Drumming for Wellness

by Jennifer and Jim Kinney

"We seldom hear the inner music, but we're all dancing to it nevertheless." Rumi

We are deeply rhythmical beings, from our heart beat to brain waves to circadian (sleep/wake) rhythms, to metabolism, to cellular activity. These connect us with earthly and cosmic cycles - the tides, the moon phases, changing seasons, and movement of the stars. Wherever there is life, we find rhythms. So it is natural that rhythm appeals directly to our soul and our emotional life.

Reinhard Flatischler, author of *The Forgotten Power of Rhythm,* says, "Every disease is a failure of rhythm, in one form or another." With the stresses of everyday living, it is easy to lose touch with the natural rhythms of our bodies, become imbalanced, and fall into dis-ease. How can we re-establish this connection with our natural selves?

Scientific research into resonating systems and entrainment has shown that our internal rhythms such as heart beat and brainwaves may synchronize to external pulses, such as drumming. Drumming has been shown to alter brainwaves, inducing alpha waves --associated with relaxation, and theta waves -- associated with intuitive or pre-conscious dynamics, nonlinear creativity and enhanced learning.

Indigenous cultures use drumming as a way to enter the realm of the sacred through altering the state of consciousness. Drummers experience a rush of energy from the vibrations, with physical stimulation producing emotional release. These response can cause changes in mood, arousal, and attention. Further, clinical research has demonstrated improved immunological parameters induced through drumming.

Drumming for wellness can be done solo or in a group. The easiest type of drum to use is a Native American hoop drum, played with a beater or hand. A drumming meditation, played with eyes closed, can painlessly "empty the mind", while creating brain wave patterns that can synchronize higher and lower brain functions, and balance left and right brain hemispheres.

Shamanic drumming uses a single, repetitive rhythm played at a tempo of three to four beats per second to induce a trance state. Although sounding quite basic, the many tones, pitches, and harmonics of the drum creates a soundscape which interacts

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with the natural world. This connection supports the shaman on his or her healing journey.

Feeling the resonance of the beat off the drum contributes to altering the state of consciousness. Indigenous people believe that the spirit of the animal that gave its skin to the drum, and the tree that contributed the wood, live on through the drum. Drums are considered sacred instruments, that connect the player with deeper rhythms of nature and life.

The African djembe, featured in the movie, “The Visitor,” offers a wider range of expression for the hand drummer than the hoop drum. The low beats or bass beats are deeply grounding, the mid-range or tone beats resonate with the heart, and the high or slap beats activate higher chakras.

A good exercise for drumming to reduce stress is to begin with a simple repetitive beat, and then allow the rhythm to change in a way that expresses one’s feelings. The physical act of “playing feelings” can release repressed emotions and help the drummer to become centered and balanced.

Drumming with others in a drum circle offers additional benefits of interpersonal connection and support. Robert Friedman, a psychologist who promotes drumming as therapy, describes this as, "Everyone is speaking, everyone is heard, and each person's sound is an essential part of the whole."

In *The Healing Power of the Drum,* Friedman suggests creating a family drum circle, where each person can take turns expressing their feelings through the drum. Another exercise is to have one person play a beat, which is then repeated by the other members of the circle. Everyone takes a turn being the leader. This call-and-response activity reduces tensions and creates a form of active listening and supportive communication.

In our experience, many people come to a drum circle with fears and doubts about their abilities to drum. Inevitably, these individuals are successful within the circle, and they leave with a great sense of accomplishment and increased self-esteem. Drummers often comment on how participating in the drum circle shifted them from feelings of anger, frustration or resignation to a sense of being relaxed and at peace.

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Drum circles can play specific rhythms, such as the 5-element drumming of the West African Dagara Tribe, or play what we call, “creative drumming.” Creative drumming starts with a simple heartbeat rhythm. From that, each person improvises until they find their own beat. The first one or two minutes descends into chaos, out of which a group rhythm emerges. The ultimate result is a tremendous feeling of co-creation and unity.

Fundamentally, drumming is upbeat and fun. It stimulates pleasurable feelings, making people feel good without drugs. In fact, drumming produces a “natural high” that has been found effective as a complementary treatment in addiction therapy. Other therapists have found that drumming offers benefits to Alzheimer's patients, autistic children, emotionally-disturbed teens, and trauma (PTSD) patients. Certain corporations use drumming for team building and in stress-reduction programs.

Drumming is an ancient, universal approach to healing. In drumming for wellness, the ultimate point is to let go of the analytical mind, allowing the rhythm to sink below the surface of our being. There, the beat can be experienced and integrated by the body and the deepest layers of our consciousness. The rhythm of the drum becomes our rhythm, aligning our mind, body and spirit, and bringing us back into balance with life.

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About the authors: Jim Kinney and Jennifer Kinney, M.A. are cofounders of the Santa Fe Harmony Center, which offers healing and transformation through energy medicine, drum circles, music, & experiential workshop and retreats. More information along with downloads of drumbeat rhythms and native flute music are available on their website at www.santafeharmonycenter.com.

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