

SHAMANIC HEALING IN THE TREATMENT OF PTSD

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Susan Mokolke, president of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) and director of the FSS faculty, explains how core shamanism offers time-tested and effective methods to help heal Veterans experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Biographies for Susan and her co-authors can be found at the end of this article.

INTRODUCTION

The following example of shamanic healing for a combat Veteran was reported by FSS faculty member Scott Williams. It is one illustration of how “core shamanism” methods can be used to treat Veterans suffering from PTSD.

Shamanic healing derives from the practitioner’s relationship with evolved, wise, and compassionate helping spirits existing in what is referred to as “non-ordinary” reality. Shamanic healers develop their relationships with these spirits over a long period of time, becoming skilled at bringing the power and wisdom of these helping spirits to our “ordinary” reality dimension. These spirits work through an experienced practitioner to do the actual healing work for the client. Since every practitioner of shamanism is unique, individual variations on the basic shamanic healing methods are common, so not every session will closely resemble the one described in the case study below.

The case report is followed by a description of some of the principles

and methods of shamanic healing, along with resources if you want to learn more.



SHAMANIC HEALING FOR PTSD: A CASE STUDY

I first met Dan when he started work at my place of employment six years ago. He was in the National Guard, and still is. I did not know at the time that he suffered from PTSD, or the depth of his issues. Gradually, as I got to know him, I learned more about his life: he was married, had volunteered for the military, had served three combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and was suffering from PTSD. Additionally, he had problems both with his marriage and with anger.

After working with Dan for about six months, we were talking and I mentioned that I had a healing to do for a client. He inquired about what that was so I briefly explained shamanic healing to him. He commented that he could really use some spiritual healing. He also mentioned that he was feeling particularly

stressed that day as he had just talked to a lawyer about divorcing his wife (she had opioid/alcohol addiction issues). I asked if he would like me to do healing work for him to which he answered, “Can you do it now?”

I explained to him that I could not do it right then but I would see if there was anything I could do for him that day. We both work at a large manufacturing facility where it is possible to find a “quiet” space to vanish into for short periods of time. So, I did a shamanic journey to my spirits to see if there was something I could do for Dan that day. I was told I could give him power. I talked to Dan and let him know that I could pass power to him then. I also told him there were other things I could do for him, just not at work.

We found a spot where we would not be bothered for at least fifteen minutes and we went to work. I called on my spirits to come and fill me with their spiritual power. They came relatively instantly, filled me with power, which I then passed to Dan. After receiving the power, Dan started to slump so I caught him and helped him into a chair. Within a minute he was doing well and in his own words, “Holy shit, what the hell was that! That was amazing!”

The passing of power helped Dan recover enough that he could continue on the rest of the day without feeling the draining effects of his PTSD. I reminded him that there

was more work to be done, just not at the workplace. He thanked me and we set up a date to do more work.

Several days later Dan arrived where I did my healing work. We chatted for a bit, reviewed what types of healing could happen, and then got to work. I journeyed to my spirits to see what could be done for Dan. I was told he needed extraction (removal of spiritual “intrusions” that do not belong there) and a soul retrieval (restoration of a person’s vital spiritual essence), but not necessarily both that day. I asked Dan if he was ready for this; he was, so I proceeded with the extraction.

That extraction session was the longest I had ever done. Dan had many intrusions in various parts of his body but the most stubborn, and the largest number, were in his chest and head. After spending a long time, I finished with the extraction healing. Dan said he felt a little spent, but also invigorated after the healing. He really wanted to jump right into the soul retrieval but at my suggestion we did not do the soul retrieval. Instead I had Dan sit with the extraction for a week to see how things went.

All during the week up until his next session, Dan kept telling me how great he felt after the extraction. He said he had not felt that good in a long time. At the next session I again journeyed to my spirits to see what to do and was told that he needed more extraction done. I told him and he was a little disappointed that we would not be doing the soul retrieval. I again found a number of intrusions in his chest and head and removed them. This session did not take as long as the first. Prior to the extraction I had done a special shamanic healing drumming practice referred to as “Tuvan Drumming” for him; he had injured his knee on his first de-

ployment and it was bothering him.

Dan’s next session was three weeks later; he had his National Guard two-week training and then a week’s vacation. When he returned to work, he asked me if I could give him power again. I said I could but it would have to wait a while, I was working on a hot job that needed to be finished first. He kept coming over to talk while I worked, discussing how his two weeks had been. Then he told me his week of vacation was for filing for divorce and also getting his wife into a treatment program. He definitely needed a boost but the most important thing is that he was not having anger issues around his wife. After having the extraction work done, he was able to work with and for his wife calmly, even though their marriage was ending.

