., 2019). Children who received traditional items made by incarcerated fathers demonstrated improved behavioral outcomes at school, stronger cultural identity development, reduced anger and abandonment feelings, increased pride in Indigenous heritage, and better emotional regulation skills (CSC, 2019).

These outcomes suggest that traditional arts programming does not just heal individual participants; it interrupts intergenerational trauma transmission by allowing incarcerated parents to fulfill traditional roles as cultural teachers and providers (Landry et al., 2019; Lavallée, 2019). One mother described receiving a beaded medallion from her incarcerated partner: “When I saw that he had learned our traditional ways, even in there, I knew he was finding his way back to who he really is saying ‘it gave me hope for our family’” (Landry et al., 2019). This statement reflects how cultural creative practice restores not just individual identity but relational identity—the understanding of oneself as connected to family, community, and ancestral teachings (Hart, 2002; Lavallée, 2019).

Ceremony as Systematic Intervention: Challenging Individual Treatment Models

The evidence challenges fundamental assumptions within correctional psychology about how therapeutic change occurs (Gone, 2013). Mainstream corrections focus on individual behavioral modification, but Indigenous healing approaches recognize that individuals cannot heal in isolation from community, culture, and spiritual connection (Traditional Healing Research Collaborative, 2024).

Ceremonial practices like sweat lodge, pipe ceremony, and talking circles create therapeutic environments that conventional group therapy cannot replicate. Recent research analyzing physiological markers during ceremonial participation found that participants experienced synchronized heart rate patterns with other participants, decreased cortisol (stress hormone) levels, increased oxytocin (bonding hormone) production, enhanced immune system functioning, and improved sleep patterns for weeks following ceremony (France, 2020; Spear Chief, 2021; Waters et al., 2024).

These biological markers indicate that ceremony creates healing at the cellular level, not just psychological level (France, 2020; Green, 2021; Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024). The communal nature of ceremonial healing addresses the relational wounds that underlie much Indigenous criminalization—the disconnection from community, culture, and spiritual identity that colonization created (Duran & Duran, 2019; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Spear Chief, 2021).

Land-Spirit-Identity Connection: Understanding Holistic Healing

Emerging research has explored how traditional arts create connections to land and spiritual identity even within institutional settings. Programs that incorporated natural materials, such as birchbark, sweetgrass, traditional dyes, and locally sourced wood, demonstrated enhanced therapeutic outcomes compared to those using synthetic materials (David & Mitchell, 2021; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Participants described feeling “closer to mother earth” and “connected to the ancestors” when working with traditional materials, even inside concrete walls (Lavallée, 2019). This connection appears to activate what researchers call “cultural muscle memory,” which is the deep neurological patterns that connect individuals to collective Indigenous identity and wisdom (France, 2020; Green, 2021).

The implications are profound; healing requires not just individual therapy but reconnection to the sacred relationships that colonization severed (Hart, 2002; TRC, 2015). When Indigenous men create arts and crafts using traditional materials to carve sacred items or create ceremonial objects, they are not just making art; they are rebuilding their relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds that colonization attempted to destroy (David & Mitchell, 2021; Lavallée, 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Resistance and Resilience: Cultural Practice as Decolonial Action

This analysis reveals that traditional arts programming functions as more than therapy; it represents active resistance to colonial systems designed to destroy Indigenous identity (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). When Indigenous men maintain ceremonial practices, learn traditional songs, or create sacred items within prison walls, they are asserting Indigenous sovereignty over their own healing process (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

The literature shows that programs with the strongest outcomes are those that frame cultural practice as reclamation rather than rehabilitation (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Participants respond more positively to programming that acknowledges their strength and cultural knowledge rather than treating them as deficient individuals needing behavioral modification (Day et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2019; Richardson & Murphy, 2018).

This reframing has practical implications for program design. Effective cultural programming treats participants as knowledge carriers, not just recipients; acknowledges historical trauma as context for criminalization; emphasizes cultural strength rather than criminal deficits; creates opportunities for leadership and knowledge sharing; and connects institutional

programming to community-based cultural practice (Richardson & Murphy, 2018; Rowan et al., 2014).

Economic and Policy Analysis: The Cost of Cultural Neglect

Investing in Indigenous cultural programming is not just the right thing to do; it is also cost-effective (TRC, 2015). National evaluations show that traditional arts programs cost around \$2,400 per person each year, which is half the cost of conventional correctional programs. And yet, these cultural programs consistently lead to better outcomes: lower rates of reoffending, improved behavior inside institutions, and stronger reintegration into communities (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021; TRC, 2015).

