



PART ONE

Basic Aboriginal Teachings

*The Life Braid Theory:
Mind, spirit, and body
woven together
for balance*

*Braid Theory Developed by
Lucy Barney, Lillooet Nation, RN,
MSN, 1999*



New life begins

Pregnancy, childbirth, and the first year of being a parent can be very positive times, filled with excitement and joy. These are also periods of change that can affect the balance and harmony of day to day life. Sometimes, change can be difficult—especially when the changes that happen both within and around a woman are not what she expects.

Not knowing what to expect and being unsure of whether she is doing things “the right way” can make a soon-to-be or new mother feel worried and anxious.

Right from the beginning of a pregnancy, it is important for a woman to pay attention to her health and well being—for her own benefit, and for her growing baby. Each pregnancy is different and so are a woman’s emotional feelings about each one.

A very important part of being healthy is to have balance and harmony in the emotional part of life.

Holistic Health

Many traditional Aboriginal teachings are about holistic health – being in balance and harmony with nature. Nature feeds the whole person: spiritual, mental, emotional and physical selves. People who are ill or unhealthy are not in balance or harmony with nature. There are many aspects to this balance and harmony including the way we deal with life challenges, the way we use our emotions to function and interact with others, the connections we have within our social and physical lives, and the connectedness we feel in our lives.

The Braid Theory is an excellent example of how to help find this balance. “The Braid theory consists of looking at the Mind, Body, and Spirit: one strand represents the mind, another the body, and thirdly the spirit. When we braid our hair, it is said that we are feeling proud and worthy, when we do not, it is said we walk with humbleness.” – Lucy Barney, Lillooet Nation

Circle of Life Model

This guide follows the “The Circle of Life” model to explore how Aboriginal women can look after their emotional and mental health during pregnancy or following the birth of a baby, and how if they experience baby blues or depression can come back to balance and harmony with their spiritual, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves. When the gifts of nature are used wisely and combined with being active, being positive and having good relationships with other people and the spiritual world – good health will be more likely.

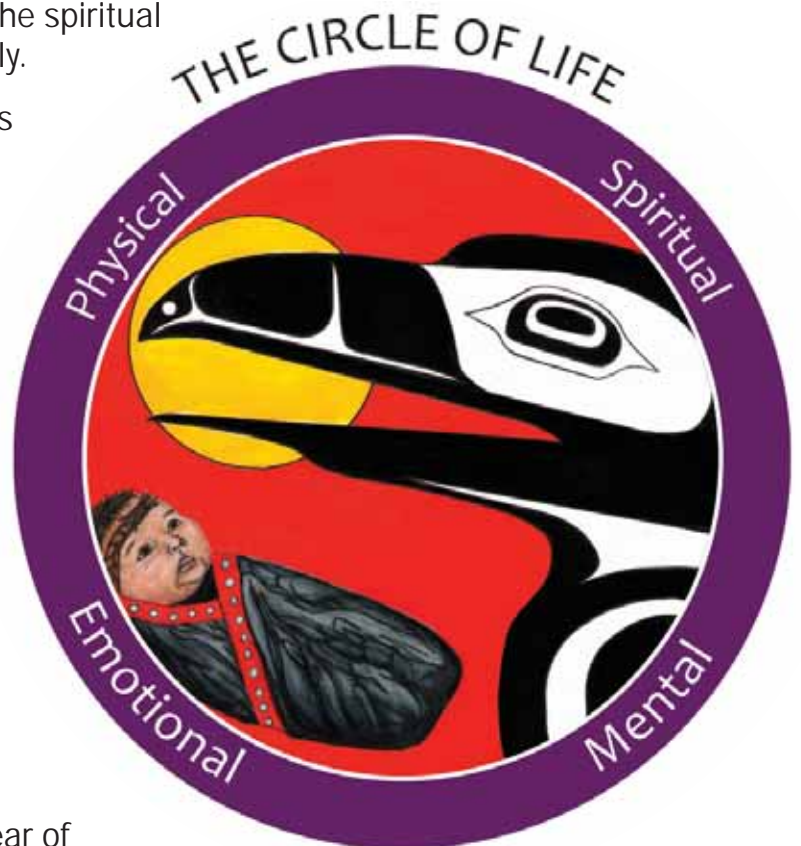
The “Circle of Life” model (sometimes referred to as the Medicine Wheel model) used in this guide illustrates balanced living and a holistic perspective on health including physical, emotional, spiritual and mental health.

