

Drum therapy finds a new rhythm

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Nervous, proud, low, loved — those are some of the words pinned on the wall at the Victoria Mental Health Centre, where 11 people have gathered for group drumming.

It begins with a check-in, where each person in the semi-circle introduces himself and says how the day is going.

"The sun is shining, so I'm having a great day," says one participant.

"I'm doing OK," says another in a lower tone.

But there's very little talking for the rest of the hour, as everyone focuses on the steady rhythm leader Jordan Hanson assigns them to tap out on the drums between their knees. When the beat splits in two, concentration turns to nervous smiles as some of the newer participants lose the beat. By the end of the session, there's only relief and a sense of accomplishment.

African hand-drumming is one of several day programs that help clients at Royal Jubilee Hospital's Eric Martin Pavilion transition from hospital to community. Others include Qi gong, relaxation and cognitive behaviour therapy.

"This is not an end place," occupational therapist Lori Peters said of the day hospital. "This is where they can learn some skills to help them cope and manage their mental health, decrease their chances of being back in hospital and reintegrate back into the community."

Drew Barnes, co-ordinator of the psychiatric day hospital, said the program has been incredibly successful — for some patients, it's the only program they choose to attend and he has consistently seen positive results.

"It's sort of an example of the importance of trying out, explor-

ing and innovating in health care — because once in a while, you stumble upon something like this that hits a home run."

How it works

Drumming requires breaking down a task, as well as developing memory, concentration and attention, all of which has therapeutic value.

"It's a brain exercise that's really good for our clients at this stage in their recovery," said Barnes. "It challenges their brains in new ways and research is showing that that's really healthy for all of us."

Challenges make the brain more robust and resilient, he said, in much the same way physical activity improves our physical health.

"The same applies to our brains: Use it or lose it."

Benefits vary, but one of the biggest is social, despite the general lack of speaking, Peters said.

"For some of our guys who have schizophrenia, it's really hard for them to connect with others and interact with others verbally," Peters said. "They can do it with the drum, being part of the group, without having to organize their thoughts and express their words, which is harder to do."

Learning something simple, but challenging, like drumming can also be a good way to build confidence. The group has presented several public performances — a big step for many of the patients.

"We had one client who was still in hospital and hadn't been out of her house for four years before that," Peters said. Her group performed in front of more than 200 people. "And here she was, doing this. I think it's the risks that people take in stepping out and the courage they have to take on that challenge that's really amazing."

The teacher

Hanson has led the hospital drum circle for about eight years. One of his most memorable experiences came when they performed for about 300 doctors from across the country who were in town for a conference.

"They were very surprised that a group could sound so strong, given that they were dealing with these mental-health challenges," Hanson said.

He had secretly hidden drums around the room, and when his group was finished, he told the doctors it was their turn, much to their surprise. The doctors had trouble catching the beat. "It really kind of levelled the field," Hanson said. "For me, it really allowed the audience to appreciate how far this group had come in being able to do this performance."

... For the first time, [the audience] realized it's not so easy."

Nor was it easy getting the drum circle started. It's loud, so it was a challenge to find a place to do it. Not everyone was convinced it would be useful.

"We had to

open people's outlook to recognize that it was, or is, something significant."

Hanson has shared hand drumming with people through workshops across Canada — including songstress Ani DiFranco, former governor-general Adrienne Clarkson and primatologist Jane Goodall. He also runs Hand Drum Rhythms, as well as teaching in UVic's School of Music. But his first teaching experience was at a school in Halifax for children with disabilities. His students were blind, deaf, hyperactive and autistic.

"That was really a challenge, just because of the nature of the personalities. Your outlook on life is shaped by your senses, so the way these students interact with the world is different in each case," he said. The blind would learn by listening, the deaf by watching. The autistic would focus on one aspect of the beat, while the hyperactive had to focus on many.

"So I had seen some of the potential benefits in connecting people through music and potentially through rhythm," he said. "With the drums, it's something everybody can do and feel a large degree of success."

He did the same thing on Vancouver Island with a group of deaf and blind children.

Each year, he'd hold a session at Willows Beach.

"Imagine what it would be like if you could not hear or see," he said. "They're very tactile."

Sometimes, they would be lying on the drums, they'd be feeling the hide.

Because the drum is such a powerful

soundwave, even if you can't hear it you can feel it."

He said the best part of the experience, for him, was watching the public reaction.

"Inevitably, a group of people somewhere along the beach would start dancing and bopping along," he said. "They had no idea that the group that was playing this music were mainly kids who were deaf and blind."

What clients say

Several of the participants at this session are dealing with anxiety and depression. They say drumming helps.

"Because I want to do my best, I have to tell myself, 'OK, it's only my first or second session,'" said one participant whose psychiatrist suggested drumming after she spent several months in group therapy for anxiety. "So it's about practising something new and enjoying it — and not beating myself up about it if I mess up."

"It kind of normalizes things for me," she said. "Coming here, even though we all have different symptoms, it's just kind of nice interacting with different people."

Louise de Lugt was having trouble functioning and even getting out of bed before she began treatment at the hospital for anxiety and depression.

"I'm still feeling a little bit overwhelmed, but I'm making progress," said de Lugt, now on her second drumming session.

"And I think once I get used to it a bit more, it will be fun."

Jean Taylor, who was hospitalized for anxiety before becoming a day client, was on her second-to-last day of the program.

"I'm much better now and I think the drumming has just added to it," she said. "Because it's like, if I can do this, what else can I do? It was new to me and totally out of my comfort zone at the beginning."

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Jordan Hanson teaches drumming to students through his Hand Drum Rhythms program at UVic, as well as to clients at the Victoria Centre for Mental Health.