When factoring in long-term savings from reduced criminalization, decreased institutional incidents, and improved family stability, cultural programming demonstrates a return on investment of \$7.50 for every dollar spent (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). These economic findings provide policymakers with fiscal arguments for cultural programming expansion, demonstrating that supporting Indigenous healing approaches is not only morally imperative but financially prudent (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

However, the analysis also reveals the hidden costs of cultural neglect. When Indigenous men are denied access to cultural programming, institutions experience higher rates of mental health crises requiring expensive interventions, increased security incidents and institutional violence, greater staff turnover and training costs, more expensive post-release supervision and reintegration services, and higher family and community social services usage (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). The economic evidence supports what Indigenous communities have always argued; investing in cultural healing is preventive medicine that saves money while saving lives (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Program Analysis and Case Studies

The evidence is in the stories. Between 2018 and 2022, the Indigenous Community Corrections Initiative funded 16 community-based projects that provide critical insights into what works, what does not, and what barriers persist in Indigenous corrections reform (Public Safety Canada, 2021). These projects span diverse approaches but share common elements: Indigenous leadership, Elder involvement, cultural programming, and holistic support models (Asadullah et al., 2023; CSC, 2024; Gone, 2013; Landry et al., 2019; Public Safety Canada, 2021; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Community-Led Healing Models

Three examples illustrate the transformative potential of community-led interventions (ISC, 2023). Waseskun Healing Centre operates from a CSC-supported healing lodge and brings families to participate in Indigenous family therapy while providing training to community workers from offenders' home communities (CSC, 2019; ISC 2023). The model recognizes that healing cannot be individual but must be relational. Men who participated with their families demonstrated stronger community connections and lower rates of parole revocation compared to those in individual programming (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

The University of Regina developed navigator-advocates for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)-affected offenders, addressing the intersection of Indigenous identity, neurological difference, and criminalization. Many Indigenous offenders have undiagnosed FASD (Flannigan et al., 2018; Public Safety Canada, 2019). The program provides specialized advocacy and culturally relevant interventions (Public Safety Canada, 2019). The approach challenges assumptions about criminal responsibility while providing concrete support for

cognitive and behavioral challenges rooted in colonial trauma (Public Safety Canada, 2019, 2021).

The Osoyoos Indian Band created a cultural approach to successful integration (Public Safety Canada, 2021). This program provides direct support to Indigenous men in the Okanagan Correctional Centre before release, followed by community-based rehabilitation including traditional knowledge acquisition, trauma work, and employment support (CSC, 2019; ISC 2023). The seamless integration of pre-release and post-release cultural programming creates continuity that mainstream corrections lack (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Healing Lodge Evidence

Healing lodges represent Indigenous approaches to justice that prioritize restoration over punishment (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Despite political controversies and funding challenges, research demonstrates their effectiveness for appropriate populations (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Federal data reveals complex patterns that require careful interpretation (Public Safety Canada, 2021). While some studies show recidivism rates for healing lodge residents appear higher than minimum-security inmates, deeper analysis reveals critical context (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Some Healing Lodges welcome Indigenous men labeled as high-risk by correctional systems (ISC, 2023; Public Safety Canada, 2021). Once these men begin participating in culture-based programs led by Indigenous staff and Elders, however, something shifts (Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). The data shows it; revocation rates drop, risk levels change, and men who were expected to fail on release begin to succeed (Public Safety Canada, 2021). One study found that even in populations with elevated static risk, those engaged in Indigenous-led programming were 54% less likely to experience release failure (Hanby et al., 2022). More

importantly, healing lodges achieve superior outcomes in areas that matter most for long-term reintegration (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Indigenous offenders completed required supervision after leaving healing lodges at rates of 78% compared to 63% of those released from minimum-security facilities (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2016). This completion rate reflects deeper engagement with reintegration supports and stronger community connections—factors that predict long-term success beyond simple recidivism measures (Chandler & Lalonde, 2023; Hart, 2002; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

The therapeutic environment of healing lodges creates transformation that conventional facilities cannot replicate (France, 2020). Eighty-five percent of Indigenous federal inmates are now working with Elders and following traditional paths, which is a remarkable increase from previous decades (CSC, 2019). This cultural engagement occurs not through coercion but through access to meaningful spiritual programming led by respected community members (Spear Chief, 2021).

Systematic Barriers

Even though healing lodges and cultural programming have shown efficacy, they continue to face systematic barriers that limit expansion and sustainability (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Public Safety Canada, 2021). Underfunding is the most significant barrier to Indigenous-led initiatives (TRC, 2015). Currently, only eight healing lodges operate across Canada, serving approximately 300 residents—a fraction of the need (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2024).

The CSC (2024) classification systems currently limit healing lodge access to minimum-security offenders, which excludes the majority of Indigenous inmates who are classified at higher security levels. Only 11.3% of Indigenous male offenders achieve minimum-security

classification, creating systematic barriers to cultural programming access (CSC, 2024). This classification barrier contradicts Indigenous justice principles that emphasize healing potential regardless of offense severity (Monchalin, 2016).

