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Insync

## Drumming Up Good Health

By Diane Cole

Robin McMurray was physically exhausted, emotionally drained, and downright frustrated. There was almost nothing she could do on her own. While she had beaten chronic myeloid leukemia, the treatments left her weak and tired.

"I went from being an active, capable person to someone who needed a wheelchair just to move from my bed to the bathroom," recalls the 37-year-old English teacher from San Pedro, California. "I was taking 30 different medications" she says, "and suffering from the fog of 'chemo brain.' Emotionally, I was going through much more than I realized." Yoga and other exercises that had helped McMurray relax in the past were now too taxing.

Then she noticed that the Wellness Community in nearby Redondo Beach was offering something she hadn't tried before: a drum circle. "It sounded interesting," says McMurray. "I was open to anything that might be helpful, especially something that clearly wasn't going to be harmful."

At the start of the first session, McMurray's hands trembled so badly (a side effect of her medications) she couldn't even coordinate the use of a drumstick or mallet. But she quickly realized she didn't need a stick to make a sound on the small drum she held. She just needed her hand. It made no difference whether her hand was graceful or awkward, weak or strong; she just banged the drum, and sounds emerged.

Soon, McMurray found herself using her fingers and palm to slap, tap, and beat along to the rhythm of the group around her. Before long, she was completely immersed in the vibrant, pulsing rhythms produced by the 30 other cancer patients drumming that night.

### What Studies Show

Professional drummer and trained drum circle facilitator Steven Angel led the group McMurray joined. (Angel used to play with rock legend Jimi Hendrix.) As they drum, he instructs his groups in visualization, meditation, and breathing exercises. He asks people to imagine that the drum they are beating is the object of their anger. For many, it's the cancer itself. The result, says Angel, is cathartic.

McMurray says she felt her emotions "get shaken loose inside. It's a primal release that feels cleansing and spiritually uplifting," she says. "It's sensory. You're hearing it and feeling it at a more basic level than talk therapy or counseling."

And now, a new study suggests that drumming all those feelings up and out may improve patients'

health. "By no means are we claiming to cure cancer," says neurologist Barry Bittman, MD, who led the study as medical director of the Mind-Body Wellness Center in Meadville, Pennsylvania. "But we are showing that drumming has remarkable benefits. It helps people cope by providing support and community. At the same time, there are biological benefits we're learning more about as time goes on."

### Drumbeat of Life

"Drums connects us to the heartbeat of the earth and our own heartbeat," says psychotherapist Lora Matz, who works as a healing coach at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis. "You can lose yourself in the sound and the rhythm of the drum beat, and that can open something ancient within us."

Professional musicians often get a kind of natural high through their playing, something non-musicians seldom do. "But drums are musician-proof, because you don't have to be a musician to play. You just start beating," says Barbara Reuer, PhD, a San Diego music therapist. "Drumming provides an opportunity to get that same kind of emotional and physical experience without any prior training."

It's the state of mind known as "flow," says Dr. Reuer. When musicians, and amateur drummers, find themselves in flow, especially at a slower, steady beat, they can shift into a rhythm of deep relaxation and expanded awareness. These "altered" states, she says, release the flow of endorphins—"feel-good" chemicals that can help improve, if even for a short time, your quality of life.

Stress levels, as measured by a drop in the stress hormone cortisol, fell in all 111 participants. Perhaps this was simply the predictable result of relaxation. But only one group experienced a boost in "natural killer" cells—an immune system response to cancer cells and viruses. That was the group practicing what Dr. Bittman calls composite drumming—sessions that include guided imagery and visualization—the same type of drumming Robin McMurray took part in.

So far, Dr. Bittman's study is the only one to address the subject of drumming and cells that fight cancer. Music therapists and doctors agree that more research is needed. "But this is a great first step, because further investigation can help us confirm the large anecdotal evidence that drumming helps," says music therapist Barbara Reuer, PhD. Dr. Reuer often uses drums and drum circles in her work with cancer patients throughout the Scripps Health Care System in San Diego. (She also served as past president of the American Music Therapy Association.) One important benefit of drumming, she says, is pain relief. Some scientists believe that the drum's vibrations—and the diversion that music making provides—can interrupt the pain cycle—at least for a short time.

At Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, music therapist Rachel Jacobson uses drums to help patients control nausea, reduce stress and pain, and sometimes as a form of exercise to improve upper body strength. Drum circles, she says, are great mood-boosters and community builders. "In the circles, the patients have a lot of fun. They laugh. A lot of supportive relationships develop."

Indeed, drumming allows patients and their families to take their minds off illness and enjoy themselves, says Dr. Bittman. "That's so important for those facing chronic illness." Bringing the patient's family into the circle can also help ease tensions, Jacobson says. "Family members may feel useless or helpless, not knowing what to say or do. And drumming is a good way to have a non-verbal exchange."

To find out how drumming might help patients, Dr. Bittman and his collaborators from the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in California tested the blood chemistry of 111 healthy men and women. The participants were divided into several groups. Two control groups either listened passively to music, or simply sat and read. Four groups of active drummers each practiced different drumming styles.

Dr. Bittman, began his research with the hypothesis that drumming could reverse stress. Listening to music—a mostly passive activity—in and of itself reduces stress, he says. But his study suggests that actual music-making combined with visualization can offer additional benefits.

"We know stress takes a toll on the immune system," says Ann Webster, PhD. Dr. Webster is director of the Mind-Body Cancer Program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. "When you're under stress blood levels of stress hormones go up, and your body is no longer able to make killer cells and other cells of the immune system in the amounts it normally would. And that can lead to disease progression. Reducing stress is very restorative. It gets the system back into balance."

