

# Group A Rational Strategy for Whole Person Care Drumming

by Christine Stevens, M.S.W., MT-BC, M.A.



*Mark was the kind of kid who refused to talk in groups. He was a loner on the unit and resistant in individual counseling. His behavior was almost justified by the sad story that sat inside his chest. Only seven months after his mother's death one year ago, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. Even Mark's relatives, with whom he lived, could not get him to open up. The drum facilitator doubted even she could break through until the "inspirational beats" portion of the drum program — where the group uses their drums to answer a question. The facilitator asked, "What does it feel like when you lose someone special in your life?" To everyone's surprise, Mark grabbed the big mallet and played the biggest drum in the circle. The music he played spoke volumes about his anger, grief, and confusion. One by one, the group joined the rhythm. When he looked up from his drum to see the group following him, Mark brightened up. From that point on, everyone noticed a change in him. Mark's healing had begun.*

Most people agree that music listening can evoke deep emotions. However, few people have enjoyed making music themselves. Now for the first time in healthcare, an evidence-based strategy is available from a bio-psycho-social perspective that uses music making experiences to build community, foster self-expression, and produce transformation. Echoing the importance of whole person care, this program addresses mind, body, and spirit within an incredible activity that is fun, powerful, and accessible to all people, regardless of prior musical experience.

## Research Findings

Several years ago, a neurologist and researcher, Barry Bittman, M.D. attended a drum circle at an integrative medical conference. Standing in the center of seven hundred healthcare professionals was a facilitator named Arthur Hull, the noted father of the drum circle movement. Dr. Bittman remarked that he immediately recognized the metaphor of the experience. "I'd never seen seven hundred healthcare professionals working together! And they sounded great. I sensed incredible support and sharing and I was immediately engaged in the group." This serendipitous experience inspired Bittman to lead a research team to scientifically investigate group drumming from a psychoneuroimmunological perspective. Bittman initially studied different types of drumming to see what worked best. The results were surprising. It was not a matter of playing well or learning a specific beat. Instead, it took a composite approach that wove together key health promoting activities in a one-hour protocol, which included exercise, visualization, support, nurturing, self-expression, and of course music making. The protocol resulted in a significant increase in NK cells, circulating white blood cells that seek out and destroy cancer and virally infected cells (Bittman, 2000).

In order to extend the research findings to treatment centers and healthcare professionals, Bittman and his colleagues at REMO developed a three-day intensive facilitator-training program called *HealthRHYTHMS*®. This training program was developed for individuals ranging from physicians, nurses, music therapists, musicians, drug and alcohol counselors and other healthcare

professions interested in bringing group drumming into treatment programs. A number of professions receive continuing education credits for the unique professional development program.

## Rationale

The accessibility of group drumming is key. Rhythm is inside everyone. Group drumming is an ancient healing practice that has stood the test of time. Within the context of Recreational Music-making, a new approach has paved the path of applying music making to stress-reduction, self-expression and community building. Group drumming is not about performance, technique, or showing off. In fact, it is not really about drumming. Echoing the main tenet of music therapy, this musical experience is utilized to produce non-musical outcomes. Ultimately, through the metaphor and the actual hands-on practice of group drumming, there is a transfer of the skills from the drum circle to life, facilitated by the inner discovery of positive resources.

## The Program

The *HealthRHYTHMS*® one-hour protocol takes participants from isolation to belonging, from suppression of emotions to self-expression, and from performance anxiety to creativity. Since the drums can be intimidating for first-time players, the program actually begins with an icebreaker using only shakers. A shaker pass activity gets everyone laughing and puts them at ease with the idea of music making while demonstrating the power of teamwork within the circle. Next, the technique of playing the drums is shown and participants play a call and response game, sometimes using their names to create rhythms on the drums. Soon everyone is joining the beat. Once the music gets going, the facilitator uses body language to cue the group to stop, start again, play soft or loud, or feature one person while everyone else stops and listens. When the whole circle comes to a clean stop together, a huge sense of accomplishment and camaraderie is created. Participants spontaneously clap and cheer.

