

Terence Elliott
March 16, 2022
Sound Healing Final Paper

Healing Power of the Djembe Drum

The djembe is recognized in West African communities as a healing drum because of its history as a tool for traditional African healing ceremonies. Drumming in West African culture was used primarily to communicate across far distances. The djembe drum became a mouthpiece for tribal groups to connect and converse from a far. Drumming was used as well for celebrations and as warnings against danger. However, recent research indicates that drumming increases self-esteem and other cognitive skills, which can assist in the treatment of various illnesses.

The origin of the African djembe dates to 500 A.D., from Mali, West Africa. Djembes from Mali are regarded with the highest respect as sacred instruments that create a transformational power and the drum's ability to assist healers in calming the human spirit in times of distress. Drumming provides a way to connect with people without the language and cultural barriers. (Friedman, 2000)

Therapeutic drum rhythm techniques have been used for over thousands of years to create and maintain mental, physical, and spiritual health. Drumming can accelerate physical healing, boosting the immune system and producing feelings of well-being, releasing of emotional trauma, and reintegration of self. Rhythm is a powerful tool that permeates the entire brain. For example, vision is in one part of the brain, speech another, but drumming accesses the whole brain. The drumming sounds can generate dynamic neuronal connections in all parts of the brain even where there is significant damage or impairment.

The drum making process from various African cultures is quite sacred. There are important instructions in gathering the materials for the drum, who has the privilege of preparing the drum, and the behavioral rules that can be displayed around this precious percussion instrument. During the making of the drum, prayers are made to ensure the release of positive energies where the drums are played.

The drums signify the earth in some African cultures. The drums round form represents the universe, and the steady beat, is the heart, throbbing at the center of the universe. The awareness of the beat creates the line between the physical reality and the spiritual world. This sound can stir us up and help people understand the mystery and power of all things (Binns, 2016).

We all are vibrational energies. It is the essence of our existence. Everything in the universe has vibrational energies. So, we all have a rhythmic vibration set to motion. The benefits of drumming are both physical and mental, and come from rhythmic healing. This type

of healing works with the natural law of resonance to restore vibrational integrity on a more holistic level. Drumming can make our physical bodies, brainwaves, and energy channels (such as meridians or chakras) vibrate in response.

The djembe drum is part of a group of instruments called membranophones. Membranophones create sound from the vibration of a membrane, or skin. When the drum is struck the skin reverberates and the shape of the hollow drum acts as amplifier. The sound is projected out of the bottom of the shell. The notes are achieved by striking the drum in different places and with different parts of the hand. There are many other types of African drums, most of which use the principle of a vibrating membrane. The djembe is made of a hollow hardwood body, with skin fastened over the top. The skin is traditionally rawhide, such as goat or cow skin. Modern djembes now often use synthetic skins. The skin is tightly stretched over the shell using metal rings and rope. The tightly stretched skin creates a sound when it is struck. You play it by hitting it with your hands and fingers. (Stain, 2019)

On the djembe there are three basic notes - the bass, tone, and slap. The bass is the lowest pitch, the tone is in the middle register and the slap is the highest pitch. The djembe is easily recognizable and is one of the loudest African drums. The tighter the skin, the louder the drum. Most people find the drum as one of the easiest instruments to play. But the key part of the sound is proper placements for the bass, tone, and slap. And tone being one of the hardest of the three basic notes to make. You must place your hand correctly on the drum for the different sounds or the language you speak on the drum will be muffled and incoherent. So, like any musical instrument it takes the right instructions and skill to make the drum speak. Most West African cultures refer to the djembe as a “talking drum.”

The djembe instrument is a versatile tool in music therapy, djembe drums can create sounds which resonate with all individuals at every developmental stage. The organizing and unique structure of rhythm can produce far-reaching effects on the brain, influencing thinking, perception and learning ability. Non-verbal communication skills such as turn-taking and sharing can bridge the gap towards improving verbal skills, reducing a sense of isolation and encourage positive changes in mood and emotional well-being.

