

*Circle Of Life: Cancer Education and Wellness*

*for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*



American Cancer Society Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>  
*Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*

Wellness Along the Cancer Journey:  
Coordinator's and Educator's Guide

Revised October 2016

Chapter 5: Honoring Customs and Traditions



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#### **Honoring Customs and Traditions**

The Circle Of Life curriculum was written with the idea that coordinators and educators already know the customs and traditions for the community in which they are working. In some cases, however, this may not be true. For example, a health care provider going with an educator to a Circle Of Life event may not be familiar with the tribal customs.

Coordinators and educators can help others understand the importance of honoring the customs and traditions of each community. They may want to work with people one-on-one or set up cultural training for the staff of a local clinic or hospital. See Appendix I for more information on conducting a training session.

Partners, who may consist of tribal community partners, local Society staff, and Circle Of Life coordinators and educators, need to understand that culture is a fabric that has been carefully woven over many generations. These ties link people together in the present and through time to their ancestors. Culture includes people's shared customs, practices, beliefs, and values. These unique traditions are reflected in how they live their day-to-day lives.

\*Some common values among American Indians and Alaska Native people include:

- Sharing and generosity
- Commitment to family, community, and tribe
- Respect for elders
- Non-interference
- Focus on present time
- Harmony with nature
- Respect for status of the woman and the child

*\*Quote taken from the Native American Cancer Research conducted by Carol Locust, University of Arizona, Tucson*

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#### **American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

Coordinators and educators may also want to take time to talk with partners (including tribal community partners and local Society staff) about the importance of traditional healing practices. Following is a brief overview of American Indian and Alaska Native healing that can be shared with partners in addition to any information that may be provided about local traditions.

American Indian and Alaska Native healing has been practiced in North America for approximately 40,000 years. It appears to have roots in common with other cultures, including ancient Ayurvedic and Chinese traditions. It has also been influenced by the environments in which American Indians and Alaska Natives settled, as well as the nature, plants, and animals around them. Healing practices evolved over time as the tribes moved and interacted with other tribes along trade routes. The tribes gathered herbs from nearby lands, and sometimes traded them over long distances.

Many native medicine practices were banned in parts of the United States for many decades. They were lost or driven underground until 1978, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed. Even now, there are problems with ceremonies and rituals on some sacred sites because the land is being used for something else. Despite that, American Indian and Alaska Native community-based medical systems still practice some traditional healing practices and rituals.

From the native point of view, healing is more about bringing balance to the entire person than curing a disease. Traditional healers aim to make people whole by restoring well-being and harmony to their life and the spirit of nature, which is sometimes called God or the Creator. Healing is based on the belief that everyone and everything on earth is connected. Every person, animal, and plant has a spirit or essence. An object such as a river or rock, and even the earth itself, may be thought to have this kind of spirit.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have a tradition that suggests that illness and disease stem from a person not being balanced (spiritually, mentally, and physically). Such a person may have negative thinking or unhealthy habits. The goal of American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices is to find and restore

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balance and wholeness in a person. They seek to bring a person back to a healthy and spiritually pure state.

There are many types of American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices that are promoted to help with illness. They include herbal remedies, rituals, and symbolic therapies. Medicine men and women may use these practices to treat illnesses of both the body and spirit.

