

Culturally appropriate health promotion: its meaning and application in Aboriginal communities

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Introduction

Health promotion practitioners are constantly faced with the dilemma of developing effective health promotion strategies to improve the health of communities. It is argued that among various factors influencing the outcome of health promotion is the relevance of the individual's community and cultural background.¹ Using a research study conducted in and with a community of Indigenous people in north-eastern New South Wales, the authors of this paper argue that Western approaches to Indigenous health requires the restructuring of health care services to accommodate culturally appropriate approaches.

Literature review

Traditional Aboriginal views of health are considerably different from the Western biomedical perspective. Health for Aboriginal

people, which is best described by the term 'well-being', involves the interplay of social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being within a community framework.^{2,3} Atkinson described the harmony of the Indigenous peoples before invasion and the importance of relationships in this equilibrium.^{4,5} Health issues were often interpreted in terms of relationships, including spiritual connections to the land and ancestors, and the relationships within the community such as those with elders.

Aboriginal spirituality mainly derives from the stories of the Dreaming, and characterises one's "relationship to other people, to the spirits, and to the land".⁶ The Dreaming has been described as "a founding drama – a period during which the formless was given form"⁷ and the ancestors of the Dreaming "in an intense burst of creative activity moved across the landscape shaping its physical features as they can now be seen".⁸ Although there are

Abstract

Issues addressed: The socio-economic disadvantage and ill-health experienced by Indigenous Australians has continued at alarming rates despite increased research into Indigenous health and the burdens faced by Indigenous peoples. Given the state of ill-health in Indigenous communities, there is increasing recognition of the need for greater understanding of Indigenous health needs and means by which to deal with them.

Method: This exploratory research study was designed to assess the meaning of Indigenous Australians' 'well-being' and 'spirituality', and the possible connection between these concepts. The study explored these concepts through a series of semi-structured interviews in an Indigenous community of north-eastern New South Wales.

Results: The research participants consistently described well-being as an all-encompassing and holistic concept. Findings showed that spirituality still occupied a crucial role in Indigenous culture and well-being, despite the challenges to its existence since European invasion.

Conclusion: It is evident that the support of Indigenous spirituality, community cohesion and identity will be beneficial, if not essential to the promotion of health and well-being among Australia's Indigenous peoples. The acknowledgement of spirituality as a significant factor in well-being has many implications for diverse fields and practices of health.

Key words: Aboriginal culture, spirituality, well-being, health promotion, holistic, family and community, identity

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So what?

Increased understanding of the subjective experience of Indigenous peoples, and particularly the relationship between spirituality and well-being, will result in better informed, and therefore more effective health professionals and culturally appropriate health care services.

spiritual beliefs and practices that remain specific to certain Indigenous communities, there are commonly held Aboriginal beliefs such as those regarding the interconnectedness of land, kinship and spirit for Aboriginal well-being.⁹

A common thread arising from the literature is the need to recognise spirituality as influential, if not the driving force, in the healing of Indigenous peoples. The healing these studies typically refer to is that of a spiritual reconnection, with the aim of improving well-being through reintegration of spiritual, physical, mental and social domains.^{4,5,10} It is suggested that these elements be recognised along with a cross-disciplinary and humanistic (or 'holistic' in Indigenous terms) approach to cultural healing.⁵ The importance of spirituality and traditional rituals in helping Indigenous healing and well-being has been described,^{7,11} along with its potential to facilitate health education and promotion in Indigenous communities.¹²

Method

The study was conducted in 2003, in an Indigenous community in north-eastern New South Wales. Community members were approached by an Indigenous representative from the Local Aboriginal Land Council, who supported the study. The researcher arranged a suitable one-to-one interview time with each of the six consenting participants. A topic outline was developed and used in the interviews, and allowed the participants to discuss the connection between spirituality and well-being of their own accord. The study was subject to ethical and cultural considerations and sought approval from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), based on the *Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*.¹³

Results

The findings of the interviews indicated that well-being was a holistic concept affected by many factors, not merely one's physical and mental health. Major themes arising in the interviews that were described as influencing well-being included: identity, family and community kinship, culture and spirituality, and land.

Identity was viewed as both a component of spirituality and the result of spiritual development. The relationships within the community and the sense of belonging to the community were described as the basis of Aboriginal identity and integral to well-being. Family and community relationships were presented as the basis of their culture and as being important to cohesion and healing within the community.

All participants considered cultural practices, sacred sites and spiritual connections with ancestors as important components in their sense of well-being. Participants used the terms 'culture' and 'spirituality' interchangeably and referred to such concepts

as 'cultural spirituality', which included the rituals and traditions of the community. Spiritual beliefs and cultural practices, such as storytelling and ceremonies, were considered to have a strong link with individual and community well-being.

The responses confirmed the centrality of spirituality in Aboriginal culture. The strong connection between spirituality and well-being was expressed by feelings of protection, energy, confidence and pride. The spiritual connections within the community, such as those with ancestors and with the tribal area, help to maintain a sense of belonging, community cohesion and well-being. In addition, land and biodiversity were described as "interlinked and vital" to cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs and community well-being.

Discussion

The interview findings indicated that a multi-directional relationship exists between the concepts of well-being, culture, spirituality and identity. The research supported the understanding of well-being presented by the literature by detailing the extent of the complexity and interdependency of Indigenous well-being. It was clear from this research that spirituality still occupied a crucial role in Indigenous culture and well-being by assisting close kinship, spiritual connection with ancestors and land, and gave a sense of protection and positive identity to the individual and the community.¹⁴

The research indicated that the encouragement of spiritual connections with ancestors and the land could be an important instrument in preventive programs and health promotion initiatives. The promotion of positive self and community identity through increased opportunities for spiritual expression, including ceremonial performances, rituals, painting, storytelling, community/family gatherings, and dance, has the potential to improve the health and well-being of communities and should therefore be encouraged and integrated wherever possible in health promotion initiatives. Due to the importance of land and connection to spiritual ancestors for many Indigenous Australians, visits to sacred sites with an appropriate elder or approved person is another way in which health education or promotional activities could incorporate cultural values and practices.

Conclusion

Recognition of spirituality as a critical factor in Indigenous well-being can contribute to the development and implementation of health promotion and preventive projects. Health professionals, in particular non-Indigenous ones, have a responsibility to understand the dynamic relationship between mind, body and spirit, so as to accurately address whole health when working with Indigenous peoples. All health professionals would benefit from an understanding of the 'whole-of-life' view

of Aboriginal peoples, where all aspects of an individual are viewed as equal and interlinked.

Holistic strategies for the promotion of Indigenous well-being will not be complete or effective if issues such as identity and spirituality continue to be ignored, as they have been in the dominant medical model. Acknowledgement of a client's specific spiritual and well-being needs is vital to the holistic approach. Consulting and collaborating with individuals and their communities as to how these needs can be met is essential in establishing a culturally appropriate and more effective approach to promotional initiatives. A practical approach to the integration and connection of spirituality, culture and health could be the utilisation (by elders and other community members) of traditional oral history techniques and ceremonies to deliver up-to-date health information and education to the community.

Finally, health services need to be self-determined, based on the goals of the Indigenous community and community controlled. It is increasingly obvious that spirituality should be incorporated into health care. The key to incorporating spirituality and culture in health promotion lies in the collaboration and creativity of all stakeholders.

Note

The term 'Indigenous' used in this paper refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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