



Native American Elders Diagnosed with Cancer: **Spirituality**



Gloria Suazo
Taos Pueblo
Diagnosed:
1994 breast cancer

2004 stomach cancer
Jan 2007 passed

What is this issue?

The body, mind, and spirit are intertwined like the threads of a fine weaving. A lack of health in any part of us affects our whole self. Tending to our spirits when facing a life-threatening illness, such as cancer, is as important to healing as medicine is to our body.

- 🪸 Spiritual beliefs may be from organized religion and churches, traditional Indian medicine and/or other types of **spirituality**.
- 🪸 Spiritual beliefs are personal and provide strength and hope to help with your recovery.



What are the problems or issues related to Spirituality?

- 🪸 Some Western providers are comfortable with priests, ministers, rabbis, and pastors coming to provide spiritual guidance to cancer patients, but they are not always so accepting of traditional Indian healers and medicines.
- 🪸 Sometimes members of your own family may have different spiritual beliefs than you do.
- 🪸 Providers or family members who do not understand or respect your spiritual beliefs may make it difficult for your spiritual healer to come to the hospital or home to help you.

What can you do to find a *Real* spiritual healer?

- 👤 If you are uncertain whether or not a Spiritual healer is “legitimate”, ask other Native elder leaders from your community.
 - 👤 Some Natives and non-Natives have gotten into “New Age” and other beliefs and claim to be Shaman or healers. You have to be careful.
 - 👤 Ceremonies performed for you and your family take time and effort to prepare. Phony healers tend to take pieces of several different ceremonies that they like or think are mystical. Real healers feel that this “grabbing a little of this and that” interferes with the healing and can make you and the family sicker / out of balance.
 - 👤 If the healer asks for money, s/he is not legitimate.
 - 👤 If the healer asks you and your family to take off all of your clothes for the ceremony, s/he is probably not a *real* healer.



Denver Native American Cancer Advocates
(303) 837-7163

National Native American Cancer Advocates
1-800-537-8295

“Native American Cancer Education for Survivors”
<http://NatAmCancer.org>

Native American Cancer Research
3022 South Nova Road, Pine, CO 80470-7830
303-838-9359; fax: 303-838-7629

The issues identified in this Fact Sheet are from intertribal focus groups held in 2006.
Thank you to those who participated

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What did elder Native patients say about this issue?

- 👉 *“On the Monday that I was diagnosed, I went home, I talked to one of my friends. In our community, the Native American Church is really big. I talked to her and she gave me medicine. I took the medicine right then and there. Physiologically I think I was prepared and I didn't feel any real fear. (04-04-06)*
- 👉 *“I was very lucky they had a prayer meeting the night I had my surgery. Three o'clock in the morning I sat up in bed and felt this charge go through my body and it was an experience I will never forget. I never felt so good.” (04-04-06)*
- 👉 *“So I as an Indian woman, I participate in ceremonies ... I called the spiritual leader and called some friends and my family, even though they've gone a different ways spiritually, the church way, I called for ceremony. I thought, I am not going to go through this alone, I am gonna give this all I've got. I am putting it into Grandfathers hands. Whatever my path is supposed to be I am gonna have to learn how to accept it, but I am going to ask for prayers. This is the only way I knew. So I did, and they held a sweat lodge for me and my family came even though they don't practice the ceremonial ways ... It just amazed me and gave me strength and empowerment to know that my family would still guide me through this time.*
- 👉 *“So we had the ceremony and we just kept singing and as I sang , each time I just felt a little lighter and lighter like something's lifting from me. I knew my family was outside. So I started to sing a little louder so they could hear and in that process I didn't realize what I was doing for myself and I was reaching out and that my prayers were going with the prayers themselves. As I got louder I felt like I was making a connection and after a while it didn't matter who was around. And in the last round ... I realized that I'm going to be okay!”*
- 👉 *“Your Indian belief system has a lot to do with fighting off the disease. Your emotional stability has a lot to do with any kind of disease. That's how I look at it. We have the power to heal ourselves as we learn how to take care of our bodies and our whole quality of life.” (4-13-06)*
- 👉 *“We had different people praying and stuff so our spirituality was impacted, plus we came from families that believed in prayer and those types of things and practiced that.” (4-13-06)*
- 👉 *“I was fortunate to have people come and pray before the surgery and after the surgery.” (4-13-06)*
- 👉 *“Something that we need to do is practice our traditional ways as well as our western medicine and connecting the two.” (4-4-06)*

- 👛 *“There are ceremonies that some traditional healers will do before the treatment sometimes they will come here. Yes and that's been helpful.” (4-13-06)*
- 👛 *“I am also doing my own Native healing with my doctors, with my medicine man.” (4-21-06)*
- 👛 *“As an Indian person, you don't have to go through it [cancer] alone. You have your ceremonials and your ways to share. This is beautiful.” (4-4-06)*

What are common myths related to Native Spirituality?

- 👛 MYTH: Natives are more mystical / spiritual than other cultures
 - 🌐 Almost all cancer patients take part in some sort of spiritual practice. Native practices are just different from theirs; not necessarily “better”, but probably better for us because they are our beliefs.
- 👛 MYTH: If you live in the city, you cannot be spiritual in the Native way.
 - 🌐 Urban Indians also are very active in Native spiritual ceremonies
- 👛 MYTH: Traditional Indian Medicine always interferes with Western Medicine
 - 🌐 Most traditional medicines do not interfere with Western medicine. You do need to tell your Western provider what herbs and poultices you are taking because some traditional treatments may affect how well your western treatment works
- 👛 MYTH: Traditional treatment or ceremony prepared for one Native can be used for another Native cancer patient
 - 🌐 Traditional healers typically individualize the teas, herbs and/or prayers for you and your type of cancer.

What can you do while you're in the hospital?

- 👛 Healthcare providers and workers need to be informed about which articles (eagle feathers, totem bags) should not be touched or thrown away.
- 👛 You may need to store sacred articles in clear sterile bags.
 - 🌐 One nurse helped an elder cancer patient have his totem bag with him during surgery. She used Betadine© to sterilize the outside of his upper thigh, then had him place his totem bag inside a sterile bag. She used sterile tape to stick it to his leg. The location was not in the way of the surgeon or other healthcare staff.
- 👛 You may need to give your articles to your family or have them placed in a safe when you leave your room for treatment or if you are taking medication (anesthesia, strong pain medicine) that makes you less aware of what is happening around you.