

The Healing Power of the Drum - Part I

by Robert Lawrence Friedman

The following excerpts are from "The Healing Power of the Drum", by Robert Lawrence Friedman, published by White Cliffs Media, Inc., October 2000.

In *The Healing Power of the Drum*, psychotherapist and drum facilitator Robert Lawrence Friedman weaves an tapestry of personal experience, fascinating anecdotes and compelling research, demonstrating the hand drum's capacity to provide significant health benefits for everyone. This breakthrough book examines the use of hand drums in treating at-risk adolescents, stressed-out employees, Vietnam veterans, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, and more.

Following are excerpts from my book:

The hand drum has been used for thousands of years in celebrations, rituals and ceremonies. However, the merging of science with the healing qualities of the hand drum is a relatively new development.

Psychological and Physiological Applications

Some of the psychological applications in which hand drums are being used include assisting veterans to release the emotional pain of post-traumatic stress disorder, releasing the pent-up anger and negative emotions of "at-risk" adolescents, and promoting health in corporate executives through releasing their day-to-day stress, in addition to many other applications.

In the medical field, the hand drum is being used to help Alzheimer's patients improve their short-term memory and increase social interaction and to help autistic children increase their attention spans. In some cases, it is not necessarily the hand drum that provides positive changes in an individual, but a rhythmic device such as a metronome or an audiotape which plays specific rhythms. Such tools are being used to aid Parkinson's patients and stroke victims to regain the control of movement or increase their gaits.

As a drum facilitator and psychotherapist, I have personally witnessed the power of the drum to relax the tense, energize the tired, and heal the emotionally wounded. I have also observed the hand drum's extraordinary and consistent ability to create states of euphoria, induce light trance, promote play, release anger and promote feelings of community and unity.

My hope is that through examining the breadth of work that is available we can realize that the application of rhythm and its ability to heal the body, mind and soul is boundless. Yet much more research is necessary to confirm what many have experienced and studied already-that rhythm in relationship to the body and mind has many benefits-an idea that our society is just beginning to grasp.

In this century, when we seem to be moving farther and farther away from ourselves and our deeper needs, the drum, through its simplicity, effortlessness and naturalism, offers us a link back to that which we knew before technology separated us from our soul.

Through providing a channel back to our deeper nature, the drum concurrently provides those who use it with a link to others. The drum seems to have the capacity to unite all individuals who choose to experience it together. Despite race, religion, color, creed, background, or ideology, all are joined together through this ancient instrument's calling. The drum, therefore, becomes a vehicle for transporting all who utilize it, across all boundaries, to an experience of wholeness and community.

Alzheimer's Disease

As our life spans become longer and longer, mental problems such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia become more common. Many people with these diseases eventually require institutional care. Nursing homes are required to provide activities for residents which enhance the quality of their lives. Playing drums has been found to be the ideal activity for people with diminished physical and mental capacities.

Researchers have found that because rhythm is so intrinsic to our nature, Alzheimer's patients, even in the latter stages of the disease, can copy simple rhythms played on a drum. This form of interaction takes on great significance when all other forms of communication have been diminished. Drumming seems to focus Alzheimer's patients for a short time, and they seem momentarily coherent. These interludes, however brief, are priceless to loved ones.

Drumming and Stress Management

Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath...It believes that everything is an emergency. Nothing is that important. -Natalie Goldberg

How does the drum help to relieve stress? There are numerous ways this occurs. When people drum, they are generally having fun. It is difficult to be in a playful mode and be stressed at the same time. Also, as described previously, the drum has the capacity to release negative feelings-of which stress is clearly one. When one hits the drum, he or she is placed squarely in the here and now. Some of our stress is created from past or future thoughts of fear, worry, or regret, but it is very difficult to be stressed and be in the present moment.

Drumming increases our Alpha brainwaves, those brainwaves associated with feelings of well-being and euphoria.

In a recent interview, Dr. Barry Quinn, a licensed clinical psychologist, described his results of working with drumming to increase the Alpha brainwaves of his hypervigilant (highly stressed) patients.

