

Mooka'Am (A New Dawn)

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A treatment approach which weaves contemporary forms of Social
Work with traditional ways of healing for Aboriginal people in
Toronto

Everywhere across the country a "New Dawn" is upon many of our Aboriginal Communities as the movement towards healing and health unfolds. In this article, we the staff of Mooka'Am hope to share with you how our program developed, our philosophy, our goals, objectives and the various types of modalities we use to help facilitate healing and health. We will outline how we weave contemporary therapeutic strategies with traditional healing techniques to have a culturally based approach.

Since Mooka'Am is staffed by a number of people who have unique skills and talents the following article is co-written by four individuals. By doing this, we hope to give you a flavour of our programs from a grass roots perspective. We, the writers of this article, are the actual service providers.

The Mooka'Am Program is housed at Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (N.C.F.S.T.). It was established in 1990 when front line staff at N.C.F.S.T. recognized that survivors of sexual abuse were not making use of mainstream agencies. The program therefore was originally developed to treat survivors of sexual abuse. Over the years the healing base of Mooka'Am has expanded to include all other forms of abuse including family violence, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and all other forms of trauma.

Our Philosophy

We believe that healing must be grounded in culture and so all of our programs and activities stem from the values of Aboriginal traditional life. In developing and implementing all our programs, wisdom, guidance and advice was sought from various elders in Southern Ontario. They have acted as consultants, teachers and in some cases, direct service providers.

A strong value within Aboriginal culture and a central theme of Mooka'Am's healing approach is respect. We respect where a client is at and therefore our approach may be very slow allowing for our participants to develop trust and a sense of safety in staff. We do not push culture on any of our participants... it is there for them to pick up if they wish to do so.

The relationship between clients and Mooka'Am staff is based on equality. There is an intrinsic recognition that "we are all in the process of healing" and it is a life-long endeavour. When we feel it is helpful for our clients, staff will self-disclose and share their own life

experience. Further to this we believe that all staff need to continue their own healing through ongoing therapy, work with Elders, Ceremonies and whatever they deem important and necessary for continued growth. This includes on-going education and training in contemporary therapeutic practices such as Play Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Individual and Group Therapy, Expressive Arts and Psychodrama.

Staff also work as a team to encourage support, understanding and mutual aid. As much as possible, staff are encouraged to be creative and to use their special gifts in designing and developing programs. These gifts are manifested in the specific skill areas that each member brings.

Finally, Mooka'Am is continually growing and evolving in response to the needs of our participants. Healing is multi-faceted and calls for creativity and constant evaluation so that staff agendas do not take precedence over participants' needs.

The Goals of Mooka'Am

- To enhance self-esteem and cultural identity
- To build healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships
- To increase the ability to identify and express feelings
- To promote movement towards personal growth.

How we the staff of Mooka'Am help our clients reach these goals is accomplished through individual counselling and therapy, healing circles and therapeutic groups, play therapy for children, the use of expressive arts and a number of traditional healing strategies and teachings. The following are two examples of programs delivered, followed by an in-depth description of a therapeutic modality used throughout the Mooka'Am program.

Family Violence Program

The overall goal of the Family Violence Program is to break the cycle of violence within urbanized Native families through cultural vision and awareness. This program has three specific service initiatives or project activities aimed at facilitating the empowerment of Native women within their environments, in order to make the community safer for themselves and their families. They are:

- To provide education and support group programs for both Native women and their children who have witnessed or are experiencing violence in their home setting.
- To develop a culture-based manual, which articulates the agency's model of service in the intervention and prevention of violence towards women and their children.
- To provide individual counselling, education and advocacy to assaulted women.

The Family Violence project complements other services already provided by this agency, and the social service system. It fills the gap between initial intervention (as is provided by N.C.F.S.T.) and long-range intensive therapy. By offering an in-depth educational program for participants we can support the intervention and promote the prevention of sustained or further violence. Also, we are in the position to refer clients who are victims of abuse, whether past or present, to the larger Mooka'Am program for specialized treatment.

The project activities combine various strategies of education, intervention and prevention in a manner that is sensitive to the needs of First Nations women and children who have experienced violence. These strategies include the developing and reaffirming values and practices from within aboriginal culture which discourage violence and instead promote healthy relationships. Through the provision of combined traditional healing and contemporary methods of intervention, the project provides a safe and supportive setting in which they may share, discuss and learn the prevention of violence.

