



FACT SHEET

Rhythmic Interventions for Engaging the Disengaged

Belonging and Connection

Social connection & a sense of belonging are well recognised as central elements of optimal mental health across the life-span (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Shared physical activity is recognised as one of the leading ways of developing that connection in a short time period (Bailey & McClaren, 2005). The use of rhythmic music, drums & percussion, to connect people in group music making has been shown to be one of the most effective ways of developing this attribute and its many psycho-social benefits. A recent study showed sustained reductions in levels of depression, & anxiety, as well as improvements in social resilience & their immune system for patients participating in weekly drumming compared to a non-drumming control group (Fancourt et al, 2016). In particular, the common symptoms of social anxiety and social isolation are ameliorated by involvement in the group drumming exercises which promote social connection and a sense of belonging.

Physical and Fun

One of the common challenges for those working with disengaged populations are low levels of attention or focus. Acute levels of this problem are often symptomatic of ADHD, but can also be caused by changes in testosterone levels during adolescence or by the often unrealistic expectation of sitting quietly under instruction for hours upon end (Andersen & Teicher, 2000). Physical therapies, like rhythmic music, increase participation levels because of the stimulus of physical movement which also delivers psychological health benefits including reductions in stress, anxiety and depression (Dunn, Trevidi & Oneill, 2001). Brain research suggests that fun is not just beneficial but required for authentic learning and long-term memory. The human brain and body respond positively to laughter with the release of endorphin, epinephrine (adrenaline), and dopamine, and with increased breathing volume (more oxygen). When people are having fun they are more alert, and the subsequent information is more likely to be attached to the positive emotional experience as a lasting memory (Willis, 2007). It is also critical not to underestimate the role fun has on perceptions of safety - When people are having fun they are feeling safe & free from worry.

Response to Rhythm

Response to rhythm is a natural human aptitude, likely developed as an evolutionary survival trait, (Zentner, & Eerola, 2010). This proclivity is at the heart of the drums ability to engage individuals who shy away from other therapeutic inducements. Drums are also easy to play & in the hands of a trained therapist or educator can be used to quickly build confidence & feelings of success & achievement. Undermining many attempts to engage disaffected or alienated members of society are feelings of insecurity, shame & resentment. Histories of insecure attachment, relationship breakdown, personal betrayal and abuse are common & give rise to a reluctance to trust a counsellor or engage with an intervention program. Experiential therapies like those using rhythmic music offer a less confronting face to these individuals than traditional 'talk based' approaches, presenting a range of immediate rewards that are not available from direct counselling or instruction, including fun, variety and adventure. For the therapist, one of the greatest rewards from this type of approach is the ability to observe the client in a more natural setting, where they are less likely to be guarded about their thoughts and feelings, & are more at ease in their behaviours and responses. This advantage is reciprocal in that the client too benefits from being more relaxed, and authentic and is able to enter more fully into the process. Rhythmic therapies are often associated with the concept of 'flow' where people become wholly immersed in the activity. This feature underlies the powerful level of engagement music can offer.

Safety beyond Words

Among the most socially isolated population groups are those who are less competent in the dominant language of a society; new immigrants, indigenous people, and those with poor literacy are all restricted from the benefits that confidence and fluidity in the dominant language brings. Utilising a therapeutic approach, such as rhythmic music, that reduces this reliance on language is immediately welcoming & generally reassuring for people from these backgrounds, and reduces the high levels of miscommunication associated with cross cultural therapeutic relationships.

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