

We have had numerous requests at UTFAV for information about a Traditional pamphlet series and how it can help survivors of Domestic Violence. Please see this as a starting place on your road for healing and recovery ~ The UTFAV Team

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony

When people talk about this lodge they talk about entering the womb of Mother Earth. This is a ceremony of physical and spiritual healing which may help you to cleanse, open, learn, and grow on your healing journey. For a woman or man in a domestic abuse or sexual assault situation, the purpose is also emotional healing. It is a part of many Tribal nations' spiritual traditions. There may be differences in the way the ceremony is conducted and how the sweat lodge is constructed, but it is generally agreed that the sweat lodge is a sacred place of healing.

The sweat lodge ceremony is conducted by a Native American Spiritual leader, recognized as such by their tribal community. We will simply call this person the "conductor." Sweat lodge conductors are men or women who have trained for many years to earn the right to conduct sweats. They have received the teachings and have gone through ceremonies to develop the gift that is given to them. Tobacco must be given to the sweat lodge conductor to actually perform the ceremony. It is important to tell the conductor if you have any health issues and the purpose of your request. All participants should be alcohol and drug free. Traditional protocol is observed by the women and no one should be on their menstrual cycle.

A gift of tobacco must be given for the teaching of what a sweat lodge is and how it was given to our Indian people. It is important to understand as much as possible before you participate. All questions are good. Be patient.

How is a sweat lodge constructed?



A sweat lodge is a dome-shaped structure made from fresh sapling trees that are built in a location that is both private and sacred. The tree saplings are harvested fresh and are easily bent into the dome-shape, which is tied into place with twine. It is shaped in the form of an oval and is covered with natural material that keeps the heat in and keeps out the light out. A more natural heavy canvas is preferred over plastic tarps because it is free of chemicals that could be released when the covering is hot. You will need several layers of canvas and a doorway opening that is easily opened and closed. Some people also use cotton blankets for the doorway, lining the inside of the sweat lodge and placed as a covering on the dirt floor. The center of the lodge is a shallow circular shaped pit that represents the womb of Mother Earth. It is kept clean from roots and the rocks are cleared away after use.

The direction of the sweat lodge doorway that people enter differs according to the teachings of the conductor. For many Anishinawbe people, the door of the lodge faces east and a spirit path leads to an altar's crescent shaped mound in front of the door and behind the fire. This mound is built from the earth removed from the lodge's center pit. Its purpose is talked about in the teachings of the sweat

lodge that will be shared by the spiritual leader.

What happens in a Sweat Lodge?

A person selected as the Ishkodayinini, or fireman, will start the sacred fire and will carefully select rocks that will be heated for the sweat lodge. The number of rock varies according to how big the lodge is, how many are going in, the season of the year and the purpose. In some teachings, the rocks are known as the bones of Mother Earth. Women call the rocks Grandmother or Nokomis and men call the rocks Grandfather or Mishomis.

The Ishkodayinini heats the rocks with wood and fire. This preparation may take three or more hours. While the rocks are being heated, the teachings of the Sweat Lodge are given to those who gave tobacco. This is the most appropriate time to give this teaching.

The conductor then gives instructions to the participants to change into their sweat lodge clothes. This may be swim trunks and a towel wrapped around them for the men. The women wear a robe, cotton dress or large towel that covers them modestly. There should be no metal on the clothing worn in the sweat lodge. The heat of metal will get too hot for the skin. No shoes are worn in the Sweat Lodge. If participants wish to bring something into the lodge, such as a shaker, they must be given permission from the lodge conductor.

Participants are instructed to offer tobacco at the sacred fire with their prayers. The conductor will tell each person where they will sit in the sweat lodge. Some participants will be instructed to have specific responsibilities. When everyone is seated inside the lodge, a sweat lodge medicine water vessel will be handed to the conductor who is inside the lodge. A pitch fork or shovel is used to bring in

the rocks one at a time into the shallow pit in the middle of the lodge. Cedar, sweet grass or sage is placed on each rock as they are brought in. The doorway flap is then closed and the inside of the sweat lodge is completely dark. Prayers are offered by the conductor and medicine water is poured over the red hot rocks creating a cleansing steam in the lodge. Steam billows throughout the inside of the sweat lodge and causes the body to sweat and purifies each person. The prayers and songs are sung that encourage healing by the Creator.

The sweat lodge purification ceremony is very important in helping a man or woman who has been physically, emotionally or sexually abused to feel clean and centered again. Those in the sweat lodge will be given time to offer their individual prayer to promote healing.

When you enter the sweat lodge you are seeking the help of the Creator and the spirits. The helping spirits are called into the sweat lodge by means of the prayers and songs. Medicines may also be offered by the conductor for healing. Drum shakers and eagle whistles may be used. Sometimes a sacred pipe is shared.

At the end of the ceremony, the spirits are thanked and sent home. When you come out of the sweat lodge your spirit feels new and alive, you can feel the healing energies and you are more aware of all Creation and the beauty that is there.

How do you ask for a sweat lodge ceremony?

This request can be talked about on the phone but a gift of natural tobacco must be given in person to the traditional healer or medicine person. Tobacco can be purchased at a store and presented in an unopened container or pouch. You may also use a tobacco tie. Talk about the reason for the request and talk

about any health concerns you have. Be willing to make your own arrangements and time for this ceremony.

What are the traditional protocols?

Tobacco must be given for any request. You must be alcohol and drug free to be in a ceremony. For women you must observe the traditional protocol of not being on your menstrual cycle for four days before or after the ceremony. Help in the construction of the sweat lodge, gathering wood and rocks as well as helping to spread the tarps used to cover the lodge. Clean-up the sweat lodge area before you leave. The tarps and blankets must be aired out to dry. Sweat lodge rocks must be removed and buried. A gift for the conductor is always appreciated.

How can you find a Sweat Lodge Ceremony?

Contact your nearest Tribal Center for more information by phone or in person. Tribes are the best resource for finding traditional healers and medicine people who are currently holding sweat lodge ceremonies in your area. For Michigan Federally Recognized Tribes you can find a list of tribes at our United Three Fires Against Violence web site. www.utfav.org.

What should you say?

Give your name, your tribe and ask to be in contact with a traditional healer or medicine person who holds sweat lodge ceremonies. Give your contact phone number. Keep trying in case you may not reach the right person the first time.

For any questions about the sweat lodge ceremony, offer tobacco to your tribal elder or spiritual leader.

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony

Uniting Three Fires Against Violence

Helping and Healing from all Directions



Uniting Three Fires Against Violence

531 Ashmun Street

PO Box 1836

Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan 49783

(906) 253-9775

WEB www.UTFAV.org

This project is supported by Grant Number 2009-EC-S6-0010 awarded by the Office of Violence Against Women, US Dept of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of policies of the US Dept. of Justice