The overall aim of these groups allows participants to receive mutual support and develop healthier behaviours and coping skills in dealing with family violence related issues. The support groups also provide participants with an opportunity to share their experiences, thus reducing their sense of isolation, while promoting healthier lifestyles.

The women's support group incorporates such activities as shared meals and therapeutic interventions (such as drawing and singing) and a selection of educational programs. These include: traditional and cultural teachings; identification and expression of feelings; understanding the myths and causes of violence; examining the use of power and control; reflecting on healthy and non-healthy relationships; learning how to be assertive, how to change the situation; and acknowledging personal strengths and growth.

The children's group incorporates shared meals and crafts. These sessions provide education and encourage discussion around family violence. These sessions encourage children to: identify and express feelings in a healthy way; to enhance their social support system and to reduce their feelings of isolation; to discuss safety plans and examine who is responsible for the violence. These children appreciate a stimulating, social and educational environment as a way of dealing with the stress of their home environment.

Throughout the evaluation process, women have expressed a high level of satisfaction with the incorporation of Medicine Wheel teachings. It is an aid in teaching about the prevention and awareness of family violence and promoting healthy relationships.

Another cultural activity is the use of traditional story telling. The Anishinaabe Creation Story is shared with the women to mirror their inherent gifts as women. Through this, identity is strengthened and women realize that they are not alone.

Working with Children From Substance Abusing Homes

The Children's Circle is a relatively new program being developed by Mooka'Am. A large percent of adults on the family service caseload at N.C.F.S.T. experience difficulties related to alcohol or substance abuse. We recognized that children living in such an environment are adversely affected; in addition, it is often a long and difficult process before parents are ready and committed to seek treatment. During these difficult periods children's needs can be

overlooked. It is for these reasons that the idea of responding to the needs of children in these families emerged.

The program provides: knowledge surrounding addictions and affected family systems; teaches protective behaviours and coping skills; enhances self-esteem; augments children's respect of Native culture and traditions; fosters a positive Native identity; and finally creates a safe healing environment for the children. The model embraces a wide scope in terms of education, prevention and intervention. These three areas are addressed from moment to moment at both the individual and group levels. It is our hope that early education, intervention and prevention, will enable these children to have optimal development as they travel along life's path.

The circles are being delivered within the Mooka'Am programme and at various schools across Metropolitan Toronto. The difficulties associated with transportation, time away from school due to appointments and consistent attendance are better addressed by delivering the program in the school system. At present, the program has reached 96 children.

The goals of the Children's Circle reflect many of the objectives of Mooka'Am as outlined in the introduction to this paper. The underlying issues of many of the children participating in these circles are not different from those of other children utilizing Mooka'Am. What these children share is the presenting problem and some common experiences.

Uniqueness of the Children's Circle Program

The Children's Circle is unique because it is culture-based as are other Mooka'Am programs and services. There is a mystique within the mainstream therapeutic community and sometimes within Native communities as to what constitutes a "culture-based" program. This section will attempt to provide an answer to the question: "How are contemporary methods of intervention combined with traditional healing practices?" in the context of group work with children. At the outset, a set of clear statements will be made for the reader:

- The issues an individual works on indicate where trauma has occurred in an individual's functioning.

- The issues and individual processes have a tremendous impact on and are experienced or evidenced in all areas of the self.
- Mainstream society, in the past, has had a long-standing tradition of addressing the physical, emotional, mental, sexual and social aspects of the self in limited combinations or in isolation; very few attempts have been made to provide healing to the spiritual being and there is very little understanding of the individual's social and cultural experience.
- We recognize, respect and value the use of contemporary methods of intervention.
- Native cultures all recognize, are aware of, and process understanding of all aspects of the self: the physical, sexual, emotional, mental, spiritual and social.
- Native cultural and traditional healing practices serve to restore balance to individuals by healing all aspects of the self.
- In healing the aspects of the self, one addresses the issues.
- Issues can be addressed by using a variety of activities and interventions.
- It follows then, that the issues of the children and objectives of the program can be achieved through a successful blending of traditional healing practices and contemporary methods.

