



Good Medicine Bundle

DIGITAL LESSONS

OPERATION
PREVENTION

Finding **Balance** in Traditional Ways



Discovery
EDUCATION



Elementary School Activity



Activity

Finding Balance in Traditional Ways



Focus Skill

Balancing the Self



Time

45–60 minutes

Overview

This activity introduces students to the Native American cultural value of achieving balance within self and in connection to community. Traditional medicine and cultural practices used the concept of a medicine wheel that incorporates the balance of nature such as the four directions, the four seasons, four colors, and the four elements to represent the four aspects of an individual (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual).

Objectives

Students will:

- ◆ Identify how the traditional use of a medicine wheel connects to achieving balance.
- ◆ Define the four aspects of a person as identified on the medicine wheel: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.
- ◆ Explore how they can use the example of a medicine wheel to reflect on balance in their own lives.
- ◆ Discuss how balance or imbalance affects our decisions and behaviors.
- ◆ Determine ways to bring more balance to their lives through self-reflection and community.

Materials

- ◆ Pen or pencil for opening activity
- ◆ Student Handout 1: *“Balance is Good Medicine”*
- ◆ Student Handout 2: *“Why is Balance Important”*
- ◆ Student Handout 3: *“Putting our Learning about Balance into Action”*

Teacher Resource

[Indigenous Religious Traditions: Bighorn Medicine Wheel, Wyoming](#)

Lesson Resources

Student Handout 1:
“Balance is Good Medicine”

Student Handout 2:
“Why is Balance Important”

Student Handout 3:
“Putting our Learning about Balance into Action”

Standards

National Health Education Standards

- ◆ Standard 2: Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.
- ◆ Standard 5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.

English Language Arts

Common Core State Standards

- ◆ Reading:
 - ◆ R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.



Procedure

1. Prior to beginning the lesson, it is recommended that the teacher read the Teacher Resource article [Indigenous Religious Traditions: Bighorn Medicine Wheel, Wyoming](#). This article sheds light on the archeological site of Bighorn Medicine Wheel that is sacred to many tribes and often a focus of ceremonial travel. An image of this wheel is featured in Student Handout 1 in this lesson. This article will offer more background information for teaching this lesson.
2. Begin the activity by asking students to try to balance a pencil or pen on the tip of one finger. Allow them a few attempts and then ask them to share with a partner what made the activity challenging. Then have students hold out four fingers and try to balance the pen/pencil again. Ask one or two students to share with the whole class why this second attempt was easier.
3. Share with the class that they will be learning about how balance within their bodies and minds can help them be healthier, but they will be learning about balance from a Native or American Indian perspective.
4. Have students read Student Handout 1: “Balance is Good Medicine” as a whole group. Use some of the following questions to prompt discussion.
 - ◆ Ask students what they notice about the photos on page 2. Responses may include that they use natural items to make the wheels or that it is a community effort to make the wheel. Some students may also notice that each wheel has a center point.
 - ◆ Have students define the four aspects on the medicine wheel: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. How do each of those play a role in our lives?
 - ◆ According to the article, why is ceremony important? How is this a bit different from what other communities call a ceremony? How might it be the same?
 - ◆ Extend thinking with asking students why Native people may have chosen a circle to represent the balance. What could that symbolize or mean?
 - ◆ Ask students to share with a partner something new they learned from this article. Ask students if they have any questions about the reading.
5. Next, have students read Student Handout 2 “Why is Balance Important.” This reading can be done independently or in small groups. Though this article is written at an elementary reading level, the mention of trauma may need to be discussed with students to understand what defines a trauma and how it can affect our lives even if we do not know it. Trauma can be personal or felt by a community



Procedure (continued)

or nation. This is also an opportunity to ask students how balance can help avoid negative behaviors. Ask students what a negative behavior or a decision could be at their age level. At the elementary level, students may give examples such as fighting, stealing, saying mean things to friends, or feeling sad and lonely. The teacher may want to mention that sometimes other people will try to get us to follow their bad behaviors. With older elementary students, emphasize that being balanced in our own lives will help us avoid following other people when they try to convince us to make bad decisions. Sometimes other people may want us to try things such as taking drugs, drinking alcohol, or doing something that is not in our best interest. If we are balanced in our lives and keep our mental and emotional health strong, then we will be bold enough not to follow these negative behaviors

