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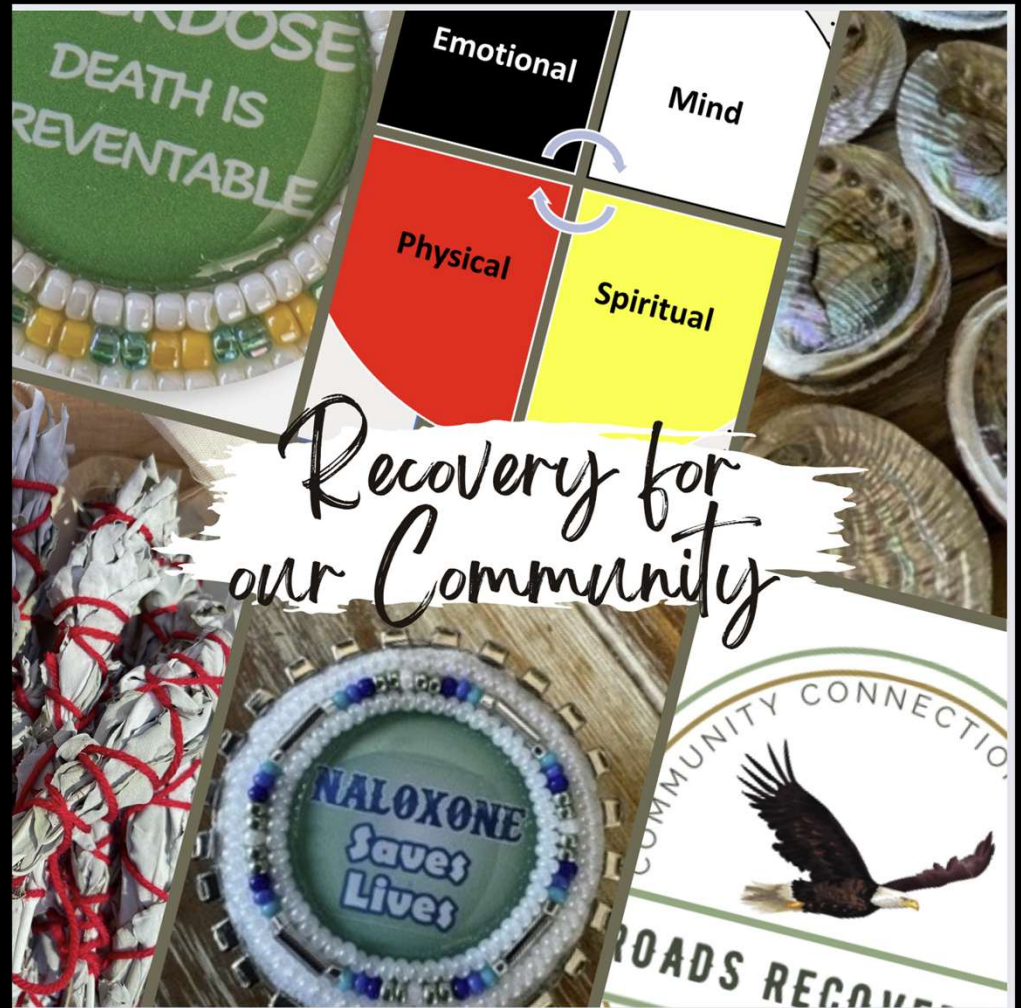
Rethinking Rock  
Bottom: Healing  
Through Indigenous  
Harm Reduction and  
Decolonizing Western  
SUD Services