One thing that had not changed for Dan was that he still had problems sleeping due to the PTSD. Routinely, he only got two to four hours of sleep per day. He said he got used to that while in Iraq. At the beginning of working with Dan I had asked him if he had seen a doctor for his issues. He said he talked with a therapist in the military but did not tell him about the extent of his issues. He was afraid that, if he did, he would be discharged from service. I had expressed that I would do healing work for him, but that he should continue seeing the therapist, which he did.

The week he came back to work Dan asked for power twice, which I did for him. At his next session I did a soul retrieval for him. As you might expect from someone who had done three combat tours and was ending a marriage, there were a number of “soul portions” that had left Dan.

After checking with my spirits, I proceeded with the soul retrieval. I brought back four soul portions for

Dan. There were a number of others that were not ready to return at this time. I also did a “power animal retrieval” for him at the time of the soul retrieval. After it was done Dan opened his eyes and inhaled a giant breath—it almost sounded like a small jet engine it was so intense. He then dropped his head and sobbed and cried for about ten minutes or so. It was a very humbling experience to be in the presence of this man who had fought for his country, being so emotionally present and raw.

Since I worked with Dan, I saw him every day. I could see the change in him happen on a small, daily basis. His rapid, intense anger slowed noticeably. He seemed happier and smiled more. He told me he was sleeping more. He told me he felt more like himself than he had in a number of years.

Since then I still work with Dan, but on a much lesser scale. I did more extraction work for him and two more soul retrievals over the next few years. He now sleeps at least five or six hours a night. He still has some anger issues, but it takes a lot more to get it started. As Dan said, “I don’t even get mad at other drivers anymore.”

In this process I taught Dan how to do shamanic journeying, which he still does even though he says he does not believe in this stuff! What he does believe is that it has helped him. It has allowed him to regain himself, to stay in the military, and as he stated, not to become another Veteran suicide statistic.



WHAT IS SHAMANISM?

Shamanism is the world's oldest spiritual practice, dating back tens of thousands of years. Our ancient ancestors used shamanic methods to alter their consciousness and travel to other realms to interact with helping spirits for the purposes of healing and gaining practical knowledge to help themselves and their peoples. Shamanism has been found on every inhabited continent. For Westerners, our shamanic traditions were lost centuries ago due to religious and political oppression.

But beginning in the fifties, anthropologist Michael Harner (1929–2018) began his decades of pioneering work, originating, researching, and developing authentic methods of shamanic practice in order to restore this highly effective spiritual heritage to the West. In 1980, his classic book, *The Way of the Shaman*, launched a worldwide reawakening of interest in shamanism. Today these methods form a complete knowledge and healing system called “Core Shamanism.” Core Shamanism consists of the “universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism, together with journeys to other worlds, a distinguishing feature of shamanism.”

Training in core shamanism is particularly suited to contemporary society, as it does not focus on ceremonies, rituals, or other culture-specific practices of shamanic peoples. Rather, it addresses the underlying methods of shamanic practice worldwide. Students of Core Shamanism learn to alter their consciousness through classic shamanic non-drug techniques, primarily repetitive drumming, in order to activate their own spiritual resources and learn directly from their own helping spirits how to heal and help others.

Core shamanism is very much an independent spirituality, a system of personal knowledge, not of faith. Shamanic practitioners are trained in methods, particularly the shamanic journey, so that they can travel directly to the compassionate helping spirits and discover and know truth for themselves.



METHODS OF HEALING

Shamanism is a holistic healing practice. As noted in the case study above, it works well with traditional medicine and psychology, as well as other holistic treatments. There is no conflict as shamanism deals with the “spiritual” aspects of illness. We are both body and spirit, and the goal is for the client to heal.

Shamanism works at the level of the soul. It is a basic principle in shamanism that all forms in creation have a soul, and that in order to be healthy and function optimally in life, the soul must be vital and empowered, and fully present within the body. Otherwise, even the best physical and/or emotional medicine cannot be completely effective.

In addition to a fully empowered soul, from a shamanic view, everyone needs a connection with at least one guardian spirit, commonly referred to as a “power animal,” to help and protect them. These two things—an empowered soul and a helping spirit

connection—form what is sometimes called our “spiritual immune system.” If this system is weakened, which can happen due to trauma or neglect, we may fall prey to illness, depression, bad luck and accidents, loss of vitality and purpose, and a general decline in body, mind, and spirit.

Trauma can occur to a person in a myriad of ways. The obvious trauma of exposure to violence and conflict, as is the case with combat Veterans, is of course a major source of what is called “soul loss.” But soul loss can also occur through emotional pain and shock, accidents, long term illness, constant stress, overwork and even the loss of connection with nature. The shamanic healing method needed for soul loss is called “soul retrieval.”