6. Give students time to discuss the medicine wheel on the handout. Share with students that sometimes tribes share similar traditions such as the medicine wheel. However, it is important to know that each tribe is an independent nation and will have a native language and unique customs. Note* While this is a general example of a medicine wheel, each tribe will associate different colors, resources, or meaning. Not all tribes follow a medicine wheel but will instead have other practices for wellness. Discuss the idea that balance occurs in the center of the wheel when all four aspects are in harmony. Allow students time to complete the reflection questions at the bottom of the page.
7. Hold a discussion on what it might look like or feel like if a person is out of balance in each of the four areas. Sometimes students at this age have already heard parents or older siblings talk about stress, anxiety, or even depression. Many students come to class with the effects of trauma already present in their lives. This is an opportunity to share with students that everyone deals with imbalance in their lives, and the medicine wheel is a reminder that we have to do healthy things for each aspect of our bodies/minds. This also means helping others in our community when we see them off balance.
8. To close the class, give students time to complete Student Handout 3: "Putting Our Learning about Balance into Action." This contains statements about each of the four aspects of a person that connect to Native traditions and values.



Student Handout 1

Balance is Good Medicine

By Dr. Shane Doyle, Apsáalooke Nation

Shodajee (Show-daw-jay)! Hello students, greetings from Bozeman, Montana. Bozeman is in a large valley surrounded by tall mountains, and is the traditional homeland of many indigenous nations, including my own Apsáalooke (Up-saw-low-gah) Nation. Along with sharing a vast and beautiful homeland with other nations like the Blackfeet, Salish and Shoshone to name a few, my tribe also shares many common values and similar traditions that celebrate a balanced life. “Medicine Wheels” are a representative symbol of those values, and there is much wisdom in their simple and perfect equality. In this lesson, you will learn about we can all use the Medicine Wheel to help guide us through our day and avoid the pitfalls of addiction and the harms that come from it.



Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
Edward S. Curtis Collection

The Apsáalooke and other Indigenous people believe strongly in a ceremonial way of life that emphasizes the importance of discipline, humility, and prayer each day. There is also an understanding among Native people that medicine is more than something that comes in the form of a pill or shot from doctors at the hospital or pharmacy. In the Apsáalooke language, the word for sacred medicine is “baxpa”, pronounced bawk-paw, and it is believed that each of us can receive the blessings of sacred medicine if we practice a balanced life and do good things for ourselves and others. This is the reason the stone circles are called “Medicine Wheels”, because they remind us how we can heal from pain and trauma and become whole.

Some of the Medicine Wheels, like the one in the photograph below, are over 6,000 years old, and from these wheels came the Sun Dance ceremony, which is also pictured. This ceremony is shared in some form by all the tribes of the Northern Plains and is meant to heal the mind and body and the community. It requires great work and preparation, as well as sacrifice and generosity. Participants in the ceremony must fast without food or water while dancing and praying for as many as 3 days and nights. Family and friends come together to support the ceremony, sharing food and exchanging gifts at the conclusion, and there is a powerful feeling of connection, respect and sacredness. This is the spiritual medicine that helps us to heal and also to understand how making negative decisions such as taking drugs like opioids or hurting other people takes us away from the circle of balance and health and wellness.

I am very thankful and proud of the beautiful traditions that have been passed down from my ancestors. The ceremonies and knowledge that have guided me in my life have protected me from addiction and given me the tools and ability to live my best life.

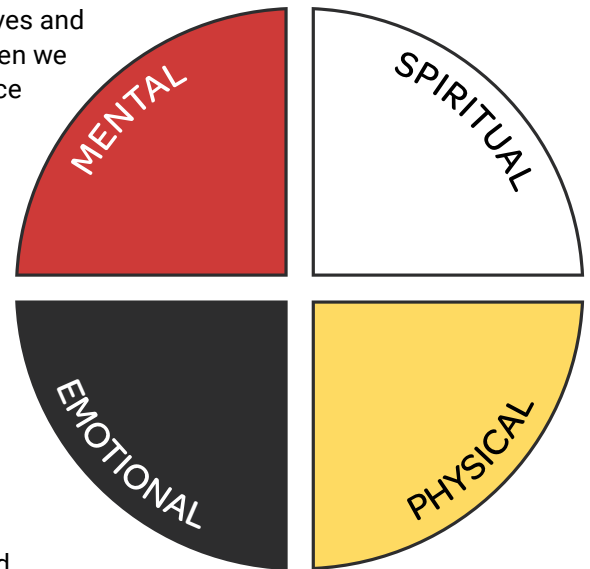
Dr. Shane Doyle is an educational consultant and member of the Apsaalooké (Crow) Nation. His Apsaalooké name means Old Buffalo Bull, and he lives in Bozeman with his wife, Megkian, and their five children.



