



Emerging Results

The Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program: A Holistic Intervention

KEY WORDS: *Aboriginal offenders, substance abuse programs, holistic, culture, spiritual*

Why we developed this program

Over-representation of Aboriginal offenders is a problem in Canadian federal institutions (CSC) with approximately 18% of the population identified as Aboriginal – roughly six times the size of the Canadian Aboriginal population and this over-representation is on the increase (Boe, 2000; Treasury Board Secretariat, 2008). Motiuk and Nafekh (2000) found that the proportion of federally incarcerated Aboriginal offenders requiring substance abuse programming is high within each of the Aboriginal groups. Specifically, 93% of First Nations and Inuit, and 91% of Métis offenders were identified as requiring a considerable or high level of intervention in the area of substance abuse. As a result, CSC developed a national substance abuse treatment program that addresses the needs of Aboriginal offenders.

The development of the Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program (AOSAP) was driven by Elders and countless Aboriginal partners and staff. A Research Advisory Group - led by the late Dr. Joseph Couture and comprised of many key national Aboriginal healing organizations – also guided the development of AOSAP and informed the research process.

What we did

The program's modular design includes a blending of strong cultural and traditional healing through a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual lens with contemporary best-practices, such as social learning (role modeling) and cognitive behaviour therapies (relapse prevention).

Module I presents the foundation of culture by providing participants with an introduction to the program, the power of the circle of wellness, safety and self-care strategies, the importance of physical self care and traditional values and goals.

Module II facilitates Aboriginal spiritual engagement with an introduction to and exploration of the impacts of trauma, historic trauma and how substance abuse was and still is used by Aboriginal people to cope with the effects. This module also examines triggers, shame, anger and violence.

Module III examines the impacts of Substance Abuse within Aboriginal communities and helps participants understand alcohol abuse, drug abuse and other addictions within an Aboriginal context and explores effects of substance abuse on individuals, families and communities. The focus then shifts to the restoration of health, pride and culture and assists the offender in recognizing and understanding the link between substance abuse and criminal behaviour.

Module IV looks at relapse prevention and planning. It uses a blend of contemporary best practices, traditional teachings and sacred medicines to help the participant develop an individualized plan to manage their risk situations.

What we found

Preliminary research examining program effectiveness indicates that AOSAP effectively responded to the needs of Aboriginal men with substance abuse problems. Specifically, participants developed stronger connection to their Aboriginal roots, were motivated to change their behaviour and developed greater insight into how to manage their substance abuse problems. As well, the preliminary research also revealed that stronger treatment effects can be expected through interventions that blend traditional Aboriginal healing with contemporary best-practices. Those who successfully completed AOSAP, significantly more remained in the community during follow-up compared to Aboriginal men who completed mainstream programs and/or those who did not participate in programs prior to release from custody.

References

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- *report currently under consultation with Aboriginal partners*

Prepared by: Amanda Brazil

Contact

Addictions Research Centre
Research Branch
(902) 838-5900
addictions.research@csc-scc.gc.ca