## The Circle Widens

While most drum circles are offered as part of a support group or wellness program, hospitalized patients recovering from longer-term treatment take part as well.

At Duke, music therapist Jacobson has brought drums to the patients instead of the other way around. "There have been times when a patient couldn't get out of his room, so we've had people pile in like a slumber party, and just start the drum circle right there," she says.

Inviting hospital staff members—including nurses, doctors and surgeons—to join the circle can help break down "the invisible wall" between patients and staff, says Jacobson. "After a doctor comes in and acts silly, banging on a drum, he seems much more approachable."

Because cancer patients on chemo can have weakened immune systems, the instruments are sterilized after each use. Before playing the drums, Jacobson says she always asks permission from the patient's visiting family members. Often, she says, they join right in.

Some people are reluctant at first to play the drum. They worry about not being musical or rhythmic. But music therapist Christine Stevens, who has been leading drum groups in Valencia, California, for 8 years, says it usually doesn't take long for them to get over their shyness.

"The drum is an accessible, easy-to-use instrument," she says. "And rhythm is as automatic as your lungs breathing or your heart beating." Stevens is director of music therapy and wellness programs at Remo Drum Company, which sponsored Dr. Bittman's research. In drumming circles she runs, each participant chooses his or her own drum—ranging from small tambourines to large congas. Stevens explains how to beat a drum, or hold a mallet. Then she asks each drummer to sound out the rhythm of their name on the drum. Others echo the name back.

You need not join a group to enjoy drumming. After Robin McMurray took part in a drum circle with Steven Angel, she bought an inexpensive hand drum that she and her husband play at home, every week or even a couple of times a day, depending on their mood. McMurray and her husband follow Angel's methods. Duke's Rachel Jacobson and Dr. Reuer also report that their drum circle participants often ask where they can buy drums.

### For More Information

**American Music Association**  
301-589-3300  
[www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org)

**Mind-Body Wellness Center**  
814-724-1765  
[www.mind-body.org](http://www.mind-body.org)

**Remo Drums Health Rhythms**  
661-294-5600  
[www.remo.com](http://www.remo.com)

"One goal of the drum circle is for people to come out more skilled in using music as a coping skill for stress reduction," says Jacobson.

People who take part in drumming sessions are almost always excited by the experience. "It made me laugh and open up. Now I don't feel so nervous all the time," one drummer told Dr. Reuer. Another said to her, "It lifted my spirits above and beyond what I thought possible." And this: "I feel happy now—stronger and ready to fight and go on."

If you feel like drumming up some good health, the circle is open.

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## Biofeedback Indicates Drumming Relieves Stress

Drumming has been used for centuries by the world's indigenous peoples, who have always drummed in ceremony at weddings, births, deaths, harvests, and rites of passage. In recent years, major articles describing the healing effects of this ancient practice have appeared in newspapers and magazines such as the New York Times, The Yoga Journal and Newsweek.

These and other articles have reported results of studies demonstrating the calming, focusing effect of group drumming sessions upon Alzheimer's patients, emotionally disturbed teens, autistic children and prison and homeless populations. Major corporations such as Motorola, AT&T and Levi Strauss have used drumming with middle management to promote team spirit building.

A recent cover of Newsweek, entitled "Your Child's Brain", presented hard evidence for the brain's fundamental need for rhythm. The article described the stress produced when the brain is deprived of this basic need. The effect of stress upon the human system has now been incontrovertibly established: stress contributes to all disease and is a primary cause of a myriad of life-threatening illnesses, such as heart attacks, strokes, immune system breakdowns, etc. Many people in alternative medicine believe that stress is a result of psychic fragmentation, literally of being disconnected from our deeper selves.

A new study by Barry Quinn, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in neurobiofeedback for stress management, indicates that drumming for brief periods can actually change a person's brainwave patterns, dramatically reducing stress. Dr. Quinn operates a neurobiofeedback (NBT) clinic called the MindSpa Place in Colorado Springs, CO, and for more than eight years has been working with how a variety of techniques affect the brainwaves. He calls the results of 30 to 40 minutes of drumming on the highest-stress clients "by far the most amazing results I have encountered thus far in my research".

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One of Dr. Quinn's patients, a Viet Nam veteran who has long suffered from high stress, hyper-vigilance and chronic sleep problems, regularly produced almost no Alpha in his brainwave patterns. (Alpha is a mental relaxation state missing in nearly 40% of the population) During a single 40-minute session of slow, gentle drumming using a one-sided All One Tribe® hand drum and a beater, this patient nearly doubled his Alpha brainwaves.

No other technique used (including a light and sound machine) in a series of 15 stress-reduction sessions had been able to produce any Alpha in this client. Until drumming, in fact, no technique used in the eight years of Dr. Quinn's NBT research had been able to bring a significant return of this relaxation brainwave in any client.

Music therapist, Barry Bernstein, whose use of the drum with Alzheimer's patients and in corporate settings has been widely publicized, believes strongly that drumming is "the healthiest, most accessible and fastest way to reconnect with ourselves. Bernstein's Kansas City-based company, "Healthy Sounds", offers a variety of programs for schools, care centers and corporations, all using the drum as a tool.

The research into the healing effects of this ancient practice are ongoing. For some, the concept that the wisdom of the indigenous world might offer relief from the most pervasive and pernicious result of late twentieth-century "prog-ress" is a fitting prospect just now, in what the United Nations has declared the "International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

*For more information, contact the All One Tribe Foundation, P.O. Drawer N, Taos, NM 87571, or call (800) 442-DRUM.*

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