How this combination is achieved in the Children's Circle Program will be further examined with regards to program structure, program content and the inter-relationships of the participants.

Program Structure

Referrals to the program originate from various sources. Family Services workers refer those children on their caseloads who are attending the schools that have been targeted; they also refer children to circles held at N.C.F.S.T. The schools' principals, teachers and Native liaison officer work with the program specialist to identify children who would benefit from the program. Children are divided into two main age groups: 6-8 years and 9-11 years of age. The

maximum number of children in each group is twelve. The circle runs for an hour every week for 9-10 months in the schools and in July and August at N.C.F.S.T..

The structure in which the groups are delivered is a talking circle. After teachings have been given to the children, they share the responsibility for smudging one another at the beginning of each circle. A check-in follows which provides an opportunity for the children to be "brought into" the circle. The check-in provides the opportunity for children to let the other members know how they feel, to talk about anything that is troubling them or to discuss exciting or scary events that has occurred since the last time everyone met in the circle. An activity is then engaged in and upon completion the session is closed.

Each circle is designed to be based upon one theme, for example, safety. This theme can be further divided into many different forms of safety: from violence, from sexual abuse, or general safety issues.. It might take several weeks to complete one theme. Although the program has specific exercises planned for each session, program workers do not rigidly follow this outline. The needs of the circle members dictate the activities of the program. For example, disclosures in the check-in may indicate that further work is required concerning new issues that are raised or the need to add another theme in the program. Since each circle being delivered at the various sites is unique, many activities are continually being developed to address various themes using different modalities, activities, interventions.

Program Content

The activities of the program also provide a tremendous range from which to choose various methods of intervention, both contemporary and traditional. Role plays have been utilized to assist children in understanding how their family members interact with one another and have been helpful in problem solving or showing different ways in which to interact with others. Traditional teachings from staff and elders are also incorporated, for example children are given teachings and receive medicine bundles. Ceremonies such as the sweatlodge are also built into the program. Discussion in the circle provides a format for mutual aid and breaking down isolation and secrecy. Since the program works specifically with children (who do not always respond to cognitive interventions) a lot of art materials are

used such as clay, Plaster of Paris, paint, materials for making Native crafts, crayons, markers and other materials. Ways to safely express feelings are taught for example, healthy ways to deal with anger. Various games have been developed such as card and board games. Children sometimes want to use a hand drum and sing songs. Story-telling through oral tradition has also been an effective means of intervention. Children listen to stories about other children. They like to tell stories that relate directly to what is being addressed in the circle. Children often ask the workers to disclose relevant information concerning their own experiences.

The type of intervention selected depends on many factors some of which include: group dynamics, where the individual and group are in terms of process, interests, depth and scope of cultural knowledge, preferred modalities and how amenable specific themes are to a particular intervention. Throughout the circle, workers process with the child and the group, the thoughts and feelings that are evoked. The program may utilize many forms of interventions to work on a selected theme. Since every group is unique, it is important to develop a variety of interventions for each circle or other contingencies in cases where children require more specialized support.

The Inter-relationships of the Participants

One of those things in life that Native people hold most dear is relationships. Relationships are all around us - in the natural environment, in our families and communities. Mooka'Am recognizes the importance of relationships is a primary concern in healing. This section will address the importance of relationships when working with children. However, it should be noted that all Mooka'Am programs and services follow the same philosophy. Relationships will be examined on four levels: between the workers and the group, the workers and the individual child, the child's relationships and the relationship between the workers.

Establishing a Healing Environment

Initially in a new circle, children are asked to generate ideas about what they need to feel safe in the circle. These ideas are transformed into guidelines for the circle such as, "Listen when someone else is talking" or "What is said here, stays here". The

workers supplement these ideas if any safety features are overlooked. Workers also inform children about their professional obligation to report disclosures of abuse. It takes a long time for the children to learn and effectively implement all these guidelines. Many of these guidelines are essentially values. Guidelines such as kindness, respect for each other and the use of medicines are used to teach children Native values. The values apply not only to the children but the workers themselves. For the most part, when group guidelines are breached, the group discusses the problem and finds an appropriate consequence or resolution. As with any relationship it is important to have limits and boundaries within the circle. These are established by the workers and the children. It is especially important when working with children to clarify these limits initially because they are naturally curious, eager to discover and test new ideas.

