10.7: The Medicine Wheel as a Change Model

The medicine wheel, drawn as a circle with four quadrants, represents a holistic set of beliefs encompassing the mind, body, emotions, and spirit, which is foundational to the human being. These beliefs have been embraced by Indigenous cultures across the world for thousands of years (McCabe, 2008). Carl Jung and others emphasized this dialogue between the four aspects of the human being as a way to understand self and maintain health (McCabe, 2008). Psychologists recognize the medicine wheel as “the Jungian mandala—a symbol of wholeness” (Dapice, 2006, p. 251).

Figure 9.6.1 Medicine Wheel
The medicine wheel is found in the teachings of individual Elders in over 500 Indigenous nations across Canada. Teachings are similar between the nations; however there are slight differences regarding the location of the four dimensions on the wheel (Clarke & Holtslander, 2010). The medicine wheel is manifested within the community as a “process (healing), a ceremony (sweats, sharing circles) and teachings (a code for living)” (McCabe, 2008, p. 34). The Indigenous people consider the community participation in ceremonies to be an important part of the healing process (McCabe, 2008). The medicine wheel assists community members to connect with each other, while also supporting balance and harmony across the four dimensions of mind, body, emotions, and spirit for the individual and the extended community (Clarke & Holtslander, 2010).

Recent literature focuses on the use of the medicine wheel to recover from illness and regain health. The medicine wheel guides healthy change and can be individualized to the specific needs of the client or community, taking into account the context of culture, socioeconomic status, family situation, disease process, and other significant factors, culminating in balance, healing, and growth in all four aspects. Research literature documents the use of the medicine wheel in diabetes education (Kattelmann, Conti, & Ren, 2010), end-of-life care for Aboriginal people (Clarke & Holtslander, 2010), substance abuse prevention programs (Walsh-Buhl, 2017), adolescent group counselling (Garner, Bruce, & Stellern, 2011), and development of a retention program for diverse nursing students (Charbonneau-Dahlen, 2015). The medicine wheel provides a guide to holistic change for both the individual and the collective community.

**Essential Learning Activity 9.6.1**

Watch the video "Medicine Wheel: Beyond the Tradition" (9:20), for an explanation and overview of the Lakota (Sioux) medicine wheel, according to Don Warne, then answer the following questions:

1. What does the medicine wheel represent?
2. How does the use of the medicine wheel extend from traditional to modern times?
3. Which gifts come from each of the four directions?