July 08, 2025

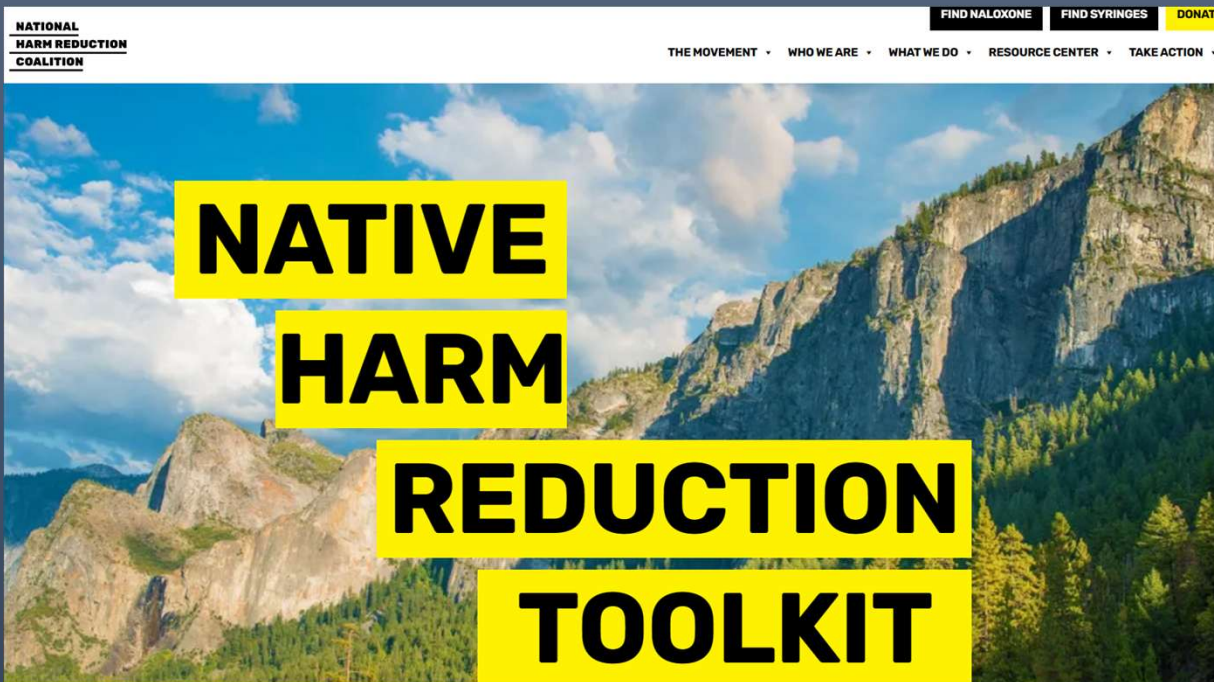


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Subject Matter Expert  
Native Harm Reduction



# National Native Harm Reduction Toolkit



SCAN ME



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We carry medicine  
We carry stories  
We carry the  
power to heal

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# A Better Way: Healing Over Harm

- Instead of waiting for people to crash, we can:
  - **Meet them with love and respect**
  - Offer **harm reduction tools** and cultural support early
- **Keep the door open**, no matter where they are on their journey