The workers play a role in a therapeutic relationship with each child within the circle. Within these limits and boundaries it is important for the workers to honour each child and encourage other children to do this as well (even though sometimes other children may not always understand why some kids can "get away with stuff"). It is also important to honour the child in his or her process. Children are not expected to achieve or begin working on an issue until they are ready. Often we have had children who will not speak aloud (they will only whisper to a worker), hold their heads down low and observe others. It is quite a joyful experience to work with these children long enough to witness their healing and the accompanying self-confidence and self-esteem. Workers do encourage and attempt various interventions with individual children but it is always gentle and caring and at the child's own speed. The workers must be aware of the child at the individual level and also in terms of their impact on the circle. In order to honour the child and the circle, sometimes the worker must make a decision as to how a particular concern will be addressed. Sometimes this means more flexibility and acknowledging the children's right to exert and develop their own sense of free-will and autonomy. This is particularly important in working with children who are part of a dysfunctional family system. It also has been proven to be effective in the environment in which the circles are delivered.

A few important points in establishing the worker's relationship with the children involve the workers' response or reaction to children. Workers are encouraged to be genuine and

authentic in their interactions with the children. Workers are constantly struggling to be as consistent and as fair as possible with all the children. The philosophy of the program is based on sharing and discourages competitive games or situations. "Children ask the darnedest things!" comes to mind when a worker begins to work with children for the first time. Children often ask questions around sexuality such as why women do not smudge and step out of the circle. Children may call workers bad names or attempt to get a negative reaction from them, or ask if specific things have happened to the workers. Workers must be aware and anticipate being asked difficult, uncomfortable or unexpected questions, and answer in a manner that is open, honest and devoid of criticism or shame. As many experiences of the children also may have been experienced by the workers, it is important for the workers to have or be in a process of their own healing in order to be effective in working with children. Personal disclosures are not discouraged by Mooka'Am. However, it is essential that the worker know how to be real and appropriate in disclosing. Such disclosures must be clinically relevant and timely to ensure the individual or the circle's process.

The relationship between the workers and the children also has an impact on the children's relationship with their families. The family is the primary agent of socialization for children. At this point it is important to state that although the program has hope that families will heal and grow we recognize that this doesn't happen overnight. We believe that the Children's Circle program can have a tremendous impact on children's ability to cope within an addicted family system. Children establish a relationship with the workers and know that they can learn and practice alternative behaviours and healthy relationship skills. They are provided with an environment in which to recreate events and scenarios and to process their effects. The group is then given an opportunity to assist the member in coming to some resolution within themselves. Other relationships with peers, friends and adults are also addressed within the circles.

The workers and their interactions amongst themselves also have an impact on the circle. The workers, are modelling healthy relationships between adults. We have found that a male and a female worker in each circle provide a very good balance for the children. Some children benefit from having a positive male role model in their lives; others observe how men and women can work together and be effective as a team. It also assists in breaking down stereotypes of how men and women are supposed to think, feel and behave.

A unique aspect of working within a Native community is that unlike a conventional therapeutic or counselling milieu, workers and children often meet at community events or on the street. It is a great opportunity for the children to observe the workers in different roles and social situations. Often children will look for consistency between what workers say in the groups and their actions outside of the group. If consistency and confidentiality are maintained, the trusting relationship is further enhanced.

An important aspect of Native culture interwoven throughout the program is the use of humour. Children often tell humorous anecdotes, stories or jokes. Workers sometimes spontaneously speak, respond or behave humorously. It is important for leaders to allow this to occur naturally and not be too quick to redirect the circle's attention or focus. Clinically, humour may provide a welcome release of energy for the individual or circle, reduce tension and can remain relevant to the theme or goal. Laughter is part of the healing process.

Expressive Arts is used throughout the Children's Circle Program. The following section is a detailed description of Expressive Arts. It is one modality used both in groups and in work with individuals.

Expressive Arts Therapy

This segment of the article will address Expressive Arts as a therapeutic modality.

