

Drumming as Alternative Therapy for Addictions

(Below is an excerpt from a research study conducted at Arizona State University)

Physiological Effects of Drumming

Drumming produces a variety of physical and psychological effects. A recent popular book on drumming reviews research suggesting the positive effects of drumming in the treatment of a wide range of physical conditions, mental illness, and personality disorders. Drumming enhances hypnotic susceptibility, increases relaxation, and induces shamanic experiences. Drumming and other rhythmic auditory stimulation impose a driving pattern on the brain, particularly in the theta and alpha ranges. The enhanced θ - and α -wave entrainment produced by drumming typifies general physiological effects of altered states of consciousness and meditation. ASCs involve a mode of consciousness, a normal brain response reflected in synchronized brain-wave patterns in the theta (3–6 cycles per second [cps]) and alpha (6–8 cps) ranges. This response is produced by activation of the limbic brain's serotonergic circuits to the lower brain. These slow-wave discharges produce strongly coherent brain-wave patterns that synchronize the frontal areas of the brain with ascending discharges, integrating nonverbal information from lower brain structures into the frontal cortex and producing insight.

Physiological changes associated with ASC facilitate healing and psychological and physiological well-being through physiological relaxation; facilitating self-regulation of physiological processes; reducing tension, anxiety, and phobic reactions; manipulating psychosomatic effects; accessing unconscious information in visual symbolism and analogical representations; inducing inter-hemispheric fusion and synchronization; and facilitating cognitive–emotional integration and social bonding and affiliation.

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Conclusions

Drumming produces physiological, psychological, and social stimulation that enhances recovery processes. Drumming induces relaxation and produces natural pleasurable experiences, enhanced awareness of preconscious dynamics, a release of emotional trauma, and reintegration of self. Drumming addresses self-centeredness, isolation, and alienation, creating a sense of connectedness with self and others. Drumming provides a secular approach to accessing a higher power and applying spiritual perspectives to the psychological and emotional dynamics of addiction. Drumming circles have important roles as complementary addiction therapy, particularly for repeated relapse and when other counseling modalities have failed.

Drumming circles and other shamanic altered state of consciousness activities can address multiple needs of addicted populations. These include:

- Physiological dynamics, inducing the relaxation response and restoring balance in the opioid and serotonergic neurotransmitter systems
- Psychodynamic needs for self-awareness and insight, emotional healing, and psychological integration
- Spiritual needs for contact with a higher power and spiritual experiences

- Social needs for connectedness with others and interpersonal support

Drumming may reduce addiction by providing natural alterations of consciousness. Shamanic drumming directly supports the introduction of spiritual factors found significant in recovery from substance abuse. Because recidivism is widespread, treatment success may mirror the natural recovery rate, and current methods have little success, the use of drumming and other altered states of consciousness as complementary therapies with considerable promise is justified.

Drumming groups may also aid recovery by enhancing health through their effects on social support and social networks. The health implications of social support have been increasingly recognized. These forms of support are of considerable significance for well-being in an increasingly atomized society in which traditional family- and community-based systems of support have become seriously eroded. Thus, deliberate enhancement of social support is a potentially significant contributor to physical, emotional, and mental health. The social support available from community drumming circles is one such source. These social effects are not merely palliative but constitute mechanisms for producing psychobiological effects. Central to these effects is an amelioration of the stress response, a significant factor in drug use and recidivism.

The use of drumming as part of substance abuse rehabilitation is far more widespread than the few cases reviewed here might suggest. Incorporation of drumming within Native American treatment programs has been repeatedly mentioned to me. A recent book reviewing the scope of research on the effects of drumming reports on programs in New York and California in which drumming is incorporated into addictions treatment.⁵ The Foundation for Shamanic Studies has several decades of experience in applying shamanic altered state of consciousness in both training and therapy. They have identified a variety of contexts in which shamanic approaches may be useful in reducing substance abuse.

The physiological effects of drumming and the positive effects of group drumming experiences on recovery that are attested to by counselors who have incorporated these activities into substance abuse rehabilitation programs provide a compelling rationale for the utilization and evaluation of this resource. Winkelman suggests a variety of ways in which the shamanic paradigm and altered states of consciousness can be applied to substance abuse rehabilitation.

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