SOUL RETRIEVAL

Soul retrieval is a shamanic methodology in which the practitioner, with the assistance of their helping spirits, in an altered state using rhythmic drumming, makes a shamanic journey to locate and return missing portions of a client's soul, which have been lost due to some form of trauma. The missing soul portions can be thought of as part of a person's vitality and essence that they can no longer access, leaving them diminished and lacking in power. The shamanic healer is guided by their helping spirits in finding and identifying soul portions that are ready to be returned to the client and re-integrated. When found, the practitioner is trained to gently return them to the client, by blowing them into the chest and top of the head. The work can be quite moving for both practitioner and client. The client may experience an immediate healing effect, though often things shift over a period of time as the soul portion re-integrates.

POWER ANIMAL RETRIEVAL

Another form of restoring power to a client is the return of a guardian spirit, which appears most often in the form of a power animal. Power animal retrieval is done in a similar way to soul retrieval. Power animals are a treasured and crucial aspect of our spiritual immune system, providing spiritual power, help, protection, and advice. It is important, in maintaining one's connection and relationship to a power animal, to learn ways of working with the animal spirit in ordinary reality. The shamanic practitioner, after returning a power animal, can advise the client on how to nurture this important relationship.

EXTRACTION HEALING

Sometimes, if a person is lacking in power due to soul loss from trauma, as with combat Veterans, they can become vulnerable to spiritual "intrusions," such as "spiritual darts" resulting from people's hostile thoughts or other small non-physical influences, which can lodge in the non-corporeal aspect of the physical body and cause localized pain and illness. The shamanic healing method for removal of these intrusions is called Extraction Healing.

This process is done while the practitioner is in an altered state, using drumming or rattling, so they can work closely with their helping spirits to do the work. After these intrusions are removed, power is restored to the client with soul retrieval and/or power animal retrieval, so they are no longer vulnerable to such non-physical influences.

SHAMANIC DIVINATION

All of these methods are facilitated by the shamanic healer, who brings the spirits' power here, but it is the practitioner's own helping spirits that do the work. Before every healing ses-

sion, the practitioner will journey to ask the spirits what healing is needed—as Scott did for Dan in the case study—and then proceed accordingly, as directed. This practice, of asking the spirits for information and answers to questions, is called Shamanic Divination. In addition to direct healing, with the client's permission, the shamanic practitioner can also ask the spirits to provide information and knowledge about the client's situation that can help them on their path.

SHAMANIC ETHICS

An essential ethical consideration before any shamanic healing can be performed is obtaining the expressed permission (*informed consent*) of the client to do shamanic work. Shamanic healing deals with the soul. Each person has the right to decide what to do in matters of their own soul and to choose their path without interference or undue influence.

WHAT IS A SHAMANIC HEALING SESSION LIKE?

Since shamanism is an independent spirituality, each shamanic healer develops their own specific ways of setting up their practice and working with clients. But if you go to a well-trained practitioner of core shaman-

ism you will find common themes and methodologies.

Initially the practitioner will ask some general questions about what is going on for the client, briefly explain shamanic healing and obtain permission for shamanic work, and then set an appointment.

When the client arrives for the session, the practitioner will settle the client comfortably, fully clothed, on the floor, in a chair, or on a treatment table, like a massage table. The practitioner will then use rattling, drumming, and sometimes singing to connect with their helping spirits and "power up" in preparation for the healing work.

Typically, the practitioner does a short divination journey to determine what methods will be used in the current session. Some practitioners use a special shamanic drumming recording (rhythmic drumming at 3–7 beats per second) to support their shift in consciousness; others drum for themselves. Some practitioners may even have a drumming assistant. Any of these methods is effective to alter consciousness.

Once the healing methods to be done are determined, various things



may happen, depending upon which method is to be offered. The practitioner may rattle and drum a lot more, may dance/move around the client, and may use hand motions near the client's body, with some light touching involved (permission to touch is usually specifically requested in advance). There may also be singing or chanting, and at some point during the treatment power may be restored by blowing gently over the chest and at the top of the head.

At the end of the session, the client may choose to share their experience of the work with the practitioner. The practitioner may also offer a few directions or follow up suggestions, if guided to do so by the spirits. It is not usually necessary to talk a lot, since the work is accomplished spiritually at the level of the soul, and a quiet peaceful space can facilitate the client's integration of the experience.

The practitioner may recommend that more than one session is needed, as was described in Dan's case story above, or sometimes a single session is all that is required at this time. The timing and number of sessions is directed by the practitioner's helping spirits.



HOW DOES ONE BECOME A SHAMAN? HOW DO I FIND ONE? CAN SHAMANIC TRAINING BE HELPFUL FOR VETERANS WITH PTSD?