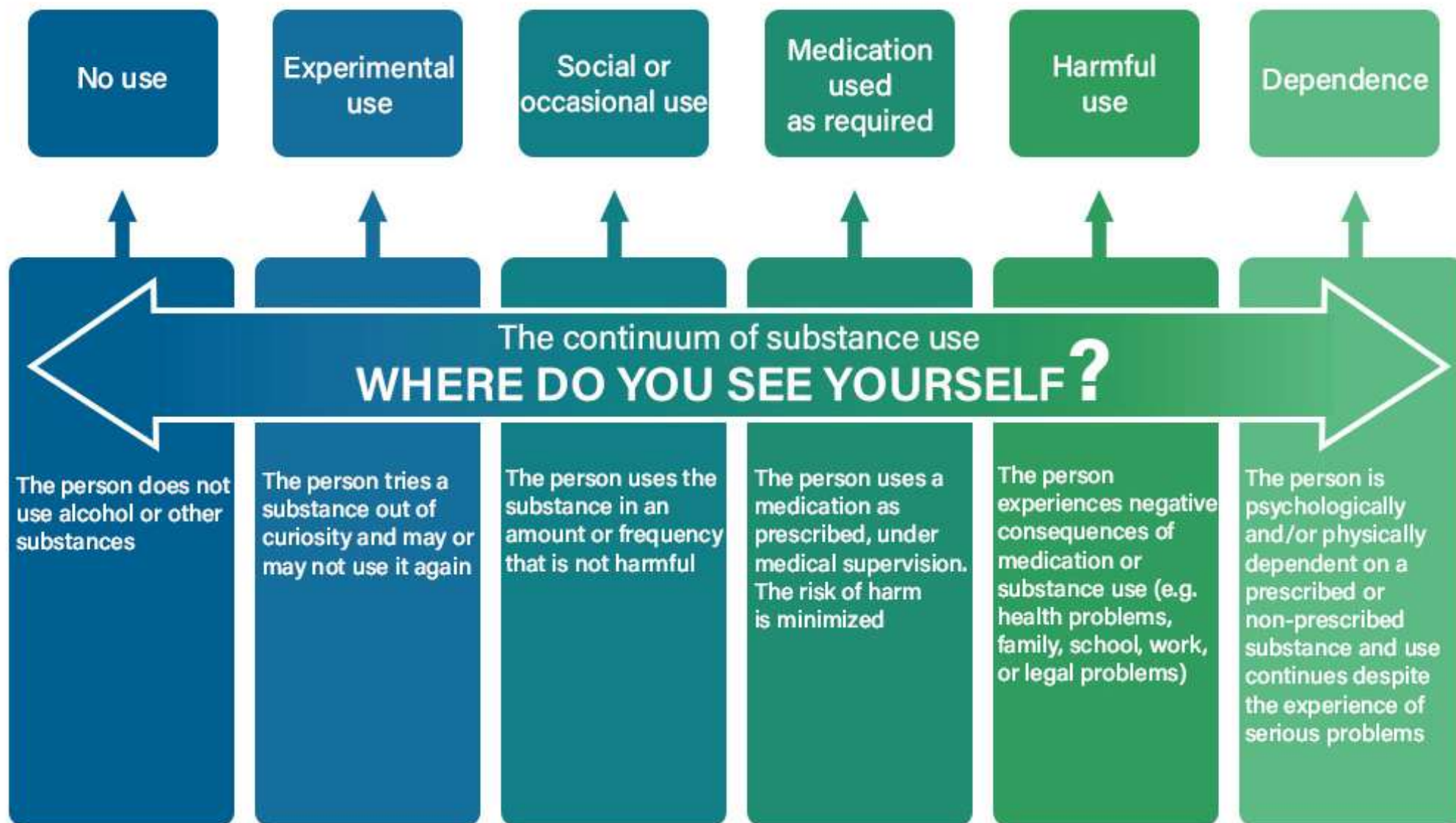


## **HARM REDUCTION IS:**

- Non-judgmental
- Radical compassion
- Meeting people where they are at
- Respectful of bodily autonomy
- Flexible
- Person-centered
- Pragmatic & Realistic
- Anti-oppressive
- Supportive of any positive change
- Evidence-based

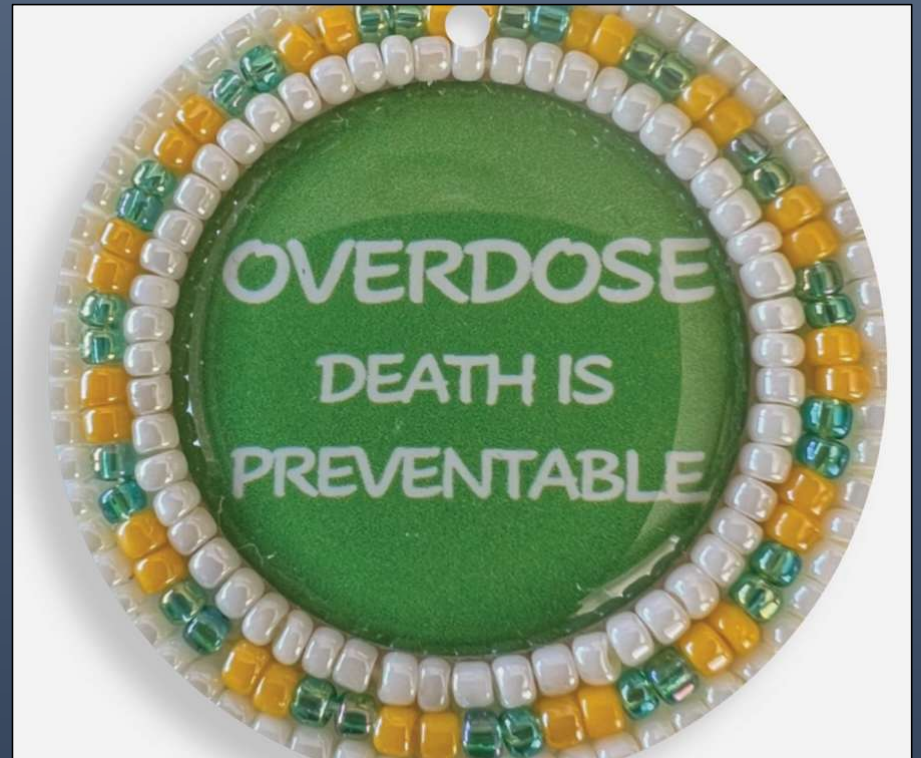
## **HARM REDUCTION IS NOT:**

- Rigid or static
- Punitive
- Stigmatizing
- Isolating
- Fear-based
- Abstinence-focused (abstinence is seen as one of many options a person can choose for their health and well-being, just not the only option)



# Why “Rock Bottom” Is a Dangerous Concept

- People often die before they get there
- Rock bottom = deeper trauma (e.g., overdose, jail, homelessness)
- Promotes shame, isolation, and stigma
- Ignores structural and historical harm





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# Rethinking Rock Bottom

- The idea of “rock bottom” is harmful because it delays help, promotes suffering, and often leads to death or deeper trauma before support is offered. Here's a breakdown of **why the concept of "rock bottom" causes harm**—especially in Native and marginalized communities.

# People Die Waiting for Help

- Telling someone they need to “hit rock bottom” before getting help **withholds life-saving support.**
- Many overdose deaths happen before a person ever gets a second chance.
- Addiction is a health condition — not a moral failure that needs punishment.



# Barrier and Shame

## It Creates Barriers, Not Pathways

- Services based on abstinence or "readiness" often exclude people still using.
- This **denies housing, care, and cultural connection** to those most in need.
- In tribal communities, where services are already limited, this exclusion can be deadly.

## It Promotes Shame, Not Healing

- "Rock bottom" is often tied to **public failure, humiliation, or loss.**
- This can lead to **deep self-blame, isolation, and suicidal thoughts.**
- Shame is not a healing tool — compassion is.