Elders teach us wisdom

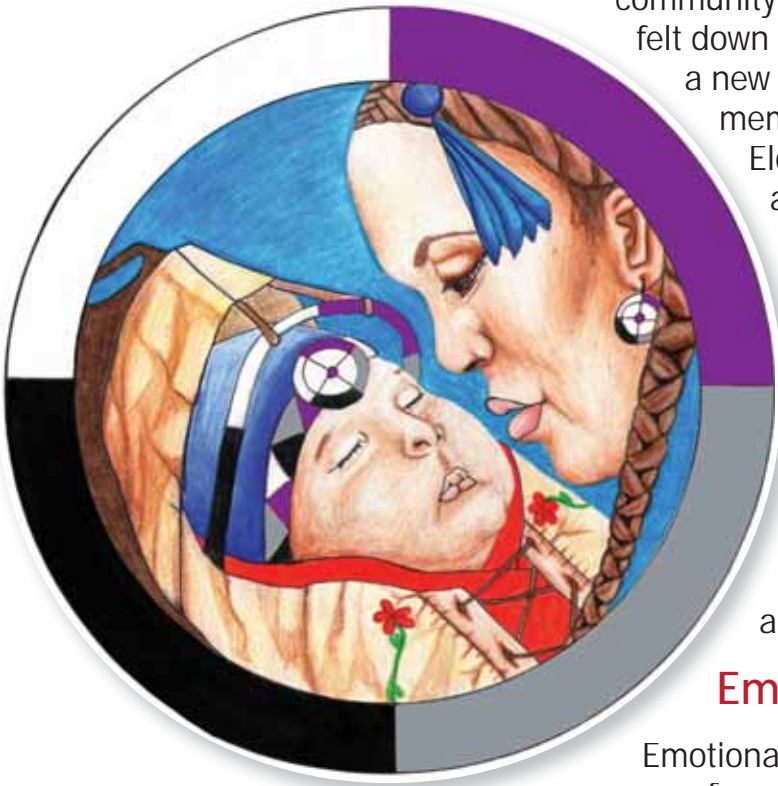
Elders’ teachings remind us to think about the whole circle of life. They remind us that the health of each person, family, community and nation is a result of balance and harmony of spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects. This creates well being.

Pregnancy, childbirth, and the first year of being a mother are times of change—exciting but uncertain. They require an Aboriginal woman to

“The Medicine Wheel is a framework... like the structure of a house. For it to work for you ...you need to fill it with teachings and values that are relevant for you, with guidelines for your lifestyle. If something does not work for me, I look to my home teachings. The Medicine Wheel is like the mirror—it is not you. It just reflects you back and shows you where you might need work in those areas that you cannot see, like your emotions and spirit. A Medicine wheel is a tool that can help you with keeping you in balance.” – YCW



"The medicine wheel applies to every nation globally. Work with strengths—make use of traditional resources—they are there 100% of the time—Elders, land, family etc." –MW



Harmony - A new mother gazes at her newborn in a cradleboard. The mother is in positive spirits as she is in balance with her emotional, spiritual, mental and physical self.

Artists - Bracken Hanuse Corlett and Csetkwe

choose a path that will help her maintain harmony and balance.

Elders teach that relationships, environment, living conditions, and history affect emotional health. Aboriginal people have had multiple losses, which still have an effect on their emotional health.

The effects of these losses of land, culture, community and spirituality have been seen and felt down through the generations. Bringing a new baby into the world can bring back memories of trauma in one's own life. The Elders teach that only by finding harmony and balance within ourselves can Aboriginal people move forward into the future in a healthy and positive manner.

Elders from many Aboriginal cultures also teach that each family is unique, all babies are special gifts of life, and that the mother's health when she is pregnant has a direct effect on her baby, labour, childbirth, and being a mother.