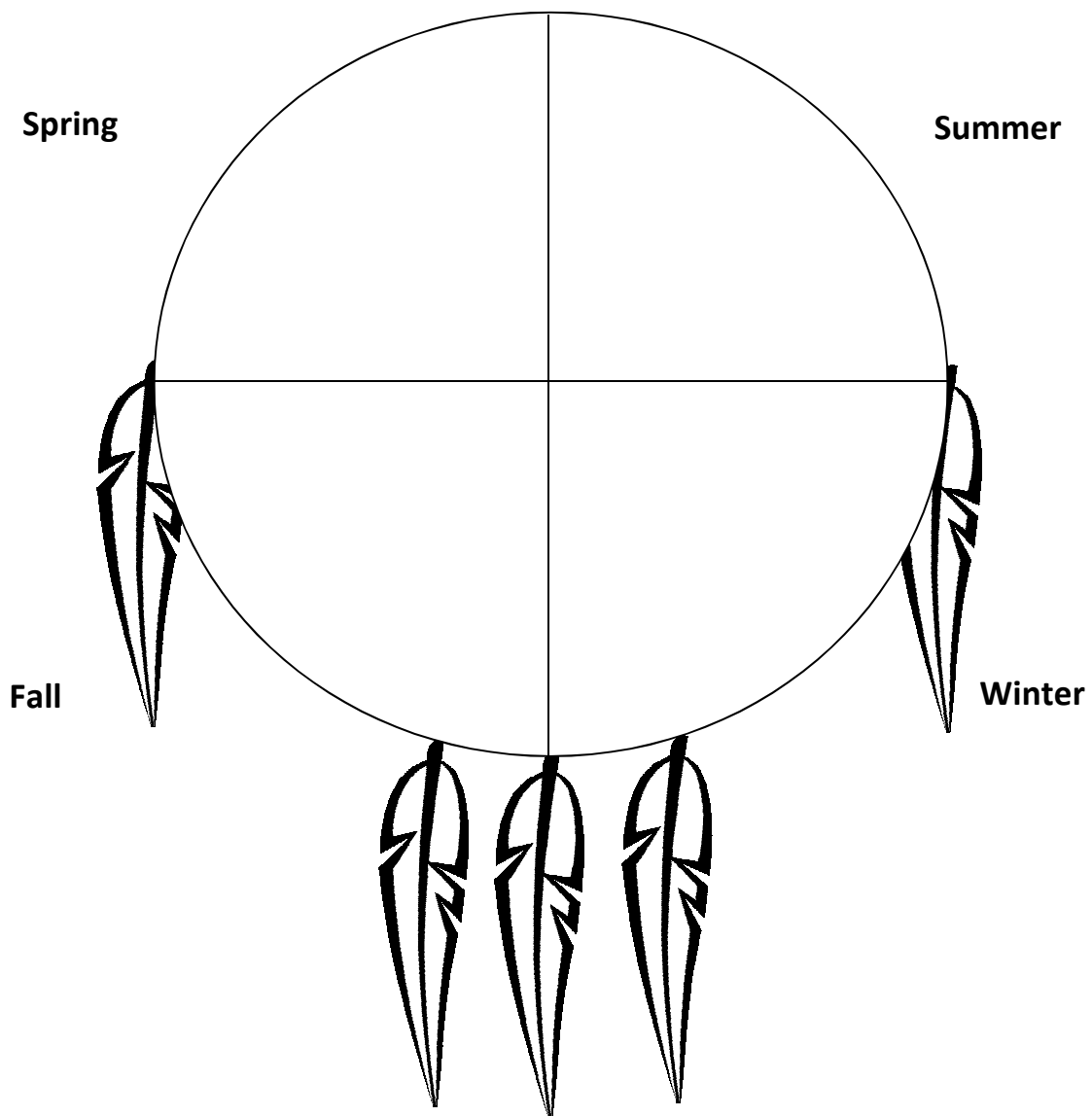
Purifying rituals are often used to cleanse the body and prepare the person for healing. An American Indian or Alaska Native healer, often called a medicine man or woman or shaman, may focus on using spiritual powers to treat people. (Shamanism is based on the idea that spirits cause illness.) Symbolic healing rituals, which can involve family and friends of the sick person, are used to invoke the spirits to help heal the person. The spirit is an important part of native healing practices.

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**Activity**

For each season of life, describe one of your family, tribal, or community traditions.



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#### **Key Messages**

- It is very important for Circle Of Life educators to show respect for the customs and traditions of the community or tribe where they will be working.
- American Indian and Alaska Native healing traditions have been in practice for approximately 40,000 years in North America.
- American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices seek to restore balance and restore a person to a healthy and spiritually whole state.