# It Ignores the Root Causes

## It Closes Doors to Harm Reduction and Culture

- Substance use is often connected to **historical trauma, violence, poverty, and pain**.
- For Native people, addiction is often a response to colonization, removal, and ongoing oppression.
- “Rock bottom” doesn’t heal trauma — it often **adds to it**.
- Rock bottom thinking rejects people unless they are ready to stop completely.
- But many find healing through **small steps, harm reduction, and cultural reconnection** long before they stop using.
- For Native communities, this could mean **returning to ceremony, language, and land** even while still using — and that should be welcomed.



# What Harm Reduction Offers

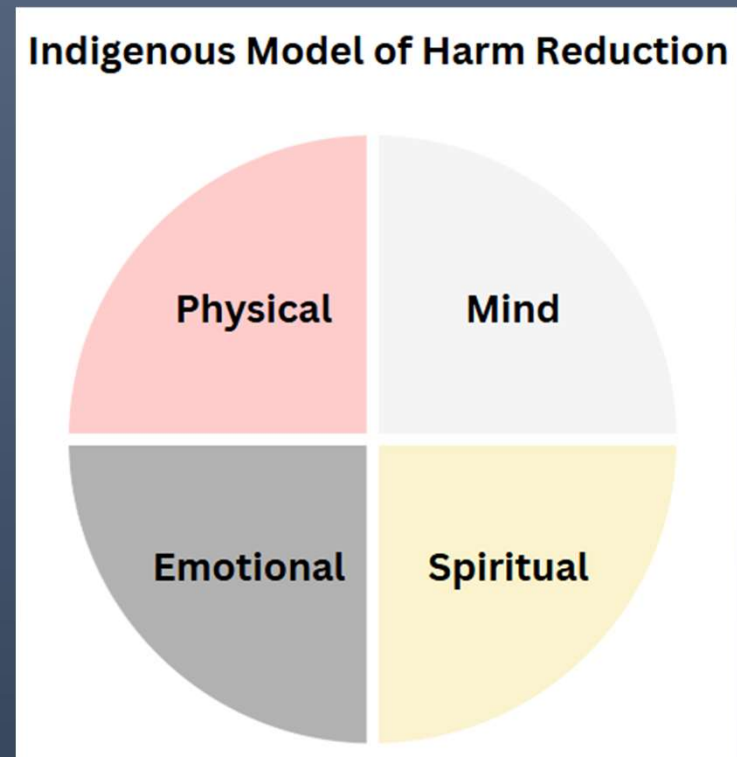


- Meets people where they are
- Nonjudgmental, strengths-based
- Reduces risk (overdose prevention, safer use supplies)
- Builds trust and opens the door to deeper healing
- Honors autonomy and community-defined wellness




# Indigenous Harm Reduction in Practice

- Culturally-rooted harm reduction programs (like your own or others across Indian Country)
- Use of ceremony, language, and Elders in healing
- Welcoming people who are still using
- Providing traditional food, smudging, talking circles alongside Narcan and wound care



## **Spiritual Health Benefits:**




**Reconnects individuals with traditional practices like smudging, prayer, and ceremonies.**


**Fosters a sense of purpose and belonging through cultural teachings and community support.**

**Promotes harmony and balance by integrating land-based healing and ancestral wisdom.**

## **Physical**

- 
- 1. Reduced risk of Infectious Diseases**
  - 2. Prevention of Overdose Deaths**
  - 3. Improved Physical Health**
    - a. Strengthened Immunity through Traditional Nutrition**
  - 4. Reduced Substance-Related Injuries**
  - 5. Improved Quality of Life**
  - 6. Mitigation of Drug Contamination Risks**

## Mental Health Benefits




Reduces anxiety and fear associated with stigma and criminalization.

Provides education and resources, empowering individuals to make informed decisions.

Encourages trauma-informed approaches that address the root causes of substance use

## **Emotional**

- 
- 1. Restored Sense of Dignity and Self-worth**
  - 2. Reduced Stigma and Isolation**
  - 3. Improved Emotional Stability**
  - 4. Enhanced Trust In Systems and Relationships**
  - 5. Emotional Healing Through Connection to Culture**
  - 6. Increased Hope and Motivation**
  - 7. Trauma-Informed Healing**
  - 8. Increased Resilience**



# Core Beliefs

- **Harm reduction is Indigenous.** Native communities have always practiced care, mutual aid, and survival.
- **Healing is holistic.** Wellness includes the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental — often reflected in teachings like the Medicine Wheel.
- **No one is disposable.** Everyone deserves safety, respect, and support, no matter where they are on their healing journey.
- **Colonialism is the root cause.** Substance use must be viewed in the context of historical and ongoing trauma.

## Examples of Decolonizing Services

- Tribal Substance Use Navigator Trainings
- Welcome Home Ceremony
- Wellness Journey
- Harm Reduction Services
- Behavioral Health
- Sober Living
- Self-car Guides

## The Respectful Approach: A Harm Reduction Guide to Human-Centered Conversations

Are you interacting  
with someone who  
uses drugs or alcohol?