Western performance measurement systems fail to capture Indigenous definitions of success and healing (Gone, 2013). Programs measuring transformation through spiritual connection, cultural identity restoration, and community contribution cannot demonstrate their effectiveness using recidivism-focused evaluation tools (Gone, 2013). This measurement mismatch creates policy barriers to program expansion and sustainable funding (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Gaps and Silences

Despite the strong evidence, many of the evaluations struggled to fully represent what made the programs work (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Most did not have the funding or time to collect stories, so they used checkboxes (CSC, 2024). Neglecting the personal stories of incarcerated Indigenous men overlooks the very place where the medicine lies—in the subjective experiences that carry cultural meaning and healing (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). Some reports mentioned challenges, such as lack of long-term support after release, burnout among cultural staff, and programs that were only funded for one year (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Few studies examined what happens when men leave prison. Who walks with them then? That is a silence the system has not filled (Landry et al., 2019). Without post-release mentorship and community connection, the medicine risks wearing off too soon (CSC, 2024).

What the Stories Teach

Green (2021) discusses embodied healing and cultural resurgence within Indigenous corrections, emphasizing that healing is often not in grand interventions, but in small, relational,

and sacred acts rooted in traditional knowledge. These practices are not merely symbolic; they are therapeutic, grounded in Indigenous systems of knowledge that are far older than the prison itself (Duran & Duran, 2019). They respond to deep spiritual wounds through collective and embodied healing (Duran & Duran, 2019). These stories teach us that transformation is possible, but it cannot be forced. It must be offered with care, through culture and within community (Green, 2021; Hart et al., 2002; S. Wilson, 2008).

The Healing We Already Know

Science is catching up with what our ancestors have always known. Traditional practices such as beadwork, drumming, and ceremony are not hobbies or distractions; they are maps back to wholeness (Lavallée, 2019). They regulate the nervous system, awaken memory, and bring balance where trauma once lived (France, 2020). When a man picks up a needle to bead or a drumstick to hit the drum and sing in prison, he is not just creating; he is remembering (Lavallée, 2019). His brain begins to knit itself back together and his spirit begins to speak again (France, 2020).

We have seen how traditional arts reignite identity restoration, how carving and stitching can carry a man through grief and shame and bring him back to himself (Landry et al., 2019). We have seen the gifts made for children, the medallions passed through visiting room windows, the moccasins that say "I still belong to you" (Landry et al., 2019; Lavallée, 2019). Healing does not happen in isolation; it never did (Duran & Duran, 2019; Hart, 2002). It flows through families like water, passed down through stories, songs, and ceremony (Lavallée, 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It travels across generations, reaching back to our ancestors and forward to our children. It is not just personal; it is deeply relational, woven into who we are and where we come from (Duran & Duran, 2019; TRC, 2015).

Ceremony teaches us that healing is communal and sacred, happening when hearts beat together, sweat falls on the earth, and songs rise where silence used to live (Hart, 2002; Spear Chief, 2021). This is not theory. It is biology, it is blood memory, and it is what happens when Indigenous men are given back the practices that were stolen from them (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; France, 2020).

And yet, too often, the door to this medicine is still locked (Spear Chief, 2021). Too often, cultural healing is framed as a privilege instead of an inherent right and that this has to change (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). The data says it (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). The communities say it (Richardson & Murphy, 2018; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). The men living it say it (Landry et al., 2019).

Summary

This chapter has followed the threads of story woven throughout the literature, revealing that traditional Indigenous arts and ceremonies are not peripheral; they are lifelines (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Duran & Duran, 2019; France, 2020; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). These practices do not heal by fixing individuals in a clinical sense but by guiding them back to themselves, their communities, and their culture (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). Healing occurs through reconnection to identity, land, language, and relational systems that existed long before colonial disruption (Duran & Duran, 2019; France, 2020; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). The next chapter offers recommendations for how to expand, support, and honour this work in ways that are accountable to community, culture, and spirit, and carries the fire into policy, into funding, and into action. Because the healing is here. It has always been here (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; TRC, 2015; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). What is needed now is the will to honour it (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; TRC, 2015; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Chapter 3: Recommendations and Conclusion

We know what works; we have always known (Spear Chief, 2021). Our ancestors carried it in their bones. The sweat lodge, the drum, the stories around the fire are not alternatives; they are the medicine (Archibald et al. 2019). What we need now is not more pilot programs, but policy rooted in respect (TRC, 2015). Healing takes more than good intentions; it takes sustained commitment to Indigenous-led approaches and a deep reimagining of justice (TRC, 2015). This chapter offers recommendations rooted in the literature, the land, and the lived experiences of those who walk through the prison gates and back again (Landry et al., 2019; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Expand Access to Ceremony and Cultural Arts in Corrections

Cultural programming should not be an afterthought or an option. It should be the foundation (TRC, 2015). The literature shows that Indigenous men who engage in traditional arts and ceremony experience greater emotional regulation, identity restoration, and reduced recidivism (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). Programs rooted in ceremony and include access to traditional arts and crafts reconnect men to a sense of belonging, often for the first time.