Creative djembe drumming can provide unique and therapeutic opportunities for the release of negative emotions, decreased anxiety and tension, and renewed energy levels. Where an individual plays the drums extremely fast and loud, they may even be able to release pent-up feelings of tension or frustration but within a safe and non-threatening environment. As well as individual work, djembe drums can be utilized in group music therapy sessions. Drum circles can act as powerful facilitators for increased social connection with others, reduced feelings of isolation and improved self-esteem through self-actualization. (Stain, 2019)

I have been playing djembe drums and leading drum circles for over five-years, and thought I knew how to play. However, I started taking lessons from a djembe master drummer at the end of last year and now I am clear that playing the djembe is much harder than I thought and takes a lot of focus, concentration, and practice. Learning to play the djembe correctly bouncing the strokes of the drumhead and syncing rhythms to my heartbeat and emotions is helping me to be a better person and a calming spirit.

Below are 12 of the health benefits you can employ by using the drums in your healing journey.

BODY

Cancer Fighting –

1. A study by Barry Bittman revealed that using specific rhythm protocols help to increase Natural Killer cells in cancer patients. The protocols enhance the immune system, consequently helping patients to better manage symptoms. Having a heightened immune system helps to slow the progression of the disease.

2. Relief from Symptoms of Parkinson's Disease and Strokes-

Research shows that when Parkinson's patients hear slow steady rhythms, they begin to move at a steadier pace as a result. It also helps patients deal with the symptoms of depression often associated with Parkinson's.

3. **Brain Workout-**Drumming synchronizes the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Listening to the music of drums builds new neuronal connections throughout the entire brain. Having more access to your brain and more connections improves your overall cerebral function.

4. Cardio and Strength Training-

The constant tapping of the feet and rapid hand movements helps drummers to build more cardio muscles than non-drummers. It is an excellent way to get some exercise in for those who don't like to work out. People have been able to burn an average of 252 calories per hour drumming.

5. Pain Reduction-

A study at the University of Oxford on the effects of drumming on pain showed how the act of drumming releases endorphins that increase the pain threshold.

MIND

6. Reduction of Stress, Anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-

Drumming is a useful tool for those living with the symptoms of the above-named disorders. Playing the drums helps to boost alpha-waves (supporting a calm and relaxed feeling). It also quiets the flight and fight response, consequently reducing the effects of anxiety and PTSD.

7. **Increased Insight-**When we drum, the frontal and lower parts of our brains synchronize. This

process of synchronization helps to produce feelings of insight, certainty, conviction and understanding. These benefits tend to last for a long time after drumming ceases.

8. Expression and Release of Emotional Issues-

The rhythm released while playing the drums resonates within every cell of the body. This resonance stimulates the release of negative cell memories. As a result, drumming provides a healthy outlet for liberation from trauma.

SPIRIT

9. Puts You in The Moment-

The art of drumming involves timing and coordination, consequently forcing you to be in the here and now. Drumming grounds, you. It gives you a few moments to take a vacation from worrying about the future or lamenting the past.

10. Encourages Self- Expression-

When you play the drums, you can express yourself to the universe and others around you. You can speak to your own spirit. Touch the spirit of others and tap into the spirit of the universe itself in a way that words cannot express.

11. Increases Awareness of the Natural Rhythm That Surrounds us-

Rhythm rules everything around us on a cellular level. Plants, animals, the constellations, even dust has a natural pattern of rhythm it adheres to. The process of drumming connects us to cadence and makes us more aware of the beats that surround us.

12. Connects us to a Higher Power-

The superstring theory states that the quarks (particles that make up protons and electrons) that make up the entire universe are one-dimensional strings that vibrate. The different oscillations of the string produce different sub-atomic particles.

It stands to reason that the process of producing rhythm like that of the drums is a creative process. Not the 'creative' of writing music but creating different states in the body and perhaps the universe itself.

The meditative state that the sound of the drum produces helps us to access a higher perception. If used with mindfulness, it will give a deeper understanding of the enigma of life.

References

- Binns, Francine. *The Vibrational Healing Power of Traditional Drums*. September 30, 2016.
- Freidman, Robert Lawrence. **The Healing Power of the Drum**. September 1, 2000.
- Stain, Abby. *The Top Musical Instruments in Music Therapy*. **Music Therapist**. July 12, 2019
- White Dear of Autumn. **Spirit Drumming: A guide to the healing power of rhythm**. May 2, 2017.