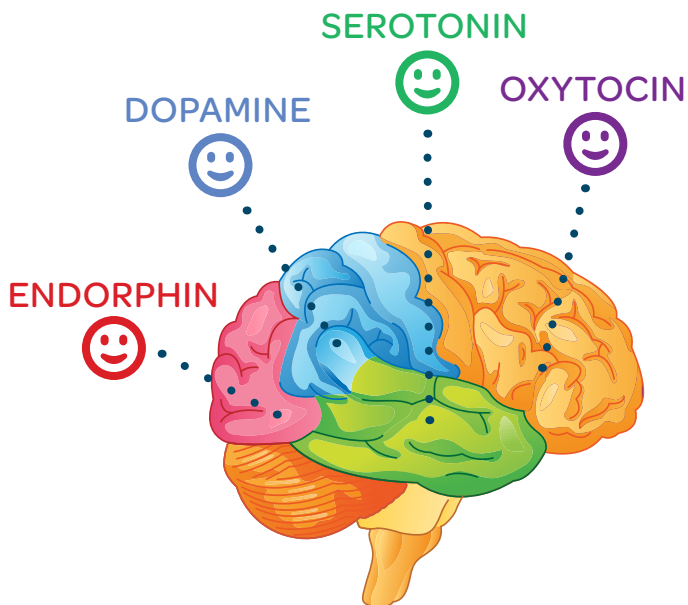
Student Handout 2

Why is Balance Important?

All of us value our well-being and enjoy feeling good about our lives and what we do. Our brains have ways to reward us with pleasure when we live a balanced and disciplined life. One of the ways we experience a feeling of pleasure is when we celebrate our friendship with others. When we are generous and show gratitude and respect toward our friends and loved ones, our brains release chemical messengers like dopamine and serotonin that provide us with a signal that we are on a good path. These chemicals help our bodies in many ways and make us healthier. If people experience traumas or challenges, they may not feel they can make positive choices or have positive thoughts that help release these good chemicals. Sometimes people try other things like opioids, medications, or alcohol to try to feel better. When people become addicted to opioids, they are no longer in balance, and they need the drugs to feel normal and good.



The Medicine Wheel shows us we can feel wonderful and fulfilled without taking opioids. The Medicine Wheel also provides a model for people who become addicted to opioids to regain their health and wellness by following the path of balance and discipline. This means learning how to activate the happy chemicals in our brain to feel more authentic feelings rather than the false feelings of happiness that drugs and medicines may give the body. The Medicine Wheel is divided into four parts which Native peoples see as the balance of nature. Traditional knowledge relied on what could be learned through a deep connection with the natural world. The use of four parts is influenced by the four seasons, the four elements, and even the four directions observed in nature.



REFLECTION

How can our knowledge about the medicine wheel help us think about working on a healthy balance in our own lives?

Are there any parts of the medicine wheel that you feel could be out of balance for you? Why do you think so?



Student Handout 3

Putting Our Learning about Balance into Action

EMOTIONAL

Connecting with Others

Native people of the Northern Plains believe in giving gifts to friends and thanking them for their support and love.



How can you show your appreciation to your loved ones?

MENTAL

Thinking Positively

Maintaining faith in ourselves and in our neighbors helps Native people to overcome personal and community challenges.



How can you nurture your inner voice to think positively about your life and give you the motivation to always improve?

SPIRITUAL

Connecting with the Natural World

Celebrating and cherishing spirituality is an important value for Native people, and being outside with nature, along with periodic fasting, is a key tradition.



How can you strengthen your life through nature and prayer or other spiritual activities?

PHYSICAL

Taking Care of Our Bodies

Disciplining our bodies to be healthy is an ancient Native American tradition on the Northern Plains. Staying physically active, eating right, and being smart about our actions are all ways to take care of our bodies.



What types of physical activities can you do every day to take care of your body?