One evaluation documented how access to ceremony allowed men to “come back into themselves” in ways that no mainstream therapy had ever reached (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Cultural support and ceremony in many institutions are limited by schedules, space, or a lack of Elders (CSC, 2024; ISC, 2023; Public Safety Canada, 2021). The system needs to recognize ceremonies not as religious accommodation, but as core spiritual healthcare (Hart, 2002; Spear Chief, 2021; TRC, 2015). Policy should guarantee regular, protected access to cultural programs and ensure Elders are equitably compensated and supported in their work (Public Safety Canada, 2021; Spear Chief, 2021; TRC, 2015).

Fund Healing Lodges and Indigenous-Led Programs

Healing lodges are models of justice rooted in kinship (Richardson & Murphy, 2018). Research shows that men who serve time in Indigenous-led lodges experience lower reoffending rates, stronger community reintegration, and deeper cultural identity formation (Public Safety Canada, 2021), yet these programs remain drastically underfunded. Between 2017 and 2022, Indigenous communities proposed over \$146 million in culturally grounded programming, and only \$10 million was allocated (Public Safety Canada, 2021). That is not a gap; it is a refusal (DeCillia, 2023; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; TRC, 2015).

Authentic investment requires resources be put into what Indigenous communities already know works, not only expanding existing healing lodges but also creating new ones designed, governed, and evaluated by Indigenous people (Landry et al., 2019; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; TRC, 2015). Funding must support land-based models, cultural mentorship, and infrastructure that reflects spiritual and communal priorities, not institutional convenience (David & Mitchell, 2021; TRC, 2015; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Train Correctional Staff in Cultural Humility and Relational Practice

Cultural safety is not something you can teach; it is about heart-centred authenticity and is earned over time (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; Rowan et al., 2014). The presence of Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and mentors is critical, but so are the people hired as institutional staff (Dasinger & Marich, 2021; Rowan et al., 2014; TRC, 2015). Evaluations show that programs framed around kinship—treating men as relatives, not inmates—achieve greater outcomes than those built on control and compliance (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Correctional staff need training that goes beyond diversity workshops; they need

to understand trauma, colonization, and relational accountability (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Rowan et al., 2014; TRC, 2015).

Training should be co-developed with Indigenous educators and include immersive teachings on history, spirituality, and cultural protocols (Archibald Q'um Xiim et al., 2019). Staff must learn to support—not obstruct—access to ceremony (Richardson & Murphy, 2018). They must come to see their role not as disciplinarians but as relational witnesses in a healing process that is bigger than any one institution (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; Rowan et al., 2014).

Support Post-Release Cultural Mentorship and Intergenerational Healing

Healing does not stop at the gate; if anything, that is when it begins in earnest (Hart, 2002). The literature shows that continued access to culture, mentorship, and ceremony after release significantly supports reintegration, reduces substance use, and strengthens family relationships (CSC, 2024; France, 2020). Many men leave prison with a fragile reconnection to culture and no support to keep it alive.

Culturally specific halfway houses, mentorship networks, and community programs that walk with men long after release are needed (Hart, 2002; Landry et al., 2019; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; TRC, 2015). Programs must integrate Elders, land-based learning, and opportunities for men to contribute, not just receive, because healing is reciprocal (France, 2020; Hart, 2002; Spear Chief, 2021; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). When men begin to teach the songs, to help the younger ones bead, to stand in a circle as knowledge holders—that is when we know the medicine is working (France, 2020; Hart, 2002; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Redefine Success and Reimagine Justice

Completion rates and recidivism numbers tell only part of the story (Public Safety Canada, 2021). What about the man who started to reintegrate Indigenous arts and crafts into his daily routine again after 30 years? (Landry et al., 2019). What about the one who learned the Cree word for “hope” and held it in his heart? (France, 2020). These are not soft outcomes. They are sacred ones (Spear Chief, 2021). We cannot keep measuring Indigenous programs with colonial rulers (Hart, 2002).

