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Drumming Past and Present: Examination of Historical and Current Medicinal Effects

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Introduction

Drumming is an activity with a long and rich history, rooted in many different cultures around the world. Traditionally, the art of drumming has been used for a wide variety of purposes including as a part of religious ceremonies, to promote psychological well-being, and to foster a sense of community. It has been used in a variety of cultural healing practices throughout the world since the beginning of ancient history (Newman et al., 2015).

Many cultures use drumming in healing ceremonies as a means for promoting an altered state of consciousness of the ill individual, the healer, and any others partaking in the ceremony, much like hypnosis does. These altered states of consciousness promote stress reduction which in turn helps boost immune function by promoting neuroimmunological activity. Additionally, the altered states encourage the individual to be more open to a new framework and new suggestions that could possibly help to resolve the illness or problem. Reframing the problem can provide the ill person with a sense of purpose and combat feelings of helplessness by giving them a new action they can take to fight the illness (Bloom, 2005). Some individuals have compared drumming to meditation due to the altered state of consciousness both activities can induce. Drumming has been found to affect the theta and alpha brainwave ranges by enacting a driving pattern which is very similar physiologically to the action produced by meditation (Newman et al., 2015). In this paper, I will explore the various uses of therapeutic drumming for as a means for promoting both physical and psychological well-being in a variety of populations.

Literature Review

A study conducted by Longhofer and Floersch (1993) looked into the benefits of African drumming for psychiatric rehabilitation at two community support programs in Kansas City. The programs utilized two professional musicians who led 50 minute drumming sessions once a week for 6 months. The class kept an open-door policy in which individuals were encouraged to join the classes at any time throughout the 6 month period. This led to a core group of 12-15 individuals who attended the classes on a regular basis, and a total of 45 people who attended the class at least once. A wide range of psychiatric illnesses were represented in the population including major illnesses like schizophrenia, manic depression, and dissociative identity disorder but the mental health diagnoses seemed to pose no barrier to learning to drum. The program gave individuals the opportunity to perform meaningful social roles, maximized involvement of the client, and created an environment of inclusivity. The clients thoroughly enjoyed their experience participating in the drumming sessions, and at the time the study was published the group had plans to continue performing and to even hold concerts.

Research performed by Newman, Maggott, and Alexander (2015) also studied the psychological benefits of drumming. However, this study was conducted in a work related setting and examined the potential of a group drumming program to reduce burnout and stress levels for individuals working at a mental health care facility in South Africa. The 30 staff members that participated in the study attended a drum circle that took place three times a week for 30 minutes prior to the work day. Attendance fluctuated slightly over time, and the program had been running for 18 months at the time the article was written. The participants

completed a questionnaire in which they provided answers to six open-ended questions about their feelings and subjective experiences in regards to the drumming circle.

A variety of positive effects were reported including a sense of belonging, reduction of stress, increased energy and productivity, the ability to learn a new skill, improved mood state, a sense of accomplishment, and the opportunity for emotional expression. Participation in the drumming circle allowed staff members to put aside the organizational hierarchy and come together in a supportive community that encouraged self-expression and a time to escape from the emotional trauma of work. Work burnout often occurs in health-care practitioners due to prolonged stretches of work related stress, job dissatisfaction, and constant exposure to an emotionally draining environment. The drumming circle sought to inspire work engagement, which is the opposite of burnout. The essential elements of work engagement are vigor (increased energy and elevated mood), dedication (enthusiasm and pride), and absorption (focused mind and loss of self-consciousness), and the authors of the study report that the drum circle helped staff grow in all of these areas.

I appreciated that this study had very practical applications that could be implemented in a wide variety of work environments. There are many jobs in which employees do not get a chance to interact with each other outside of the work day so it was refreshing to read about a study that was aimed at reducing stress and facilitating bonding between staff members in a fun and beneficial setting. Having the program three times a week right before the work day seemed like a very accessible way to run the program and it seems like it would be a great way to start the day right and put staff in a good mood. I would love to see more programs of that

nature implemented throughout more workplaces especially in healthcare environments.

When a person spends their whole day caring for other people, it can be easy to overlook caring for themselves and their own well-being.

Drumming also provides a range of physical benefits in addition to the psychological benefits discussed above. An article by Smith, Viljoen, and McGeachie (2014) aimed to further explore these physical benefits as well as some mental benefits. This study utilized a specific discipline of African drumming called djembe drumming which is known for its rhythm and use in cultural celebrations, rituals, and for communication. Two study populations participated in the research; the first was a group of 17 young-adult novice drummers, and the second was a group of 17 middle-aged individuals who were experienced djembe drummers. Both groups participated in 40 minute drum circles led by the same instructor. Baseline measures of each participant's height, body mass, lactate levels, blood pressure, and perceived stress and anxiety were taken when the participants were recruited. Additional measure of blood lactate, blood pressure, and perceived stress and anxiety were recorded immediately prior to and immediately following the drumming sessions while heart rate was monitored throughout the session.

