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Opinion

Oct 3, 2018 by Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith

How I use the teachings of the Medicine Wheel in my healing journey

20 Comments

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The Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol used by some of the Native people of North and South America. I've learned that not all Nations use the Medicine Wheel because it can be viewed as a colonialist structure, but those who do follow it, do so according to their own teachings and what has been passed down to them through their Elders and medicine people.

The Medicine Wheel teaches us that we have four aspects to ourselves: the physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual. Each must be in balance and equally developed in order for us to remain healthy, happy individuals. According to the book "*The Sacred Tree*," written by Phil Lane, Jr, Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown and Elders "there are many different ways that this basic concept is expressed: the four grandfathers, the four winds, the four cardinal directions, and many other

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objects.”

As a First Nations woman, I find this to be quite different from the Western modality of medicine in which I was raised. I feel that the Western model of medicine pushes the concept that if “you take this pill, you’ll feel better,” or “if you don’t participate in this treatment, then shame on you.” The Western model of medicine lacks the spiritual connection that is often sought when an Indigenous person is struggling or ill.

In the early stages of my healing journey from eating disorders, depression and anxiety, a psychiatrist I see brought forth the concept of self-care. She said “Christine, when it comes to recovery and healing, don’t be afraid to put yourself first. Take time for yourself, do what you need to do in order for you to feel good about yourself.”

I looked at her and said, “But self-care, that’s being selfish!”

My therapist smiled, shook her head, and said, “No, that is what you have been raised to believe by some people who don’t know themselves and what healthy boundaries are.”

It took me awhile to digest that thought. I was afraid of upsetting people, and of them being angry with me. I thought the worst of myself because instead of putting others first, I was taking the time to pay attention to myself, and the feedback I got was not always the greatest. I had to learn how to build myself up and keep myself strong.

I started to adopt the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. I physically and mentally had to keep a picture of what I had been taught, not only in my mind but also on my bedroom wall. I had to remember the teachings I had been given by the Indigenous professor who originally taught me about it and by other mentors and Elders I had seen over the years.

It is said that the Northern aspect of the Medicine Wheel deals with the spiritual. As an introvert and someone who deals with high levels of anxiety, it is easy for me to keep myself isolated and alone. I have had to learn to reach out when I need to. This means getting together with friends or calling them. It means making myself get out of my apartment, even when I don’t want to, and learning to socialize with others. I volunteer, not for recognition, but as a part of selflessness. I use sage (one of the four medicines) and smudge when I need to, which allows me to clear any negativity away I may be harboring inside or around me.

In the Eastern sphere of the Medicine Wheel, I have learned to take care of myself physically. In order to function in a balanced way, I had to learn about proper rest, setting a specific time to go to bed at

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diabetes and a low thyroid condition. Recently I have had digestive issues, and that meant changing my diet completely. Because I subsist on ODSP and freelance work, it is hard to buy the foods I need—organic and gluten-free—but I make the extra effort to do so, even if it means I run short on monies for other things I want to do. I make sure that I go for walks every day, and even invested in a Fitbit watch so that I am motivated to keep above a certain number of steps.

The Southern aspect of the Medicine Wheel deals with the mental side of health. This is where I have learned to take time for myself in a balanced way, to read a good book, watch my favourite television show, paint my nails or be creative through writing, painting, beading or sewing.

Lastly, the Western aspect has to do with how you express yourself, self-esteem, the ability to cope, having a positive attitude, having healthy relationships and feeling adjusted. This aspect of the Medicine Wheel can be the hardest to enact because I still have old ways of wanting to express myself or feel about myself, but I have come a long way. Though I may still be down about myself from time to time, I don't dwell on it as much as I used to, and sometimes people come to me for advice instead of the other way around. I know and understand what healthy relationships are, but other than a few friends and acquaintances, I remain single because I choose to for now.

I adopted the Medicine Wheel teachings to help me come off high doses of medications for my depression and anxiety. I wanted to learn to deal with my emotions instead of masking them with medications that made me feel numb and zombie-like. Sure, I still take certain medications, but the amount is a lot lower than it used to be, and this has helped me to start living instead of walking around in a daze and not feeling anything.

When my mom was dying last year, I travelled back home to see her. Instead of taking pills that would keep me numb, which was an old response to trauma and grief, I had to consistently practise positive self-talk and self-care. I kept my emotions in check while with her, and I would take breaks and go back to my motel for bits at a time. I allowed myself to cry, write or bead, which were coping mechanisms I had learned through the years, and then I would walk back to see her again.

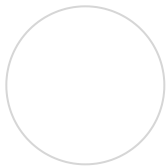
Losing my mom has been the hardest thing for me to go through. It's still very fresh and I'm still mourning. Following the Medicine Wheel and its teachings has been very difficult because I have often questioned my place in this world since her passing, and the spiritual aspect of what I have been taught and/or what I believe in has been shaken. Luckily I have some friends who have been really supportive, and they remind me that my mom wouldn't want me to give up, and that she'd want me to continue the healing path that I'm on.