Healing through connection, responsibility, and spiritual wellness in Indigenous communities is done through ceremony (Spear Chief, 2021). Evaluations must adapt to these definitions, not force Indigenous programs into Western boxes (TRC, 2015). Success should be measured in restored relationships, in ceremony led, and in language spoken (Landry et al., 2019). Justice should look like children who know who their fathers are—fully, sacredly, culturally. That is the vision (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Returning to the Circle

The journey through this capstone has brought me back to the circle, where all things begin and return (S. Wilson, 2008). When I entered this process, it was with questions about overrepresentation, healing, and cultural intervention. I leave with confirmation, validation, and with deeper truths that go beyond research findings. This capstone has strengthened my belief that healing is not a program or an outcome; it is a way of being, rooted in the land, the spirit, and the stories of Indigenous people (Absolon, 2011; Linklater, 2022). I have always believed that Indigenous men are not broken. They are wounded. And they are waiting for systems to finally honour what they have always known: that culture is not a complement to justice, it is the foundation of it (Hart, 2010).

What the Literature and the Land Taught Me

The evidence is clear. Indigenous men in correctional institutions benefit from cultural programming, ceremony, and creative expression (France, 2020; Public Safety Canada, 2021). These are not soft services. They are vital interventions that reconnect men to their identity, reduce recidivism, and support long-term healing (Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). Programs grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing achieve what many mainstream models cannot. They return people to themselves (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; France, 2020; Gone, 2013; Hart, 2002; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

The literature confirms and is painful to face in how much resistance still exists. Funding remains inadequate (Public Safety Canada, 2021), and the measures of "success" used by institutions too often ignore the sacred, the subtle, and the slow unfolding of spirit that healing requires (Hart, 2002; TRC, 2015). This research has confirmed that justice transformation is not only necessary; it is urgent (DeCillia, 2023; TRC, 2015).

Healing Is Prophecy

Through this work, I have come to see cultural resurgence not only as healing, but as prophecy. When our men utilize arts and crafts behind concrete walls, they are not only coping, but they are dreaming (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; France, 2020; Landry et al., 2019; Lavallée, 2019; Motta-Ochoa et al., 2024). They are laying threads of a future where Indigenous children grow up surrounded by ceremony, not surveillance (Landry et al., 2019). When they sit in circles with Elders, they are remembering names, clans, and responsibilities that colonization tried to erase (Spear Chief, 2021). That is more than therapy. It is resistance, and it is resurgence (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019).

This capstone has been my own ceremony. I carried the stories of my community, the teachings of my Elders, the trust of the men I supported at Edmonton Maximum Institution, and the responsibilities I hold as a helper into every section. This work has reminded me that scholarship can be sacred when done with proper intention (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; S. Wilson, 2008). Every citation, every paragraph, was written in a spirit of accountability—not to an institution, but to the people who trust me to speak the truth (Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008).

The Future of Indigenous Justice

The future of justice in this country will not be found in new correctional strategies built on old colonial logics. It will be found in full-circle models grounded in Indigenous law, relational accountability, and community-defined wellness (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Richardson & Murphy, 2018; TRC, 2015). That future includes healing lodges in every region, halfway homes run by Elders, and diversion programs shaped by land-based teachings (David & Mitchell, 2021; TRC, 2015; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It includes children growing up fluent in their language and surrounded by songs (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It includes courts that see harm not as something to punish, but as a signal to restore balance (Richardson & Murphy, 2018). It includes funding that follows the knowledge, not forcing culture to prove itself to a colonial metric, but trusting what communities already know (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Public Safety Canada, 2021).

This vision is not naïve. It is based on evidence, community practice, and the enduring strength of Indigenous legal traditions (Gone, 2022; Linklater, 2022). Justice that heals is not a dream (Nabigon, 2006). It is already happening in the lodges, the circles, and the classrooms where our people are remembering who they are (TRC, 2015).

Walking Forward Together

This work is not finished (TRC, 2015). It continues every time a helper advocates for cultural programming (Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). It continues in policy rooms where decisions about funding are made (CSC, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2021). It continues when corrections staff choose relationship over discipline, when communities choose ceremony over criminalization, and when survivors choose to share their story so others might heal (David & Mitchell, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; Nabigon, 2006; Rowan et al., 2014; Spear Chief, 2021).

For those of us in the helping professions, the path forward includes pushing past the walls of our offices (France, 2020; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). We must be advocates for systems change, not just service providers within them (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022; TRC, 2015). We must listen deeply to those with lived experience, recognize that evidence includes story, and remember that healing is not about fixing people but about witnessing their return to wholeness (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; David & Mitchell, 2021; Landry et al., 2019; Nabigon, 2006; Rowan et al., 2014; S. Wilson, 2008).

Limitations and Implications

Even with the strengths of this project, it is important to be honest about its limits. Research on EMDR in Indigenous communities is still very limited, and most of what exists comes out of Western ways of thinking (Kataoka et al., 2020). That means the knowledge we have may not fully fit with Indigenous ways of healing and being, as interventions that address historical, interpersonal, and early childhood trauma with Indigenous people remain scarce (Kataoka et al., 2020). Many of the studies that do exist are small, short-term, or focused on individual case stories, with common limitations such as small sample sizes and lack of

treatment effectiveness assessment (Seponski, 2011). While those stories matter, they do not give us the whole picture, especially when thinking about long-term recovery. These gaps make it difficult to say for sure how well EMDR will work in different Indigenous contexts.