"What I've found in my clinical work over the past 11 years is that at least 20% of the population does not have Alpha brainwaves. Alpha waves occur when the brain relaxes lightly into an 8 to 12 cycles per second brainwave pattern. Most individuals should be producing this brainwave pattern when they close their eyes and relax their mind. In a thirty minute ideal Transcendental Meditation the brain spends approximately 20 minutes in an Alpha state and 10 minutes in the deeper Theta (4-8 cps) mental state.

"There are benefits associated with Alpha waves, such as the ability to relax and keep the mind on idle when it is not focusing on a specific task. Alpha is associated with a general feeling of well-being and euphoria. Individuals who have very high amplitude of Alpha brainwaves have been found to be able to experience more "lucid dreams." People with lower than normal amounts of Alpha or no Alpha have much more mental stress than other people.

"There is also a category of people who don't have any Alpha waves and also have low amplitude brainwave activity across all bands. I see this in about 30-40% of the patients I treat. Neurologically, we refer to these people as hypervigilant. The definition of hypervigilance is someone who cannot turn off his or her mental activity for any length of time. They must always be thinking or focusing on something. They tend not to be able to let go of emotional issues but rather obsess relentlessly about them. Many with this brain pattern become alcoholics and highly addicted in a way that makes stopping drinking very difficult for them. It's very hard for them to relax and unwind. Therefore, they generally have a lot of sleep disorders as well. Anything that would increase their Alpha waves would be very beneficial to them.

"In pain patients, the amount of Alpha brainwaves a patient has is also an indicator of how well the patient is managing his or her pain. If patients are not managing their pain well, or are over-focused on it, they will lose Alpha waves. On the other hand, if a pain patient is having a good day, the Alpha will go back up.

"Until recently, I had never found anything that increased Alpha waves in people that needed most to have more of them, and I am speaking specifically of the hypervigilant population. I tried biofeedback, but it tends only to enhance the theta waves of relaxation and didn't really affect Alpha much at all. I even had some hypervigilant patients who were transcendental meditators, a group which typically has a higher amplitude of Alpha than the general population, but these hypervigilant meditators had low to non-existent Alpha.

"It was suggested to me that I do some research with drums and Alpha waves. What first came to my mind were my hypervigilant patients. Not expecting anything really, I went ahead and took four or five people and did an experiment wherein I got an Alpha wave baseline from them, which was, of course, typically low (below 10 MV) and had them drum for half an hour. The instructions I gave them were to drum a soft slow heartbeat type of rhythm. Not everyone followed the instructions. A couple did some emotional expressive drumming, and one or two might have had too much pain or felt pain from holding the drum due to fibromyalgia, but I found that 50% of the ones I tested got a normal Alpha wave pattern after thirty minutes of drumming, which means that their Alpha waves doubled. They went from 10 microvolts average to 20 microvolts just in the course of one drumming session.

"One of the participants was a friend of mine. I had done 15 neurofeedback sessions with him and gotten him i waves but had never been able to get any Alpha waves from him. The drumming was the first and only thing tl him to produce Alpha waves. I was quite impressed. I was also impressed by the fact that the Alpha waves occ these hypervigilant, high stressed people after only 20-30 minutes. It wasn't after five sessions. It was immedi the first drumming session."

Robert Lawrence Friedman, MA, Remo artist, is author of "The Healing Power of the Drum", psychotherapist, president of Stress Solutions, Inc www.stress-solutions.com. He has appeared on The Today Show in New York, Fox News and most recently on the Class of '75, a Discovery Health channel series, sharing his philosophy of drumming and wellness. The Healing Power of the Drum can be purchased at <http://www.wc-media.com>, www.amazon.com and www.bn.com.

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Drumming and Parkinson's Disease

Dr. Connie Tomaino, DA, MT-BC, shares some of her work with Parkinson's patients and rhythm.

