

DRUMMING FOR ADDICTION

By
Stephen Dolle

Group drumming has found widespread utility in health & wellness as integrative medicine in recent years. One of the more specialized applications has been in the treatment of addiction disorders, where favorable results have been observed and reported. The most widely recognized study is the 2003 paper, "Complementary Therapy for Addiction: Drumming out Drugs," by Michael Winkelman, PhD, MPH. This study reported favorable results among four (4) separate addiction treatment programs, also citing a number of Shamanic practices. I have facilitated and written about drumming for neurological disorders for 5-10 years, but only have limited experience in drumming for addiction. I had the opportunity to put on a drum circle for New Directions for Women clients (patients) on June 17, 2011. The main benefit reported by this group was "expression of repressed feelings." I view the benefits of drumming for addiction in four (4) categories: syncing of low/high brain function, team-building & community, sensory pleasure thru sound vibration, and expression of repressed feelings. I believe these specific benefits can be attained thru structured drum circles and group drumming exercises.

Structure & Methods: Group drumming, or drum circles, have been in use for many years and involve group play of hand drums and hand percussion instruments from around the world. A circle employs about 2/3 drums and 1/3 assorted percussion. In an organized drum circle, such as drumming for addiction, the clinical staff and *facilitator* determine the structure and happenings of the drum circle with a desired outcome in mind. Assignment of the instruments is random at times, and deliberate at other times. One must be mindful of the desired roles of the participants/instruments, i.e. bass drums lead and experience is necessary. Below, I elaborate on the four (4) benefits of drumming for addiction.

1. Syncing of low/high brain function: Exercise and physical movement is widely known to relax the brain, balance & entrain the body/mind, and stimulate the release of dopamine mimicking neurotransmitters. This generally heightens brain function, improves control over one's thoughts, and boosts one's state of happiness and optimism. But rhythmic movement, such as drumming and dance in particular, offers a more dramatic response than simple exercise as I can attest to from my work with brain-wave entrainment. I routinely employ a drumming rhythm method of brain-wave entrainment.

On a neurosciences level, Winkelman et. al. reported, "Drumming and rhythmic auditory stimulation impose a driving pattern on the brain, particularly in the theta (3-6 Hz) and alpha (6-8 Hz) brain wave ranges. Synchronized patterns in these frequency ranges typify altered states of consciousness and meditation activities. These slower wave discharges produce strongly coherent brain-wave patterns that synchronize the frontal areas of the brain with ascending discharges, integrating non-verbal information from lower brain structures into the frontal cortex and producing insight."

The drumming method I employ for this type of entrainment involves the play of slow walking rhythms on the dun dun or tan tan bass drums, with participants playing the counterparts on djembes, bells, shakers, and sound shapes. It is critical that the facilitator stay in constant observance of the participants to assure entrainment, and that he/she modulate the bass beat accordingly to maintain the desired entrainment. When you wish to increase the brain-wave pattern, merely raise the tempo of the beat. This is typically about a 10 minute exercise.

2. Team-building & community: The methods and format made possible thru group drumming make it excellent for team-building, targeted objectives, and sustaining the connectedness needed to motivate populations and communities. Music is an excellent means to organize a call to action. But, one must be

“engaged.” By playing an instrument, participants become “engaged” in the group activity and resulting objectives. Participants become open to suggestion, role-playing, leadership, and taking responsibility without realizing/resisting doing it. This builds trust in others, and confidence in oneself. Churches today are also exploring drumming as a means of team-building and ministering in their communities.

The drumming methods I employ here is to encourage participants to play any instrument they choose, to take initiative with rhythms, play off audible, visual, and energy cues of each other, and trust their instincts and creativity. It is normal for people *not* to trust themselves and to wait for instruction. It’s a good idea for the facilitator to start a rhythm that will sustain a long jam, or if a participant throws out a good beat, get the group to go with it. The facilitator’s job is to help participants rediscover their movements and confidence by keep the group rhythm going. His/her musical and coaching expertise can be invaluable. Finally, sculpting the drum circle with call and response, rumbling, and stop/cut/start endings, can really heighten the team effect and resulting group benefits.

3. Sensory pleasure thru sound vibration: Where rhythmic patterns were critical in syncing of brain-wave activity, the vibration of the instruments induces a “sensory” response like in EMDR therapy. The effect is greater for those who play as he/she can modulate the rhythm of the play to the vibration they seek and need. The vibrations heighten one’s feelings of relaxation, pleasure, happiness, healing, spiritual journeying, and mood, mimicking the effects of dopamine transmitters in the brain. This can also aid in communicating with one’s inner child, and facilitates other movement and breath work.

The drumming methods I employ here begins with organized beats, typically a 4/4 time structure to entrain the group that can take 5 to 10 minutes. This gives the facilitator the option to either phase in another rhythm, or allow the group to continue on its own. As a general rule, with the *inertia rule*, it is often easier to keep a good rhythm and vibration going, than to stop and start a rhythm anew. The more attentive and experienced the group, the more likely they are to entrain to more complex rhythms.

4. Expression of repressed feelings: This benefit, while it seems the least scientific by explanation, may well be the no. 1 benefit for drumming for addiction. Its effectiveness is thru non-verbal communication, or speaking with the body and body language. It was the first language of our ancestors for thousands of years, and was the first language we learned as very young children. When things get complicated, this is the language we *trust*. In addiction disorders, there is considerable guilt and shame for the disorder, and a need to “let go.” Perhaps more than anything, drumming for addiction is about letting go. Letting it all out, with your hands, with your bodies, playing and expressing what you cannot say in words.

The drumming method I employ here is to encourage participants to play whatever they choose, including, not even playing at all. If there are no good rhythms from the group, the facilitator should start one that the group can continue on its own. You want participants to take ownership of their rhythm conversation, so the facilitator should play a smaller instrument just to keep time or flavor. But it has no start. And it has no end. It is whatever the group chooses to do. The facilitator can sculpt as needed to enhance participation, such as call and response or rumbling.

About Stephen Dolle: Stephen is a drum circle facilitator, musician, speaker, and neuroscience researcher covering music, cognition, sensory integration, neurological devices, and assistive cognitive technology. He is past founder of two medical companies, and a coach on 20 little league soccer & baseball teams. He is also a brain injury survivor and expert/inventor with CNS shunt devices.

References: Winkelman, M. Complementary Therapy for Addiction: Drumming out Drugs. Am Journal Pub Health April 2003 647-651

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