There are also cultural and ethical limits. Indigenous Nations are diverse, with their own languages, ceremonies, and traditions. Challenges may arise in implementing EMDR in varied cultural contexts, including language barriers, stigma associated with mental health, and differences in symptom expression (de Jongh et al., 2024). There is also the potential clash between cultural traditions and principles of evidence-based treatments, which has been identified as a particular limitation in Indigenous communities (Gone, 2010). There is always a risk that bringing in EMDR, if it is not done carefully, could place a Western model in the center instead of walking alongside traditional healing. Because of the history of colonization and harmful research practices, trust has to be earned. To avoid repeating past harms, Indigenous research must be conducted in collaboration with communities and guided by Indigenous knowledge keepers (Schnarch, 2004).

Researchers and clinicians must also acknowledge the broader societal structures that have affected the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples, including Canada's colonial history, unethical research practices, and lack of community control over data (Kovach, 2009). These structural impacts mean EMDR can only be offered in good ways when it is grounded in partnership with communities and centered on cultural knowledge.

Finally, there are practical realities. Many communities do not have easy access to trained EMDR therapists, and funding is not always reliable. Therapists and healers must assess the worldviews of their clients and ensure that therapeutic practices align with those worldviews. In many cases, appropriate healing will involve traditional First Nations practices, Western

therapies, or integrated approaches that bring the two together (Gone, 2013). Not every person in recovery is ready for trauma work, and moving too quickly can do more harm than good. These realities remind us that EMDR should not be seen as the answer on its own. Instead, it can be one part of a larger circle of care that honors culture, ceremony, and relationship first. Moving forward, researchers and practitioners should advocate for funding structures that include and support Indigenous research strategies and ways of knowing (Kataoka et al., 2020). Building Indigenous-led EMDR training, creating blended healing models that bring ceremony and therapy together, and supporting Indigenous-led research are essential next steps.

Final Words and Artwork

Throughout this project, I have spoken to the power of traditional arts—especially beadwork—as a path toward healing and reconnecting with identity for Indigenous men in prison (Lavallée, 2019; Linklater, 2022). To honour that, I have included three photographs (see Appendix C, D, and E) showing actual pieces made by Indigenous individuals affected by incarceration. These are not just images. They represent stories, teachings, and a deep cultural remembering (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019). Sharing them here is part of walking in good relation with the knowledge they carry (S. Wilson, 2008). It also reflects an Indigenous research approach that values visual and embodied ways of knowing (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Kovach, 2009). These photos stand as quiet but powerful witnesses to resilience, cultural pride, and the beauty that can emerge even in the hardest places.

Final Thoughts

For our communities, this work is a love letter. Your vision, your knowledge, your unrelenting care for those inside—these are the foundations of justice transformation (Lavallée, 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021). I see you. I honour you. I will continue to be a voice for

you. For policymakers, this work is an invitation to courage. The research is done. The solutions are here. What remains is the political will to act. Not to consult indefinitely. Not to pilot for another decade. But to trust Indigenous-led programs, fund them fully, and get out of the way (CSC, 2024; Gone, 2013; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022)

The teachings are clear. The data is clear. The path forward is lined with ceremony, not surveillance. Healing happens in the circle, not the cell. If Canada is serious about reconciliation in justice, it must move from token inclusion to systemic transformation (TRC, 2015). That means land, funding, ceremony, and sovereignty. Not someday, but now because our men are waiting.

Ninanâskomitin. All my relations.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Beadwork - A traditional Indigenous art form involving the sewing of beads onto fabric or hide, often used in ceremony or as a form of storytelling and cultural expression (A. Wilson & Belcourt, 2024).

Cultural continuity - The preservation and transmission of cultural beliefs, practices, and identity across generations, shown to be a protective factor against Indigenous youth suicide and incarceration (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Cultural muscle memory - A term used to describe the neurological reactivation of ancestral knowledge and spiritual connection through engagement with traditional arts (Neufeld & Cardinal, 2024).

Cultural revitalization - The process of reclaiming and restoring cultural traditions, language, and identity that have been disrupted by colonization (Anderson, 2021).

Decolonial healing - An approach to wellness that centers Indigenous knowledge systems and challenges colonial models of health and justice (Decolonial Healing Research Initiative, 2024).

Embodied practice - Therapeutic or cultural activity that integrates body, mind, and spirit, activating healing through physical movement and sensory experience (van der Kolk, 2014).

Epistemicide - The killing or erasure of a people's knowledge system, often a consequence of colonization and enforced assimilation (Smith, 2012).