Emotional Health

Emotional health is how we think, feel, and act as we face our life journey and the things that happen during our life. Our emotional health affects how we handle worry and trouble, how we get along with others, and how we decide what to do. Whether a woman lives in the north, on the coast, on a reserve or in a city, she can balance her emotional health—just as she can balance her physical health.

What is good Emotional Health?

Everyone has slightly different ideas about what emotional health is and what it means. That's OK.

Here are some elements of good emotional health that can probably help everyone, regardless of where they live or where they are in life's journey. Some are illustrated with stories from The Sacred Tree¹. You may have other stories that illustrate the same thing. In general, good emotional health means that someone has:

- **The ability to enjoy life** - Sometimes, people worry so much about the future that they cannot enjoy today. Elders teach that to find joy in life without using drugs, alcohol, or smoking. Enjoying the "moment" reminds us of the mouse, whose primary concern is about the here and now. Everything the mouse does, it does with all of it's being (Sacred Tree Story). Many people are unable to do this as they are continuously looking to the past or future rather than enjoying the present moment.
- **Foresight** – Foresight is the ability to look ahead to the future and what the new day will bring. The noble Eagle teaches this skill, as well as the ability to see clearly through difficult situations. "The Eagle flies high above the world. It watches the movements of all the creatures and knows the hiding places of even the tiniest of them" (Sacred Tree Story).
- **Resilience** – Resilience means bouncing back from hard times. Someone who is resilient can manage challenges in a positive way. A story from The Sacred Tree says that being resilient is like grass. When we step on grass, it can stand up again. Even when it is cut, grass keeps on growing. We are strong like grass.
- **Balance in life** – Everyone needs to balance the time spent with family and friends with the time spent alone. Of course, each person will balance the two in a different way. Other

*"A community to raise our children"
the picture is showing how the four
adult eagles are taking the younger
ones under their wings and guiding
them in life. Doing together as a
whole makes things easier and more
beautiful.*

Artist - Gordon White



¹ Bopp J., Bopp M., Brown L., Lane P., The Sacred Tree (1985). Four Worlds International Institute for Human and Community Development, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

"Remember—no one is perfect—but we can strive to be the best we can. That is what the Elders teach us." –RPE

*"I was overwhelmed with joy and wonderment at this tiny little baby. She was beautiful and looking at me with those big brown eyes. I fell in love immediately. I felt like everything in my life was now right. But another pregnancy was very different. I looked at my son and saw a spitting image of his father—a violent, promiscuous man who I let reign terror over my life for 10 years. I verbalized aloud...my thoughts... the doctor and attending nurse put me on 24-hour watch. It took some time and a great deal of patience on my part but eventually I came back to normal. My son grew to be a healthy and beautiful man. And despite our shaky start, we have a beautiful relationship now."
–YCW*

parts of life where balance is important are the balance between work and play, sleeping and being awake, rest and exercise, and time spent indoors and time spent outdoors.

- **Flexibility** –The more flexible people are, in general the happier they will be. Being flexible will likely help women enjoy the journey of pregnancy, childbirth, and the first year of being a mother. A woman who never changes her mind, no matter what (even if she suspects she may be wrong) might need to work at being more flexible. Asking for help and learning for others is a sign of emotional growth.
- **Comfort Expressing Emotions** - Telling the people we care about how we feel (expressing our feelings) helps to maintain emotional health. Shutting off feelings and not sharing with others may cause other problems with emotional health.
- **Healthy, satisfying relationships** – Emotional health can be strengthened by having safe and supportive relationships with partners, family and friends. If a woman feels that a relationship is not healthy, she may ask for help on how to make it better. If a woman finds herself in a relationship where she does not feel safe, she can find someone to confide in, and know that the opportunity is there for her to seek help if she chooses. Personal safety and the safety of a baby are very important for pregnant and new mothers.

You may have your own ideas about what emotional health means to you. That is good. When we are emotionally healthy, we recognize the gifts the Creator has given us. We accept those gifts and work with them to our benefit. We know and take pride in who we are.