**No**



Learn about harm  
reduction so you're  
ready when you are

**Yes**



Continue



**What is your first thought or feeling?**

"They're a danger" → ⚠ STOP

"They're struggling" → Continue

"They're sacred" → ✅ You're in the right spirit

**Are you assuming they should be abstinent to deserve help?** Yes → ❌ Not harm reduction  
No → ✅ Culturally safe path

**Have you offered:**

- ☐ Clean supplies
  - ☐ Narcan
  - ☐ A listening ear
  - ☐ Connection to culture or ceremony
  - ☐ Options for care with no strings attached
  - ☐ A meal, hygiene items, or warm clothing
- (Each "yes" is a form of Native Harm Reduction)

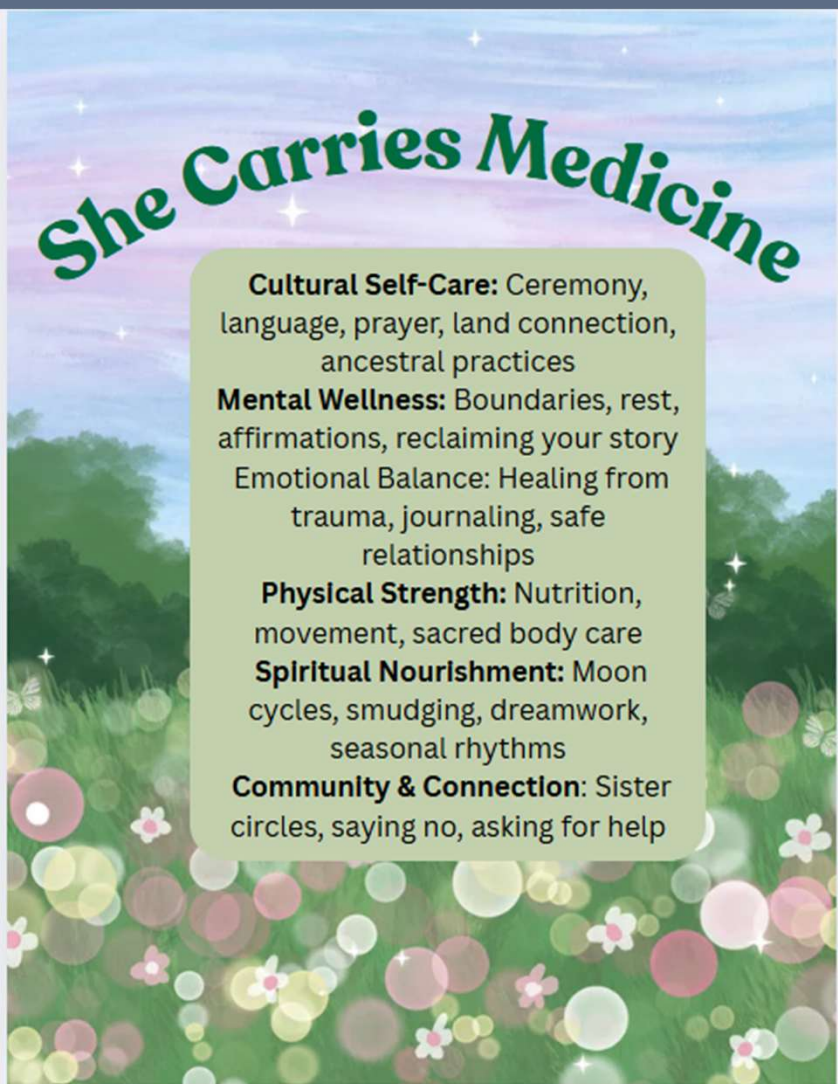
Are you centering their  
choices and dignity?

Yes → ✅ You're practicing  
Native Harm Reduction

No → Reflect and ask: "What  
does my judgment serve?"

To learn more about addiction and healing in tribal  
communities reach out to [NativeVibes.shop](https://NativeVibes.shop)





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## HARM REDUCTION SELF-CARE GUIDE

*Rooted in love, balance, and cultural care*

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# EMOTIONAL CARE

- Talk with someone you trust (a peer, Elder, or friend)
- Carry a grounding object (like a stone, medicine pouch, or feather)
- Create an “I’m okay” check-in list for yourself
- Allow yourself to feel emotions without judgment
- Take breaks from triggering people or places
- Use affirmations: *“I am sacred. I am strong. I am healing.”*



# MENTAL CARE

- Educate yourself about safer use (know the risks and how to reduce harm)
- Make a plan: “What helps me feel better when I’m struggling?”
- Practice reality-checking: “What do I know for sure right now?”
- Set one small goal a day (drink water, take a walk, call someone)
- Journal or draw your feelings

# SPIRITUAL CARE

- Light sage, sweetgrass, or cedar to cleanse and reconnect
- Visit a place that feels sacred (river, mountains, family land)
- Say a prayer, song, or gratitude to the ancestors
- Wear something that carries meaning (beaded earrings, ribbon skirt/shirt)
- Practice forgiveness—of yourself and others