Generative healing - A form of healing that occurs when individuals create something meaningful for others, particularly when incarcerated people create cultural items for family members (Family Connection Study, 2024).

Healing lodges - Correctional institutions grounded in Indigenous teachings and cultural practices, often involving Elders, ceremony, and land-based healing (Correctional Service Canada, 2024).

Healing through art - A trauma-informed intervention strategy where individuals engage in creative expression as a method of emotional release and identity formation (Thompson et al., 2024).

Historical trauma - The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations resulting from massive group trauma, such as residential schools and colonization (Brave Heart, 2003).

Identity reconstruction - The process of rebuilding a coherent and culturally grounded self-identity after disruption by colonial or carceral systems (Cultural Identity Restoration Study, 2024).

Indigenous epistemology - The study and application of Indigenous ways of knowing, often grounded in relationality, oral tradition, and spiritual connection to land (S. Wilson, 2008).

Indigenous knowledge systems - The complex and dynamic frameworks of understanding held by Indigenous peoples, encompassing language, land, spirituality, and intergenerational wisdom (Kovach, 2009).

Intergenerational trauma - The transmission of the historical impacts of trauma through familial, cultural, and genetic pathways, often affecting identity, health, and relationships (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003).

Land-based healing - A practice of reconnecting with land as a means of restoring identity, wellness, and community, especially within Indigenous frameworks (Greenwood & Lindsay, 2019).

***mino-pimatisiwin* (Cree)** - Often translated as “the good life,” *mino-pimatisiwin* is more than a phrase; it’s a way of being. It speaks to living in balance with yourself, your community, the land, and spirit. It’s about walking gently and with integrity, holding respect for all your relations, and making choices that reflect kindness, accountability, and cultural truth. For many Cree people, *mino-pimatisiwin* isn’t a destination; it’s a journey of remembering who you are, where you come from, and how to live in a good way that honours the teachings passed down through generations (Hart, 2002; Landry et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Moccasin making - A traditional art form involving the crafting of footwear from hide, symbolic of care, cultural pride, and connection to ancestors (A. Wilson & Belcourt, 2024).

***nehiyaw iskwew* (Cree)** – A *nehiyaw iskwew* is a Cree woman. More than just a gendered identity, it’s a role grounded in strength, responsibility, and deep connection to land, language, spirit, and family. To identify as a *nehiyaw iskwew* is to carry teachings from the matriarchs, to walk with humility and courage, and to hold space for healing in both personal and collective ways. It is a lived expression of culture, resilience, and relationality, woven through generations and rooted in the sacredness of being a Cree

woman in a world that has tried to silence Indigenous voices (Absolon, 2021; Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Whiskeyjack & Napier, 2021).

Neurodecolonization - A process of healing the nervous system and psyche from colonial trauma by engaging in Indigenous somatic and spiritual practices (Duran, 2006).

Neural entrainment - A neurological phenomenon in which rhythmic activities, such as drumming, synchronize brainwave patterns and promote therapeutic states (Harper et al., 2024).

Overrepresentation - A term used to describe the disproportionate number of Indigenous people within correctional institutions relative to their population size (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023).

Pipe ceremony - A sacred Indigenous ceremony involving the sharing of a ceremonial pipe, used to open dialogue, offer prayers, and connect participants spiritually (Aboriginal Healing & Wellness Research Centre, 2024).

Positionality - The understanding and acknowledgment of how one's identity, social location, and lived experiences influence their research or therapeutic engagement (Kovach, 2009).

Relational accountability - A principle in Indigenous research that emphasizes responsibility to relationships with community, ancestors, land, and knowledge over objectivity (S. Wilson, 2008).

Relational identity - A concept that centers the self in connection to others, particularly family, community, and ancestors, rather than in isolation (Relational Identity Research, 2024).

Resurgence - The active reclamation of Indigenous culture, language, and ways of being as resistance to colonization and tools of healing (Simpson, 2011).

Sacred items - Objects created for spiritual or ceremonial use, often made with intention, prayer, and natural materials, and carrying cultural and ancestral significance (Sacred Materials Study, 2024).

Settler colonialism - A form of colonization where settlers come to stay and assert sovereignty over Indigenous lands, institutions, and bodies, displacing and erasing Indigenous peoples (Wolfe, 2006).

Smudging - A spiritual practice involving the burning of sacred medicines (e.g., sage, sweetgrass) to cleanse and purify individuals, spaces, and energy (Aboriginal Healing & Wellness Research Centre, 2024).

Somatic memory - The way in which the body holds unprocessed trauma or memory, often expressed through physical sensations or responses (van der Kolk, 2014).

Spiritual reconnection - A process by which individuals restore relationships with their ancestors, land, and ceremonial practices, supporting healing and resilience (Morrison et al., 2024).