Additional Teacher Resource



Indigenous Religious Traditions: Bighorn Medicine Wheel

By Katherine Whalen

[Bighorn Medicine Wheel, Wyoming | Indigenous Religious Traditions \(coloradocollege.edu\)](https://coloradocollege.edu/)

The Medicine Wheel in the Bighorn National Forest, Wyoming, is sacred to multiple Plains Indian tribes, including the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, Lakota, Dakota, Shoshone, Cree, Salish, Kootenai and Blackfeet (Manataka American Indian Council). These tribes all use the historic Medicine Wheel for religious purposes. When Indigenous religious practice was outlawed in the 19th century, these tribes were forbidden to visit the sacred Medicine Wheel (punishment included time in federal prison). Medicine Wheel was not reopened to tribal ceremonial use until the 1950s (Geist). While lands surrounding the Medicine Wheel are now reserved for Indigenous people's religious use, the struggle leading up to this decision was far from simple.

The origin of this Medicine Wheel is a mystery, though archaeological evidence shows that Native American tribes have used the area for 7,000 years (Manataka American Indian Council). The 23,000-acre area surrounding the medicine wheel holds approximately 44 historic sites including "tipi rings, lithic scatters, buried archeological sites, and a system of relict prehistoric Indian trails" (Chapman 5). There should be no question as to why the Plains Indians tribes find this area sacred, and why tribes of many nations travel to this site to seek visions and offer prayer.

Almost every Indigenous tribe uses a Medicine Wheel, though most traditions differ slightly. For the Lakota tribe, the center of the wheel is the "heart." This is the place where the people give back to Mother Earth (Kaelin, Celinda; teaching; January 27, 2011). During buffalo hunts the Lakota people would place the tongue of the buffalo, the most important part, under the rock to show their appreciation to Mother Earth, the Creator (Kaelin, Celinda; teaching; January 27, 2011). In ceremonies today, they place the sacred tobacco that is smoked in pipe ceremony under the "heart" stone (Kaelin, Celinda; teaching; January 27, 2011). In his article, Learning Styles and Lessons from the Medicine Wheel: A Native American Philosophy, Peter Murk gives an example of the specific meaning of the four points of a medicine wheel:



The gift of the east is illumination, the color is yellow, and the animal symbol is the eagle. The gift of the south is innocence, the color is green, and the animal symbol is the mouse. The gift of the west is introspection, the color is black, and the animal symbol is the bear. Finally, the gift of the north, the color is white, and the animal symbol is the buffalo (Murk, 5-6).

While Murk mentions the specifics of the medicine wheel of just one (unspecified) tribe, the significance of the medicine wheel differs between tribes. For the Lakota tribe, the colors signified are red, black, yellow, and white (Kaelin, Celinda; teaching; January 27, 2011). Colors and symbols can often differ between tribes, but they all agree on the significance of the four directions in the medicine wheel.

While it holds religious and spiritual significance for native people, it also has a historical and curious appeal for tourists. In fact, the Secretary of the Interior declared it a National Historic Landmark in 1970 (MAIC). In 1988, the Forest Service attempted to build a viewing platform, parking lot, and visitor center near the Medicine Wheel. However, this was appealed by two Native American organizations that joined together with an environmental and historical group to prevent the action (MAIC). Instead, they had the land recognized as a religious site. In 1996, several Wyoming organizations signed a Programmatic Agreement employing a Historic Preservation Plan (HPP), which encompassed all of Medicine Mountain, an 18,000-acre area. This gave unlimited ceremonial use to Native Americans and privacy for these ceremonies when requested. Wyoming Sawmills of Sheridan filed an appeal in 1999 because they felt that the ruling for the Native American tribes in the Medicine Wheel conflict violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment (Chapman). Judges ruled that they had no standing to challenge the HPP. The Forest Service suspended a timber sale with Wyoming Sawmills of Sheridan because the noise would have disrupted the ceremonies held at Medicine Wheel.

A Cheyenne cultural leader explains, “The tribes traditionally went and still go to the sacred mountain. The people sought the high mountain for prayer” (Gulliford). Many different native tribes still use the Medicine Wheel in Wyoming to seek visions, make prayer offerings, fast, conduct the Sun Dance ceremony, and seek spiritual renewal and healing (Geist). This site has definite religious significance for these tribes, which environmental, historical, and native groups have worked to protect. While controversy still surrounds the Bighorn Medicine Wheel on Medicine Mountain, as of right now, the HPP still stands. Although tourists still sometimes have access to the Medicine Wheel, access is restricted, and when requested by the Native Americans, access is denied to tourists during ceremony (MAIC).