# PHYSICAL CARE

- Stay hydrated (add a pinch of salt/sugar if dehydrated)
- Eat when you can—simple, nourishing foods
- Carry snacks and Narcan with you
- Rest as needed; your body carries a lot
- Use safely: don't use alone, test your supply, carry a safety plan

# WHEN YOU NEED EXTRA SUPPORT

- Reach out to a harm reduction team or peer worker
- Ask for a wellness check-in from someone you trust
- Create a safety plan for using or reducing use
- Remember: relapse is not failure—it's information
- You are still worthy of care no matter where you're at



# Tribal Overdose Response Navigators



- Go into homes
- Create safety planning
- Coordinate with Spiritual Leaders
- Prevent fatal overdose
- Pulse on community
- Linkage to other care and resources



## *The Wellness Journey: A strength-based, Indigenous-centered pathway to healing and self-determination*

The Wellness Journey is a trauma-informed program rooted in Indigenous teachings and harm reduction philosophy. It supports individuals—especially those who use substances—in reconnecting to themselves, their culture, and their community through small, achievable goals grounded in the Medicine Wheel.

Rather than forcing abstinence or “rock bottom,” the Wellness Journey acknowledges that every step toward balance matters. Healing is not a straight line, and participants are encouraged to define wellness in their own way.



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## The Wellness Journey

8-week Contingency  
Management Program  
for people who use  
drugs.

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## Core Elements

- **Medicine Wheel Teachings** – The journey is guided by the four aspects of well-being: Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Spiritual.
- **Cultural Reconnection** – Activities include traditional crafts, language learning, storytelling, drumming, talking circles, and ceremony.
- **Goal Setting** – Each participant sets small goals for each area of the Medicine Wheel, with support and accountability from peers or staff.



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# Core Elements

- **Contingency Management Principles** – Positive behaviors (like attending group, drinking water, using Narcan, or practicing ceremony) are recognized and affirmed—sometimes with small incentives or cultural gifts.
- **Self-Reflection** – Weekly check-ins, journaling, and group discussions encourage participants to see their own growth and resilience.
- **Community Care** – Healing happens in relationship. The program fosters peer support and belonging, rooted in Indigenous values of interdependence and collective care.



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- **Week 1–2: Setting Intentions & Learning the Wheel**

Introductions, cultural grounding, and building safety.

- **Week 3–4: Small Steps, Big Shifts**

Participants identify their personal strengths, harms to reduce, and practices to build on.

- **Week 5–6: Cultural and Community Connection**

Talking circles, traditional healing activities, and building bridges to services or family.

- **Week 7–8: Integration and Celebration**

Participants reflect on their growth, share their stories, and are honored in a closing ceremony.



We Are  
Stronger  
Together

The Wellness  
Journey

8-week Goal setting and healthier  
lifestyle choices program

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## Guiding Principles

- You don't have to be sober to be worthy.
- Wellness is a circle, not a finish line.
- Culture is prevention, treatment, and recovery.
- Healing happens in relationship, not isolation.
- We walk with you, not ahead of you.





## Post Survey Results (67 participants)



- 90% Increased healthier choices.
- 87% Decreased drug use
- 62% Increased access to healthcare
- 87% Helped set goals and achieve them
- 100% Increased self-esteem
- 87% Increased access to culture
- 75% Decreased isolation

The Welcome Home Ceremony: *A sacred circle of belonging, restoration, and love.*

- The **Welcome Home Ceremony** is a healing practice rooted in Indigenous tradition that honors community members returning from incarceration, inpatient treatment, or long journeys of struggle and survival. It is a powerful way to remind people they are still part of the circle—that they are *not forgotten, not alone, and still loved.*