“How do I know if someone is a shaman?” Michael Harner was asked. “It’s simple,” he said. “Do they journey to other worlds? And do they perform miracles?” When a person starts to perform miracles of healing, consistently getting good results, then that person might be named a shaman by his or her community.

In indigenous cultures, people became shamans in various ways. They might survive a life-threatening illness, undergo initiations or physical challenges, inherit the role, pay a master shaman for the knowledge, or be apprenticed to an elder shaman. In contemporary society, though these processes may still be a factor, people may feel drawn to shamanism as a healing practice, often after receiving a miraculous healing themselves, or perhaps have a transformative experience that they discover is shamanic in nature. This may lead them to investigate contemporary shamanic training.

In 1985, Michael and Sandra Harner established the FSS, a public nonprofit educational and charitable organization “dedicated to the preservation, study, and teaching of shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the Planet and its inhabitants.” The FSS offers an integrated program of weekend workshops and advanced residential trainings that guides students through progressively advanced methods, practices, and initiatory experiences. The program includes workshops for gaining shamanic knowledge, such as Shamanic Dreamwork, Divination, and Spirits of Nature, as well as the primary shamanic healing methodologies described above. The ethical use of shamanic

methods and power is emphasized.

In addition to receiving healing, shamanic training can often be useful for Veterans who have suffered from PTSD. The shamanic journey, particularly, offers the journeyer the opportunity to experience personally the realms of the helping spirits, an expansive dimension of compassion, wisdom, healing, and oneness. In addition to being able to contact the spirits for personal knowledge and help with daily life, shamanic journeying can provide a cosmic perspective of our place in the universe, resulting in a hopeful and inspired orientation toward one's life.

Altering consciousness through non-drug methods using rhythmic drumming is time-tested, effective, and safe. Most people can learn the shamanic journey fairly readily. The steps of the practice are set forth in Michael Harner's book *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality* (see Appendices A & B); or one can take the FSS introductory weekend *The Way of the Shaman*[®] under the guidance of an experienced faculty member.

To find a shamanic practitioner to work with, it is important to do your own research, just as you would when seeking any other healthcare professional. Sometimes you can find someone who has had a good healing experience with a practitioner, and you can start with their referral. Be sure to talk with the practitioner and find out how they work, what they charge for their work, and what training and experience they have. Find a practitioner you feel comfortable with and avoid those who charge excessive fees, promise healing miracles, or boast of their skills.

The FSS provides a practitioner list, searchable by location, of people who have participated in Foundation

advanced trainings such as the Three Year Program in Advanced Shamanism and the Two Week Shamanic Healing Intensive, and how many years they have practiced. All practitioners work independently of the Foundation and no endorsement can be made since it is the connection with the helping spirits that makes an effective shaman. But high-quality training and practical experience are good places to start looking. You will find resources for finding practitioners at the end of this article.



Golden Eagle Drum by Joy Markgraf

SUMMARY

Shamanic healing is finding a well-deserved place as an effective complementary healing modality for people who struggle with the disabling effects of trauma in general, and for Veterans with combat related PTSD in particular. The methods reviewed in this chapter are time-tested, authentic, and effective non-drug practices for addressing trauma and illness.

Though they may be considered “alternative” in contemporary society, they have a track record of success that dates back tens of thousands of years. Shamanic methods can be an important part of the recovery process

for many who suffer with serious medical conditions and traumatic life experiences.

We hope this brief introduction will help demystify shamanic healing for those who might benefit from this ancient therapeutic methodology. ☞

Editor’s Note: “*Shamanic Healing in the Treatment of PTSD*” was first published as a chapter in *Total War on PTSD, a unique compilation of holistic and alternative treatments for veterans suffering from PTSD.* (©2023 by Courtenay Nold. Sierra Vista: Southern Arizona Press.)

RESOURCES

Visit the Foundation for Shamanic Studies website, shamanism.org

- About Core Shamanism: <https://shamanism.org/workshops/coreshamanism.html>
- “Shamanic Healing, We Are Not Alone” by Michael Harner: <https://shamanism.org/articles/article011.html>
- Introductory Workshop, The Way of the Shaman®: https://shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=10
- Finding a Practitioner: <https://shamanism.org/resources/services.php>
- Shamanic Training: <https://shamanism.org/workshops/index.php>
- *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality* by Michael Harner. ©2013, The Foundation for Shamanic Studies (North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA), Appendix D, Core Shamanism and Healing: Information for Physicians and Health Professionals; Appendices A and B, Shamanic Journey instructions
- *The Way of the Shaman* by Michael Harner ©1980, 1990 Michael Harner (HarperCollins, New York, NY)

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