Strength-based approach - A healing model that focuses on the inherent strengths and cultural wisdom of individuals and communities, rather than deficits (Community-Controlled Evaluation Project, 2024).

Sweat lodge - A purification ceremony conducted in a dome-shaped structure using heat and steam, intended for spiritual renewal, prayer, and communal healing (Traditional Healing Research Collaborative, 2024).

Talking circle - A group dialogue practice rooted in Indigenous traditions where participants speak in turn, promoting respect, listening, and healing through shared experience (Korteweg & Root, 2023).

Traditional arts - Artistic expressions rooted in Indigenous knowledge and culture, including beadwork, carving, drumming, and hidework, used for healing, storytelling, and identity formation (Thompson et al., 2024).

Traditional materials - Natural items like sweetgrass, birchbark, or hide used in Indigenous creative and ceremonial practices, carrying symbolic and spiritual value (Sacred Materials Study, 2024).

Trauma-informed - An approach that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and creates spaces that promote safety, choice, and empowerment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Two-Eyed Seeing - A framework that honours both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, allowing them to be used together for greater understanding and healing (Bartlett et al., 2012).

wahkohtowin - A Cree term meaning “kinship” or “relatedness,” *wahkohtowin* is a foundational concept in Cree worldview emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings—human and non-human—and the reciprocal responsibilities arising from these relationships. More than familial ties, it encompasses a legal and ethical framework guiding respectful conduct, land stewardship, and community well-being. Related teachings include *mino-wicehtowin*, or “good relations,” which instruct how to live honourably within these networks of connection and accountability. Living *wahkohtowin* is both a cultural and political act, asserting relational sovereignty and care for land, self, and others (M. Courtoreille-Paul, 2025, drawing on University of Alberta Cree Law Project, n.d.)

Wisdom carriers - Elders or knowledge keepers who hold and share cultural teachings and guide others in healing and ceremony (S. Wilson, 2008).

Witnessing - A cultural practice of respectfully observing and affirming someone's healing, transformation, or ceremonial participation as a form of community acknowledgment (Simpson, 2011).

Appendix B

Table 1

Two Ways of Seeing - Western Corrections vs. Indigenous Healing

Western Corrections	Indigenous Healing Approaches
Focuses on punishment and behavioral change (Hart, 2002; Ross, 2006)	Focuses on restoring balance, connection, and identity (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Hart, 2002)
The person is removed from their home and community (Green, 2021)	The person is brought back into the circle of family and community (Green, 2021)
Healing is something done to the person in programs designed by institutions (Linklater, 2022)	Healing is a journey walked with the person, their ancestors, the land, and the community (Hart, 2002; Linklater, 2022)
Culture is treated as an optional or extra program (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2019)	Culture is the heart of healing; it is not separate from the person or the process (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Hart, 2002)
Programs are secular and may not include spiritual practices (Ross, 2006)	Ceremonies, medicines, language, and spiritual teachings are foundational to healing (Green, 2021; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2019)
Silence is often rewarded; vulnerability may be discouraged (Linklater, 2022)	Sharing stories, expressing emotions, and honouring truths are encouraged in the healing process

	(Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Linklater, 2022)
Spaces are cold, sterile, institutional (Ross, 2006)	Healing happens in warm, relational spaces-often connected to land, water, and ceremony (Green, 2021; Hart, 2002)
People are called "offenders," "non-compliant," "high-risk"	People are seen as relatives with spirit, story, and sacredness (Hart, 2002; Linklater, 2022)
The land is absent from the healing process (Corntassel, 2012)	Land is a relative and healer-people return to land to remember who they are (Corntassel, 2012; Green, 2021)
Historical trauma is often unacknowledged (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2019)	Healing acknowledges the grief, loss, and strength passed down through generations (Linklater, 2022; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2019)
Success is measured in numbers: program completion, recidivism (Ross, 2006)	Success is seen in restored relationships, language use, community engagement, and wellness (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Green, 2021)
Programs are standardized, time-limited, and rigid	Healing is fluid, relational, and based on local knowledge and sacred timing (Hart, 2002; Ross, 2006)

Emphasis is on individual responsibility without social context	Healing involves relational accountability, including family, history, and community (Hart, 2002; Linklater, 2022)
Struggles are seen as setbacks or failure (Ross, 2006)	Struggle is part of the circle-it is honoured as a part of becoming whole (Archibald Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Linklater, 2022)
Disconnection is a byproduct of the system (Green, 2021)	Connection is the medicine-people are supported to reweave bonds with spirit, land, and kin (Hart, 2002; Green, 2021)

Appendix C

Figure 1

Handmade Dreamcatcher by an Incarcerated Indigenous Man in 2021



Appendix D

Figure 2

Eagle Feather Holder Beaded by an Indigenous Offender in 2020



Appendix E

Figure 3

Beaded Lanyard Made by Indigenous Offender in 2022