"I once worked with a young person with Parkinson's disease who had trouble initiating movement. I explored different rhythm patterns with him. We then made a cassette of different kinds of African drumming that he seemed to find very stimulating and helped him get moving. Anytime he had to walk across a street, whereas in the past he may freeze, he would put on his headphones and listen to African rhythms to get to the other side without freezing in the middle of rush hour traffic. We know that rhythmic cueing works because we have seen it clinically. The underlying mechanisms of how it works is what we are trying to understand better. Freezing in Parkinson's disease is when the person can't initiate movement and literally stops in his or her place. No matter how much he or she tries, he or she can't move. It seems as if the person's will has been removed. Even though the anticipation and desire is there, the patient's body doesn't respond to the signal.

"A man who was in our short-term rehabilitation program had a stroke, and he had a left side hemiparesis which means he wasn't paralyzed, but he did lose sensation in the left side of the body. He was in our physical rehabilitation program and was going to be discharged to the community, but he was still shuffling his left leg and literally dragging it. His physical therapist felt he wouldn't be safe walking outside without supervision. The optimal goal for him was to walk independently with a cane. They asked me if there was something we could recommend with music to help him feel his body so he could sway and lift his left side to get a sensation of lifting the leg even though he had limited feeling. I asked his physical therapist to measure his safe walking speed which was the same rhythm as one of Nat King Cole's songs, "Walking My Baby Back Home." I asked him a couple of times a week to walk comfortably to the song, but what he did was interesting. Instead of just walking to it, he did shuffle steps, moving backwards and forwards, almost as if he were dancing.

"He said he felt like, in listening to the music, he needed to move more, telling me he hasn't danced since he was a kid. It appeared as if the memory of dancing was still there, and the body wanted to move that way.

"In less than two months he was able to lift his leg on the beat, absolutely coordinated in time. In fact, at the end of two months, he actually got the sensation back again so he could again feel the floor. Some might say this is normal recovery, but our guess is that because he was using his leg differently, activating a muscle memory for dancing, there was indication that there is a different motor schemata in the brain for different muscle activity. When you walk you use one, when you dance you use another since it incorporates tempo. Perhaps that kicked in. This is hypothetical. We know clinically that this ability exists. We are trying to prove it scientifically. In this case, the rhythm was more important than the melody, since it was the rhythm at the tempo at which he could walk that initiated the change. The melody helped him sing the song himself and helped him to self-integrate those rhythms."

Drumming and Paralysis

Arthur Hull, a well-known drum circle facilitator, describes an experience involving a woman who used drumming to regain motor function after she was paralyzed.

"I did a program in Mill Valley in a hospital once, and a lady came up to me and told me this story: She had been involved in an accident that paralyzed her. The doctors gave her almost no hope of regaining any movement in her body from her waist down and told her that she had to acknowledge this limitation and live with it. She decided not to. She had upper body movement, and she started playing doumbeks, talking drums and bongos. Because she was a dancer, she didn't think she could live if she couldn't move her legs. She started imagining and moving her body from her prone position, any movement she could manage while she played the drum with her upper torso. She called it "micro muscle movement dancing." Slowly but surely, larger and larger movements occurred to the point that she could wiggle her toes, then move her body, until finally she could sit in a chair and play larger drums. After four years of constant drumming and dancing in this way, she became a dancer again, though now she is a drumming dancer or a dancing drummer depending on her mood. She now has full movement of her body, and she is graceful and beautiful."

The Drum-So Powerful, Yet So Simple

I can honestly say that I never bring drums and people together without several people coming up to me afterwards, expressing wonder, excitement, and even euphoria. The credit belongs to the drum, the magical, sacred drum, which has the extraordinary power to touch something deep and powerful within all. It awakens an aspect of ourselves that lies dormant until it hears an ancient calling through the rhythms of this healing vehicle. These sounds awaken our spirits and speak to our most primal and truest selves.

The drum touches that part of us that knows nothing of cell phones, faxes and deadlines. This part of us to which the drum speaks knows only inner peace, self-expression, and that which is our very basic life force. Drumming creates an island in time, where all else is shut out except the rhythms that issue forth from your fingertips at your pace, expressing your feelings at that present moment. Is it any wonder our souls hunger for it? The only wonder is that a need so vital could be supplied by a vehicle so simple-the drum.

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