

Abstract.

The pandemic of substance dependency continues to spread across the world. Among colonised Indigenous populations, the incidence and prevalence similarly continue to grow, as are the associated mortality and morbidity. There is a demonstrable need to understand “how” successful rehabilitation programs or interventions are designed and developed, and what makes one intervention successful and another fail.

The issue of substance abuse now has a coordinated world approach, developed through the World Health Organisation (WHO). This approach includes targeted national approaches and smaller, community-directed interventions aimed at reducing not only the incidence levels, but also the prevalence within Indigenous communities. However, the policy directions that have served as the foundations for coordinated interventions and rehabilitation for Indigenous People appear to be failing and there is a notable gap in the desired outcomes and the reality.

Interventions set within a culturally appropriate model appear to be more effective, but they require a range of approaches and actions to ensure their appropriateness and usability. All too frequently, the success of rehabilitation interventions is simply based on the number of clients that have come through the front door of the rehabilitation service provider and participated in the interventions, even if it is attendance of only one session. Concepts about the context in which interventions are delivered, the approaches used, and real outcomes are not frequently considered.

The research undertaken in the course of writing this thesis has used a proven method for “unpacking” the “black box” of mechanisms (Pawson, 2004) that provide real change with Indigenous People. The thesis examines the suitability of interventions for Indigenous people, their cultural appropriateness, and their ability to change the rate of success. A critical realist synthesis has been undertaken to gain an understanding and provide answers to the broad research question, which is “In what contexts do substance dependency interventions work for Indigenous People? What provides the impetus for change and can successful outcomes be achieved?”

A systematic search was initially undertaken to identify both grey and peer reviewed literature on interventions for substance dependency within Indigenous communities. All types of studies were included, qualitative and quantitative, combining both the researchers’ views and the voices of Indigenous People themselves. The theoretical frameworks that formed the basis for the design of the interventions were identified, as were the adaptive theories. Consonance, linked to traditional values and ceremonies, authenticity, the use of language, of the correct pedagogy, embedded within the ethnic/cultural group, specificity, target programs for a specific group, sense of ownership and endorsement by the tribal group were the major obvious mechanisms identified.

The essential demi regularities or mechanisms were then able to be identified and linked to consonance and authenticity. Ensuring that the interventions were connected to traditional activities brought a sense of cultural safety. The use of appropriate language and acknowledged learning methods brought authenticity into the interventions. This approach of recognisable mechanisms has enabled an understanding of the differing ways of learning, of how Indigenous People have developed an understanding of the world, an understanding of their place within the world. Being embedded within the community provided the opportunity for a sense of belonging to develop. Specific programs developed for each tribal group acknowledged that even though we are Indigenous People, we have different needs and practices. And finally, ownership and endorsement provided the conditions for the tribe to act as a group, to bring trust and pride back to their communities.

Further research needs to be conducted to establish a more specific understanding of the mechanisms, how they work and the outcomes. The impact that interventions for substance dependency have is not just on the individual, but on the tribe or community as a whole.