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# Welcome Home Ceremony

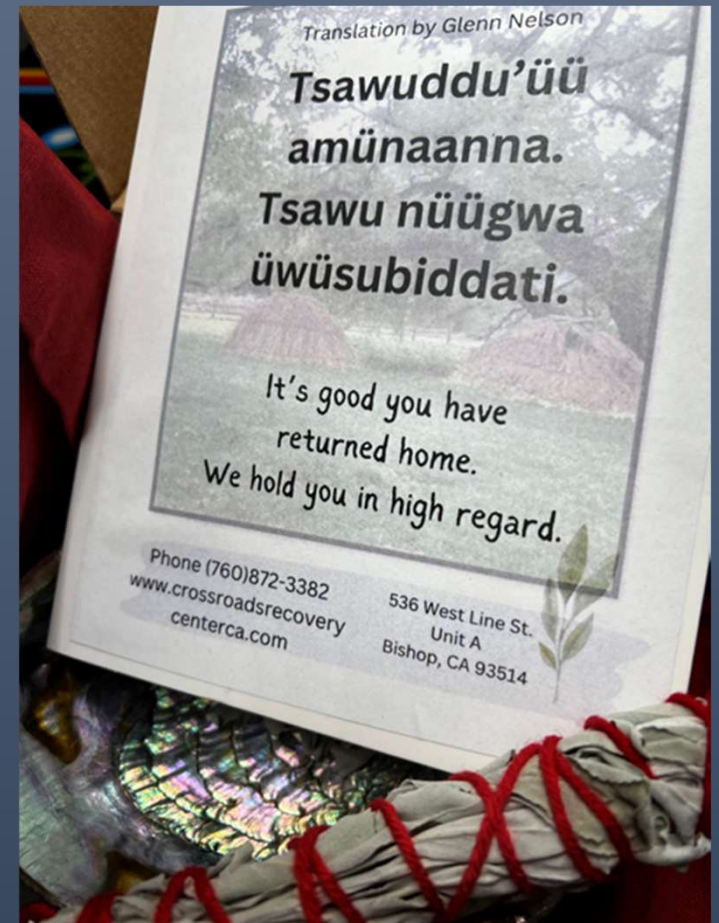
This ceremony is about restoring identity, dignity, and connection after periods of separation, whether caused by systems, addiction, or personal hardship.



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## Purpose

- To **acknowledge the pain** someone has endured, without judgment
- To **restore their place in the community circle**
- To **honor their strength** and welcome them with open arms
- To **begin a new chapter** with cultural support, love, and accountability





## Ceremony Elements



## Ceremony Elements *(May vary based on tribal tradition and personal requests)*

- **Opening Prayer or Song** – Inviting in the ancestors and the Creator for guidance
- **Smudging** – Cleansing the individual's body and spirit with sacred medicines
- **Words of Welcome** – Spoken by Elders, peers, family, or staff: "We see you. We've missed you. You belong here."
- **Gift of Medicine or Item** – Such as a medicine pouch, tobacco, ribbon shirt/skirt, feather, or beadwork

## Ceremony Elements *(May vary based on tribal tradition and personal requests)*

- **Circle Sharing** – Community members offer words of encouragement, stories, or songs
- **Cultural Recommitment** – The person may be offered a chance to set intentions, speak their hopes, or rejoin cultural activities like drum group, language class, or talking circle
- **Feast or Meal** – Sharing food to nourish the body and mark the transition home
- **Closing Prayer or Song** – Sealing the circle with unity and care



# Why It Matters

- Too often, people return to their communities carrying shame, stigma, and disconnection. The Welcome Home Ceremony disrupts that narrative. It says:
- *“You are not what happened to you.”*
- *“You are not your addiction, your sentence, or your trauma.”*
- *“You are sacred. You are our relative. You are home.”*

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SKODEN NATIVE



Harm Reduction  
Bishop, California

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# Foundational Harm Reduction Strategies

1. Cultural First
2. Community Involvement and Empowerment
3. Holistic Health
4. Self-Determination and Autonomy
  - a. Nonjudgmental
  - b. Non-Coercive Support
5. Education and Awareness
  - a. Comprehensive Services
6. Culturally Relevant Resources  
Comprehensive Services
7. Healing from Historical Trauma
8. Collaboration and Partnership
9. Advocacy and Policy Change
10. Adaptation and Flexibility

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# Culture First

Cultural Sensitivity and Respect: Indigenous harm reduction recognizes and respects traditional cultural values, beliefs, and practices. It **integrates strategies** into cultural teachings, ceremonies, and community elders' wisdom.

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# Decolonized Services – World Views

- Challenges
- Resilience
- Impact of the War on Drugs
- Colonization
- Health Disparities
- Worldview
- Kinship
- Community
- Sovereignty and Self-determination
- Cultural traditions
- Language
- Stewardship of land