Data comparisons revealed that both groups experienced similar significant reductions in stress following the drumming sessions. While diastolic blood pressure was not significantly affected by the drumming session, the systolic blood pressures of hypertensive individuals in the middle-aged population showed significant decreases (there were no hypertensive individuals in the young-adult population). Additionally, the young-adult group spent the

session with an average heart rate intensity of 40-55% of estimated maximum while the middle-aged, more experienced population exercised at a higher intensity with an average heart rate intensity of 60-65% of estimated maximum. Overall, djembe drumming was found to qualify as moderate-to-low intensity exercise with direct physical benefits including reduction in systolic blood pressure in hypertensive individuals. Blood lactate levels and heart rate intensity stayed low enough that they were beneficial without being fatiguing. Additionally, the study confirmed the cardiovascular benefits of drumming as well as the psychological benefits of decreased perceived stress and anxiety.

I enjoyed that this study showed the potential of drumming to benefit many individuals and improve overall health even in people who are generally healthy. It is nice to know that there are physical benefits as well as mental benefits from drumming sessions. The fact that drumming qualifies as a moderate-to-low intensity exercise is also beneficial to know. This is especially applicable with the growing rates of metabolic syndrome throughout the world. Changes in diet and exercise are recommended treatments for individuals with metabolic syndrome, but it can be difficult to sustain intense exercise programs long term. Increasing the availability of drumming programs would provide people with an attractive and sustainable way to participate in physical activity.

Drumming has the potential to aid both nonpathological individuals and individuals suffering from specific diseases. An article by Kelsi Carolan (2016) examined the effects of therapeutic drumming on patients suffering from Parkinson's disease (PD). These patients suffer from motor symptoms including a resting tremor, rigidity, bradykinesia, and gait and

balance problems, as well as non-motor symptoms including reduced facial expression, soft speech, and difficulty with pronunciation of words. The non-motor symptoms can often be even more debilitating than the motor symptoms because they interfere with the individual's ability to communicate with other people. In addition to the aforementioned symptoms, many PD patients also suffer from psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

Drumming is an effective way to combat many of the symptoms affecting individuals with PD. Physical activity has been used as a protective factor to help improve patient's gait and mobility and drumming allows the patients to engage in physical activity while remaining accessible enough for patients who have limited mobility. Individuals who participated in a drumming group for people with PD reported that the drumming sessions helped alleviate some of their symptoms including upper body stiffness and tremors while also improving their coordination and hand and finger dexterity. Additionally, many of the patients who participated in the program noted a positive impact on their mood, a sense of community, and an opportunity to have fun and release emotional tension.

There are many aspect of this article that I feel could be generalized to other populations besides those suffering from Parkinson's disease. Like other articles, this study also demonstrated the accessibility of drumming for many populations. Even people who were more limited in their mobility were still able to participate and even found their mobility and dexterity to be increased following the sessions. The accessibility aspect is very beneficial because it allows people who might not normally be able to engage in physical activity the chance to participate. Anecdotal data from the study also demonstrated to me that the

sessions allowed participants to get out of it what they most needed. For example, one participant reported that she valued the community she found in the classes but did not like the idea of 'drumming out her feelings' while a different participant stated that he love the emotional component and wanted more opportunities through the class to express himself emotionally. I appreciate the concept of giving people tools that can conform to their individual needs. One person may need to use drumming as a platform for self-expression while another might use it as a space to foster their sense of community and a third might just look forward to the physical benefits.

Conclusion

Overall, review of these studies gives great insight into the many benefits and potential uses for therapeutic drumming. A main theme discussed throughout almost every article is the accessibility of drumming to many populations including healthy individuals, those with physical illnesses, people with psychological illness, and others. Drumming is an activity that can be taught to those with no prior experience in just a few minutes, but is a skill that can continue to be honed for many years. This opens up the activity to individuals of any level of experience and acts as a way to facilitate teaching, learning, and bonding between individuals of varying skill levels. Additionally, drumming is accessible in a physical sense. Able bodied people with complete mobility can perform right alongside those with more limited mobility and dexterity and together they can come together to create beautiful music.

Another main achievement of many of the studies was the creation of a sense of community. Many forms of drumming require the rhythms of many different drummers to create a complete song. To do this effectively requires lots of communication and cooperation between all participants and much of this communication is completed non-verbally. This requires the drum circle members to be extra aware of both their actions and the actions of their fellow drummers thus encouraging interpersonal communication. The goal of being able to perform a song as a group leads to a sense of common purpose within all of the group members. Additionally, when people are new to drumming it allows all members of the sessions to form a collective bond in the fact that they all acquired a new skill. This serves as an

effective way to boost both group morale and self-confidence and fosters a sense of accomplishment throughout the group.

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