

# Native American Cancer Research Corporation Support Circles Fact Sheet



- Many American Indians and Alaska Natives in the past dealt with their cancer diagnosis alone (rarely told friends or even their families)
- Non-Natives and American Indians and Alaska Natives do better when they take part in support circles
- Support Circles help find resources, emotional and spiritual help for the cancer survivor and loved ones
- Now you know. Now you can.

## What is an American Indian / Alaska Native Cancer Survivor Support Circle?

- A place where:
  - American Indian cancer survivors can share their experiences with someone like them who has been there.
  - You can learn more about your cancer, your treatment, your recovery, and life after.
  - Your culture is respected and valued.

## How Does the NACR Support Circle Work?

- A series of ~8-12 meetings that local Native cancer survivors determine:
  - Dates
  - Times
  - Locations
  - Topics
- Local Lead NACR Facilitator (Lisa Harjo, Choctaw) coordinates logistics based on what the local survivors request
- Local Facilitator provides materials, speakers on special topics
- Survivors and NACR staff provide healthy foods (potluck keeping in mind diabetes and weight issues of our local participants)
- NOTE: 1 of the few support programs evaluated for effectiveness



**Lisa Harjo, MS  
Choctaw**

***People came in -- I got telephone calls, they'd write, people would read Bible verses to me, all kinds of letters. There were all kinds of people coming to see me.***



**Vincent Bointy  
Kiowa  
Colon Cancer Survivor**

## How do American Indian / Alaska Native Support Circles differ from Non-Native Support Groups?

- AI/AN Support Groups:
  - Build strongly on our cultural beliefs
  - Integrate body, mind, emotions and spirituality (promote healing and wellness such as through the Medicine Wheel or Circle of Life)
  - Traditional Indian healers, spiritual leaders and/or elders
    - Guide and pray with members
    - Explain "cancer" in relation to our ancestors' challenges and our histories (overcoming difficulties in a good way)
    - Help us find the good lessons that we should learn from the cancer experience

## Example of a Typical Agenda

- 📅 Opening Prayer and Welcome
- 📅 Pre-session learning
- 📅 Topic or Guest Speaker
- 📅 Personal stories/progress since last week
- 📅 Sharing
  - ⊕ Healthy snacks
  - ⊕ Laughter
  - ⊕ Tears
  - ⊕ Affection and support
  - ⊕ Arts and crafts
- 📅 Support for one another in the Circle
- 📅 Personal Goals / Contracts
- 📅 Journaling
- 📅 Post-Session Learning
- 📅 Closing Prayer

## Survivors' Inventory List

- 📅 Survivors organize their paperwork and documents for family members who may also be caregivers
  - ⊕ Birth Certificate
  - ⊕ Driver's License
  - ⊕ Social Security Card
  - ⊕ Tribal Card / Roll #
  - ⊕ Military Papers / Military
  - ⊕ Doctor Name / Phone
  - ⊕ Social Workers Name / Phone
  - ⊕ Medicine Person
  - ⊕ Herbalist
  - ⊕ List of Prescriptions and dosage
  - ⊕ Hospital Name/Location
  - ⊕ Spiritual Advisor/Clergy
  - ⊕ Vehicle Registration and Ownership Slip
  - ⊕ Medical Insurance/Card
  - ⊕ Life and Accident Insurance/Card
  - ⊕ Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care & Living Will
  - ⊕ Credit Cards
  - ⊕ Real Estate or Rental Papers
  - ⊕ Written Will

## Estimated Timing with the Agenda

- 📅 Duration of most are 1½ -3 hours long (depends on conversations and lengths of participants' stories)
- 📅 Topic / guest speaker session ranges from 20-45 minutes
- 📅 Participants do artwork unless sad or angry stories being shared (don't want to invite negative spirits into the artwork)
- 📅 Sharing personal stories of grief, joy, humor and information (1-1½ hours)
- 📅 Personal contracts, journaling (½ hour)
- 📅 Evaluations and recommendations for changes or requests for new topics / speakers(10 minutes)



## Examples of Learning Topics

- 📅 Spirituality and healing
- 📅 Being a Survivor and Becoming a Thriver
- 📅 Dietary concerns
- 📅 Chemotherapy
- 📅 Radiation Therapy
- 📅 New Cancer Treatments
- 📅 Surgery
- 📅 Pain control
- 📅 Intimacy and Sexuality
- 📅 Outlook on life
- 📅 Cancer American Indian / Alaska Native Cancer Data and Regional/ Tribal Variations
- 📅 Economic Issues (how to pay the bills)
- 📅 Benefits of Physical Therapy
- 📅 Emotional Purging and healing
- 📅 Follow-up care
- 📅 Managing Home and Family during Care
- 📅 Ceremonies and celebrations of life, culture family and community

## What are benefits for members?

### 🪸 Circle members:

- ⊕ Receive support and caring from other members and the facilitator.
- ⊕ Learn more about their cancer, treatment, and recovery so they can improve their quality of life during and after cancer.
- 🪸 Learn how to handle the side effects of treatments through diet, herbal teas, and new behaviors.
- ⊕ Find out they are not alone.
- ⊕ Learn to have fun again and make plans for the future.
- 🪸 Learn about resources in the community that can help them.
- ⊕ Build new relationships and friendships with other circle members.
- ⊕ Learn more about themselves and their strengths.