An extensive range of experiences and approaches toward healing are offered by the Mooka'Am Treatment program. Whether the client's choice is individual or group therapy the focus may be educational or psychotherapeutic. Experiences within the groups or on an individual basis will vary according to the treatment provided. Theoretical approaches and techniques, personal styles and personality differences all contribute to the therapeutic environment offered. Before beginning the therapeutic process, it is important to assess the individual's support system, level of stability and ego-strengths. This will determine the treatment plan and modalities used.

Expressive Arts Therapy draws on the skills and techniques of art-making and the tradition of psychotherapy. When using expressive arts, it is important to have a basic grounding in developmental theories, transference issues and inter-relational psychology. Expressive Arts Psychotherapy blends the creative use of

sound, movement and art with therapeutic skills to create new meaning in the client's life situation. It brings action to psychotherapy. Art-making in itself is recognized to be an ancient form of healing; one common to most tribal peoples.

Art making is like an unstructured ritual. As in a ritual, the physical and emotional space is attended to. The ground is prepared; the ground being the canvas, plying the clay, preparing the space of the therapy room, and emotionally preparing oneself to surrender to the process. Preparing the structural space is a necessary part of art-making. This supports the client to feel in control of their healing process. Considering that many of our clients have felt a lack of control in their lives, the creation of any art piece can foster a sense of empowerment.

The role of the therapist is that of a high witness or guide during the client's healing process. Any expression of feelings through the art making process whether using clay, paint or movement is met with compassion. The therapist may or may not give feedback. Any expression is intended to mirror or reflect back to the client to support their process. It is more of a sharing from one artist to another, while the therapist maintains the role as high witness. When the therapist does this the response must be authentic rather than an analysis of the client's expression. It is very important to be cautious in interpreting art. This is a highly technical skill that is developed through intensive training.

Talking is an important aspect of any treatment modality and the timing must be sensitive to the client's needs. Unnecessary and unfocused talking during the art making process, or during times of emotional release may be fragmenting to the client. It stops them from going into a deeper space. Judgement or personal philosophy will hinder the individual's movement. Distorted cognition, negative feelings towards the therapist and experiences of violence are all fertile ground upon which an individual's psyche may flower. It is important that the therapist contain in a supportive manner and with deep compassion the shadow or dark side of a client's life and feelings.

Safety and trust are the foundation for a therapeutic alliance. Safety must be structured into the process. This means the therapist, the client and the space cannot be harmed in any way. The room needs to be contained and free of distortions and intrusions. It needs to be comfortable and soothing. Boundaries are necessary to create safety.

Therapy is the place to make contact with and release pent up emotions gained along the experience of life. It is not O.K. to act them out in the real world. Clay is a wonderful tool to push into, tear at, flatten, build up, destroy and to form again. Art making is healing in itself. As well as benefitting from the cathartic release of pent up emotions the expressive arts experience enables one to develop an aesthetic awareness. It is not important to make a finished piece of art, but to have a concrete form that represents the psychic journey where the client can stand back and witness their own process. The expressive art experience can guide an individual toward self-acceptance, empowerment and a greater capacity to find meaning in the experience of life.

Expressive Arts, as with any theoretical base or technique, should not take precedence over the clients needs. It is the client's process that leads, and not the therapist's personal agenda. Expressive Arts is a holistic approach in that the mind, body, spirit and emotions are integrated in the therapeutic process. This in itself is in accord with traditional forms of healing and is useful for children, teens and adults alike.

Summary

In summary it is our hope that this article has clearly outlined the essence of the Mooka'Am program. The foundation of any program is rooted in the philosophy. Traditional aboriginal culture has within it powerful teachings and healing techniques which deal with the whole human being including the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The path to health and wholeness is a lifelong endeavour and through programs such as ours we only aid this process. It is highly individualized and involves creative approaches and the continual healing of those in the helper's role. All workers in the program are expected to do on-going work on themselves and to keep informed about contemporary intervention strategies.

What works for one person does not work for another. Creativity, authenticity and risk taking is essential for the process. Both workers and participants contribute their gifts of self. In this way Mooka'Am continues to evolve and change in response to client's needs, individual workers' expertise and the ever changing economic climate of funding sources. While the types of service delivery varies the essential values of respect, caring and sharing always remain.

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