# Community Involvement

## OD Prevention Event

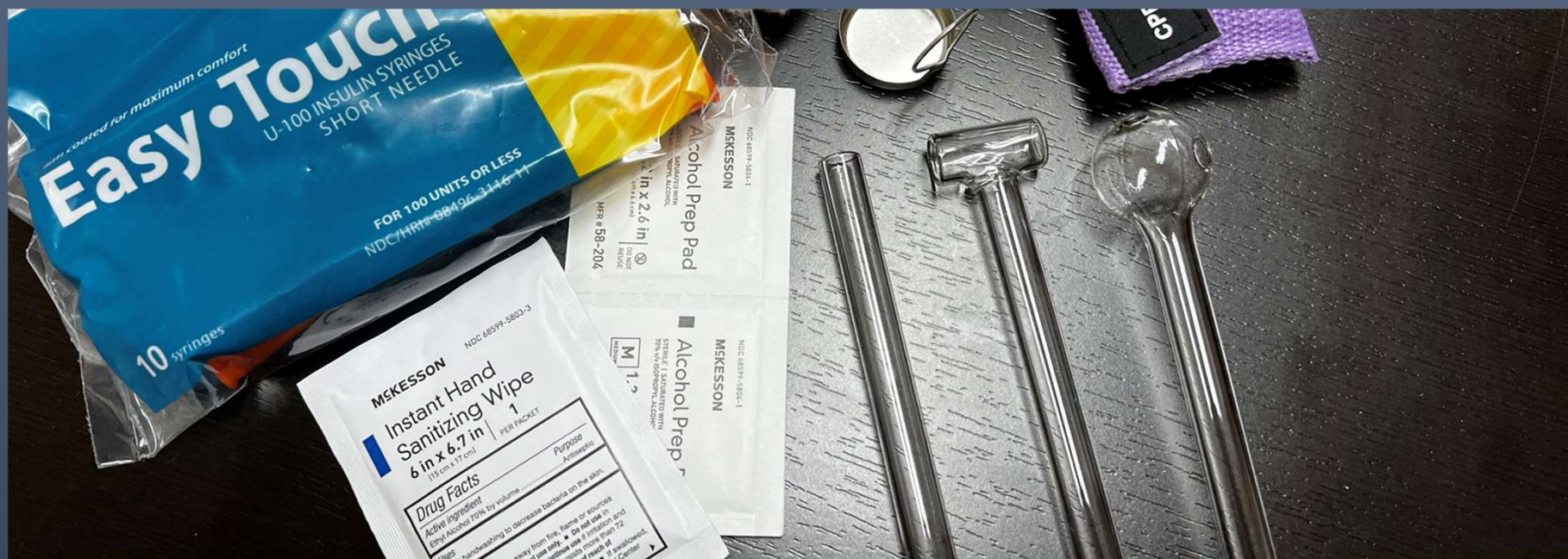


## Making OD Reversal Kits





# Syringe Exchange Program





# Syringe Exchange Program



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Harm Reduction in any setting

Low-barrier access to care

De-stigmatize

De-colonize

Advocate

Impacts of the War on Drugs

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# Welcome

## Would you like...

To talk about:

- Safer Using
- Stopping drug use
- Harm Reduction Supplies
- Overdose Prevention
- Something to eat or drink?
- "Snag Bag"
- Feminine Hygiene Kit
- Overdose Reversal Kits
- Safe Packs

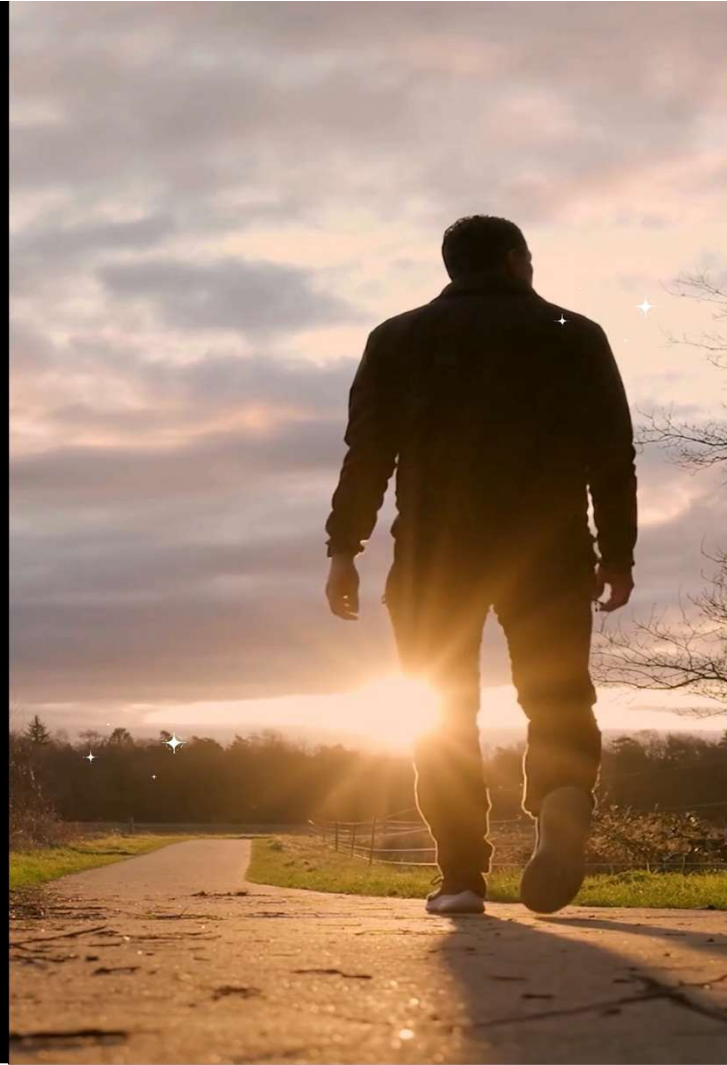
Someone to:

- Smudge with you.
- Pray with you.
- Hold Space with you.
- Substance Use Counseling
- Help with something else.
- Connection to Culture



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The Healing  
happens  
everyday



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Thank you

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