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speak good words; my ears, so I can hear good things, and so on. The Medicine Wheel and its teachings may not be for everyone, but it has helped me to stay on my healing path, and to not give up.

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AUTHOR



Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith Contributor

Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith is a Saulteaux woman from Peguis First Nation. She is an emerging writer, graduated from the University of Toronto with a specialization in Aboriginal Studies in June 2011, and graduated with a Master in Education in Social Justice in June 2017. She has written for the Native Canadian, Anishinabek News, Windspeaker, FNH Magazine, New Tribe Magazine and the Piker Press.

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Denise September 23, 2021 at 1:47 pm

Thank you for sharing your story

Lori July 20, 2021 at 9:23 am

Thank you for taking time to share your story. It is helping me as I need to find a healthier way to be on this walk. I've been struggling and your words helped me to see some possibilities for my journey. I'm very grateful I found your story. My FN therapist is a blessing. It will take time yet I will learn to be stronger.

Barb June 18, 2021 at 10:31 am

Wonderful!

Jorge June 13, 2021 at 4:30 am

Thank you for sharing most interesting I too have had to endure an extremely difficult spiritual journey due to what is commonly know as the evil eye – I fully get what you are going through ..

Sandra Griffiths February 16, 2021 at 6:30 am

Thankyou .I needed these words at this time

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It was like I was the story. It was mine. Thank you for sharing.

June-Lee Hernandez January 21, 2021 at 11:20 am

Thank you for sharing your spirit through this article. It resonated with me as I am on a healing journey. Your strength and power are inspirational. I hope you will continue to share with others your story because it crosses over all artificial human boundaries that keep us disconnected and touches the internal spirit where we are one. Again, thank you.

francine bartlett September 14, 2020 at 10:08 am

Thanks for sharing. Stories, healing journeys, and elimination of dis-ease through the teachings and guidance of the Medicine Wheel have inspired my profession as a Physical Therapist. Medicine Wheel Wellness in Jackson, WY was created in 2015 to share this message and offer healing and healthcare services incorporating all four aspects to find balance and optimize human performance. We would love to hear from you!

With Appreciation,

Francine Bartlett, DPT, ATC, RTY

mwwjh.com

jo roberts September 3, 2020 at 3:41 am

Thank you so much for sharing...self care lies at the heart of life as it gives us the strength to help and do more for others and the earth.

Trisha Roberson August 31, 2020 at 4:36 pm

Thank you for your descriptions of your healing journey. I am reflecting on my own healing and your writing has helped guide my own reflection.

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Hi.

I just quoted you in a project for my masters of education and wanted to thank-you for sharing your story.

karen

Cassie Quinlan March 27, 2019 at 8:42 pm

Thanks for your writing – and for sharing traditional ideas of balance in life – like the Medicine Wheel. Having a simple visualization like that seems helpful in a world of countless choices. I like the examples you give of types of activities. There are so many lessons in the visualizations and nature – to heal many of us! I like your examples for spiritual, they fill in a gap for me, working on a practice is different from the many thou shalt's and thou shouldn'ts that I've been taught! Wishing you continued writing and sharing, I'll look for your articles!

Djim Rowe January 7, 2019 at 7:52 pm

Christine, wonderfully written. I too have learnt a lot from friends that live in Wikwemikong, on Manitoulin Island. I live in Tobermory to the South. The whole concept of the medicine wheel, the teachings, and the concept that they are truths to be learnt and applied to our village life and to our own hearts. So refreshing to my soul. Baamaapii

Mary October 9, 2018 at 1:39 pm

Dear Christine-

Your story is very inspiring and demonstrates that anything is possible when we stay true to our fundamental teachings, and have the courage to be 'the best that we can'. Wishing you continued success on your journey.

Denyse Lynch October 4, 2018 at 2:12 pm

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to us...examining them, assessing where we are aligned, in balance with them or, out of balance. We should all be aware of our human being components.

I empathize with your grief from the loss of your mom. Many of us share that experience and it is a difficult journey, one of my most difficult in life. You too are on your journey and I am very happy you have found supports along the way. Keep doing what helps you achieve balance and please continue sharing with those of us who can benefit from your words.

Blessings on you.

Denyse

David Zakus October 4, 2018 at 12:14 pm

Very wonderful to read...Wishing you Christine all the best on your journey. We must all do it. Best,
david

Cynthia October 3, 2018 at 7:02 pm

Thank you for sharing your story. The four aspects of the medicine wheel fascinate me and I wish your journey of healing will continue to foster these components in a balanced way.

Leslie Noganosh October 3, 2018 at 3:25 pm

wonderfully expressed, hugs and prayers to continue on your life's journey

Jackie Esquimaux.Hamlin October 3, 2018 at 2:45 pm

I was captivated by your story. What an interesting journey....thanks for sharing.

Tanya February 14, 2020 at 12:43 am

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girl, but I don't remember a whole lot about it (or maybe I was just too young to understand). I've recently started re-learning my Native American Spirituality, while also gaining the wisdom of others and coming across the ways of healing and the teachings. You have inspired me. Thank you for sharing wisdom. You have a beautiful soul, I wish you well on your healing journey.

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