## Personal Contracts

- 🪸 Write thoughts, feelings, poems...
- 🪸 Draw, cut or paste pictures
- 🪸 Compose a song
- 🪸 Group art using stones, shells, beads
- 🪸 Focus on your own needs at least 15 minutes per week
- 🪸 American Indian people always take care of their community / family before themselves
- 🪸 Contract is between the participant and his or her God / Creator
- 🪸 Contract is a weekly commitment
- 🪸 Example: I, \_\_\_\_\_ do hereby promise my God/Creator that I will take 15 minutes strictly for myself this next week; I will take a few minutes to watch a butterfly dance or listen to the beautiful songs of a bird, or look up and see the stars looking down on me.



Survivors' Support – Honor Dance, Denver 2006

## Examples of Circle Ground Rules

- 🪸 A Set of directions for conduct and processes throughout the Circle; how people should behavior with one another during and after the support Circle
  - ⊕ Every session begins with the same Circle spiritual blessing or prayer.
  - ⊕ Show respect for others...allow them to tell their story without interruptions.
  - ⊕ Family members and loved ones are welcomed to the group
  - ⊕ Positive supportive comments should take place while arts & crafts are being worked on (i.e., no negativity toward others or ourselves; spiritual pain could feed into our and others= artwork).
  - ⊕ No Smoking in the building or during the Circles.
  - ⊕ Nutritious foods & beverages only (i.e., fruits, vegetables, juices, occasionally sandwiches and other healthy snacks to promote health, healing and good tastes. Please do not bring sodas, burgers, fast-foods, etc. (Remind diabetics to watch their exchanges)
  - ⊕ Circle participants, or their “designee,” determine whether or not to invite a speaker to stay for the rest of the Circle.
  - ⊕ Whatever is said in the Circle stays in the Circle
  - ⊕ No cussing or bad words used during the Circle



## Facilitator Qualifications

- 🪴 American Indian / Alaska Native (Indigenous)
- 🪴 Compassionate
- 🪴 Honest, trusted, has integrity
- 🪴 Commitment
- 🪴 Wants to work with cancer survivors / Thrivers and their loved ones

## Examples of Issues Local Survivors need to Address

- 🪴 Some Circles “close” the Circles to new participants after the 2<sup>nd</sup> session
  - ⊕ This is to insure bonding among the current Circle participants
  - ⊕ *NOTE: Newly diagnosed people are referred to one-on-one telephone counseling until the next Circle begins*
- 🪴 QUESTION: Do you think your local Circles should be “closed” to allow for bonding and healing after the first few session?
- 🪴 QUESTION: Do you think men and women should be in the same Circle? What if sexual or intimate issues will be discussed in that session?
- 🪴 QUESTION: Do you think family (or loved ones) who are the caregivers should take part in the Circles?
- 🪴 QUESTION: Should family caregivers have their own Circles?

## Facilitators Checklist of what to Bring to each session

- 🪴 Matches
- 🪴 Cedar, sage, sweet grass and/or corn pollen
- 🪴 Abalone shell and a holder for the shell
- 🪴 Healthy foods and drinks (e.g. fruits, vegetables, juices)
- 🪴 Water
- 🪴 Cups
- 🪴 Small Plates
- 🪴 Napkins
- 🪴 Eating Utensils (if applicable)
- 🪴 Name Tents or Badges
- 🪴 Tissue
- 🪴 Arts & Crafts Supplies and Accessories
- 🪴 Pens, Pencils, Notebook Paper
- 🪴 Facilitator’s Notebook
- 🪴 Medicine Wheel Evaluation Forms
- 🪴 Personal Contracts
- 🪴 Journal paper
- 🪴 Handouts (topics)
- 🪴 Referral information
- 🪴 Facilitator business card
- 🪴 Additional items requested by survivors



Supported by “Native Navigators and the Cancer Continuum (NNACC) [PI: Burhansstipanov, R24MD002811]



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Partially supported by Mayo  
Clinic’s Spirit of Eagles  
Community Network  
Programs [PI: Kaur: NCI  
U01 CA 114609]