The next component is an activity termed "inspirational beats." Participants answer a question tailored to the group's challenges using their drums. After drumming out their response, many spontaneously choose to verbally share what their playing represented. At this point, discussions naturally erupt and participants offer support and feedback to one another utilizing a bridge that is now established between musical expression and words. Finally, the program concludes a unique application of visualization called guided imagery drumming. Closing their eyes while playing, participants drum-along with a story created by the facilitator that emphasizes safety and support while drawing upon each individual's personal imagery.



The group-drumming program can be molded to meet the unique needs of

varying patient groups. The metaphor and lessons of each experience is brought out and processed briefly. For some groups, it may be the importance of being heard, while others may respond most to team building within the context of a community living experience. While the drums stay in the treatment room, the lessons go with the participants when they leave.

## Benefits

Group drumming can serve as a valuable, engaging and powerful element of an integrative program. *The benefits of the program include:*

- Community building
- Non-verbal expression
- Opportunities for listening and sharing
- Spiritual expression
- Catalyst for verbal sharing
- Exercise (it is a good work-out)
- Nurturing and support
- Success and pleasure without taking drugs
- Fun, engaging and enjoyable

## Getting Started

To learn more about group drumming and healthcare, visit the Web site [www.remo.com/health](http://www.remo.com/health), for a unique collection of over thirty articles written by doctors, counselors, and music therapists. In addition, the site features the latest research and a dialogue board where individuals can discuss useful tips and interventions for various populations.

*Dr. Barry Bittman and music therapist and social worker Christine Stevens teach HealthRHYTHMS® facilitation-training programs. Offered several times a year, the program travels to various locations across the USA and Japan. The intensive training program includes a 150-page manual, a curriculum of scientific lectures, drumming opportunities, and facilitation training in small groups. For more information, contact [healthrhythms@remo.com](mailto:healthrhythms@remo.com), or call (661) 294-5655. ▼*



## Counseling Applications of Group Drumming

### At-risk and Incarcerated Youth

In San Francisco, California, a group-drumming program sponsored by Music In Schools Today is demonstrating improvement in social skills and a marked impact on attendance and grades in the school programs. Music therapist Deb Bradway explains, "The kids latch onto the drums like life preservers. Many choose this intervention to fill their own recreational time when they are released from incarceration" (personal communication, September 4, 2003).

### Recovery Programs

At The McDonald's Treatment Center, operated by Scripps Health Care in San Diego, California, a group drumming program facilitated by music therapist Barbara Reuere, Ph.D. assists adults in their treatment program. One client noted, "I am very surprised. I haven't felt this good in weeks. Where does that come from? It doesn't come from drugs or alcohol. There's something inside of me that is still here that makes me feel good" (personal communication, September 15, 2003).



### Crisis Interventions

One year after the Columbine High School shooting, group drumming was offered as a tool for expression and support for families who were affected by the traumatic experience. And for children returning to Public School 150, just two blocks from ground zero, group drumming provided an outlet for emotional expression and nurturing.

### Teambuilding and Professional Development

For the past two years, the Southeastern School of Alcohol and Other Drug Studies in Athens, Georgia has featured an evening drum circle to reduce burn-out, boost morale, and create a sense of community among the counselors attending the professional development conference. According to veteran program director, Bob Davis, C.A.C., "Addiction is a disease of isolation. I can see how this program combats isolation by bringing people together in a powerful way. It was amazing to witness the emergence of such spirituality and joy. People who had never drummed before were singing and dancing in just one hour" (Davis, 2002).

**Christine Stevens** received a dual-masters in music therapy and social work from Colorado State University. As Director of Music Therapy and Wellness Programs at Remo Drum Company, Ms. Stevens teaches HealthRHYTHMS® facilitation training and travels internationally promoting drumming and wellness. An in-demand speaker, she brings her unique interactive keynote program to corporations, organizations, and conferences all over the world. Her first book, *The ART and HEART of Drum Circles*, was recently published by Hal Leonard and is available at Borders Books, Amazon.com, and most music stores. For more information, visit the Web site [www.ubdrumcircles.com](http://www.ubdrumcircles.com).

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