

# RHYTHM TO RECOVERY

The traditional healing properties of the drum merge with the latest research from the fields of neuroscience and trauma informed care.

Turn to almost any indigenous culture, and you will find healing traditions that turn away from words, and instead utilise rhythmic music, movement, and song, with the drum taking a central role in many traditional practices. In my own Judaeo-Christian history drumming played a central role, until in the sixth century when the hierarchy in Rome deemed it inappropriate and banned not only drumming but all forms of music, including singing, as 'heathen and inappropriate' (Redmond, 1997). This reminds us of the lengths to which the powerful will go to maintain control over others; similar ordinances were put in place recently by the Taliban and Daesh. But the drum is making a comeback within the healing professions, despite threatening traditional therapeutic power brokers, based on the work of a growing number of researchers in the fields of trauma and neurological-science. Since the advent of neuro-imaging technologies (MRIs) in the 1990s,

science has been able to demonstrate what ancient peoples had known all along – that rhythm can heal!

Today almost all the leading advocates of trauma informed practice, Perry, Ogden and Van der Kolk to name a few, are encouraging the use of rhythmic based therapies, including drumming, as a result of studies that have shown how rhythm, at certain tempos, can regulate primal areas of the brain that respond to stress. For many people who have problems with emotional regulation, particularly those who have been exposed to traumatic experiences such as violence, abuse or neglect, this part of the brain has become over-sensitised to perceptions of threat. Formed in utero under the sensory stimulus of the mothers heartbeat, these regions of the brain, the amygdala, hippocampus, and brain stem may be stabilised through exposure to rhythms at the same tempo, 80 to 100 bpm (Perry, 2006).

But it is not just this part of the brain that can be supported by rhythmic exercise. We also know that the ability of people

impacted by trauma to articulate their thoughts and feelings is reduced with some deeply affected individuals becoming mute (Bremner, 2002), and that memory centres are also compromised with people having difficulty discriminating between their recall of events and reality. The drum can be used by therapeutic practitioners to address both these issues, placing people in the present through an experiential process akin to mindfulness and helping to address communication issues through the alternative modality of music, which in itself is a language of emotion.

Twenty years ago, as a graduate counsellor trained in a cognitive approach, I found myself in a remote region of Australia working with young Aboriginal people who were struggling both socially and emotionally. My verbal skills in how to engage clients and examine thoughts, feelings and behaviours in relation to their issues, were completely ineffectual, and left me despairing. Luckily, I happened upon a colleague (a music teacher) who was using drumming to work through some

*“the drum is making a comeback within the healing professions, despite threatening traditional therapeutic power brokers, based on the work of a growing number of researchers in the fields of trauma and neurological-science.”*




self-esteem issues with some of his students, and I witnessed first-hand how engaged those young people were. I started introducing drumming into my counselling sessions, primarily as an engagement tool, but quickly realised the potential for the instrument to heal in multiple ways, and soon I was running groups using drumming exercises to explore a wide range of life issues.

Among the biggest contribution the drum has made to my practice is its ability to connect people who were struggling with social isolation or ostracisation. Unlike words, music is not prone to judgement or false associations and thus provides a safer medium for connection for the socially wary. Music can be taught competitively – a primary reason why so many people carry false beliefs about their musical ability. However, in our work we have focused not on musical competency but on musical connection, using primal, universal rhythms like the heartbeat, to get people playing in harmony together. Participatory music making with an emphasis on improvisation allows people to be themselves, but find connection. On the drum people are almost instantaneously successful and although the rhythms may be simple, it is a powerful, grounding experience. The simplicity of the instrument also makes it accessible for therapists with no musical background.

We know that one of the main issues for people who have experienced trauma are the challenges they have in their personal relationships. Stephen Porges work, (Polyvagal theory, 2007), showed how trauma impacts the nervous system to increase perceptions of threat, which in turn often leads to a reduction in social engagement, because of its attendant fear. This again highlights the limitations of 'talk based' approaches while pointing to the need for new ways to engage and connect >>







*“There are few tools as versatile and accessible to the therapist as the drum. It provides a medium for safe connection, communication, and the cathartic release of emotion,”*

>> people socially, that they perceive as safe. This same principal applies to many other individuals with social phobias such as those on the autism spectrum.

The ability of group drumming to provide a sense of connection and belonging, also provides a platform for examining and practicing other skills needed for developing healthy and supportive relationships. Trust, and communication are two of the most common issues that undermine an individual's potential, and these as well as a myriad of other factors that stem from the correlation between playing music in harmony and finding harmony with people in other walks of life, can be explored using this process.

There are few tools as versatile and accessible to the therapist as the drum. It provides a medium for safe connection, communication, and the cathartic release of emotion, as well as the sheer joy of creative musical play. Yet like our ancestors, whose instruments were seen as pagan and inferior, there is still a way to go before it can resume its place as a respected healing modality in contemporary health practice. However, a wealth of recent research studies make this harder and harder to resist as the weight of evidence validates the healing power of the drum (Fancourt et al, 2016; Wood & Faulkner, 2012; Faulkner & Bartleet, 2018). ■

**References:** Bremner J.D. (2002). *Does Stress Damage the Brain? Understanding Trauma-related Disorders from a Mind-Body Perspective*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton; Fancourt D, Perkins R, Ascenso S, Carvalho LA, Steptoe A, Williamson A (2016) Effects of Group Drumming Interventions on Anxiety, Depression, Social Resilience and Inflammatory Immune Response among Mental Health Service Users. *PLoS ONE* 11 (3): e0151136. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0151136>

Faulkner S., Wood L., Ivery P., Donovan R. (2012). It is not just music and rhythm: Evaluation of a drumming-based intervention to improve the social wellbeing of alienated youth. *Children Australia*, 37, 31–39. doi:10.1017/cha.2012.5. Faulkner, S., & Bartleet, B. L. (2018, in press). Drumming interventions in Australian prisons: Insights from the Rhythm2 Recovery Model. In M. Balfour, B. L. Bartleet, L. Davey, J. Rynne & H. Schippers (Eds.). *Performing arts in prisons*. Bristol: Intellect. Perry, B. (2006). Applying principles of neurodevelopment to clinical work with maltreated and traumatised children, In N.B.Web, ed. *Working with traumatised youth in child welfare*. New York: Guilford Press. Porges, S.W. (2007). *The Polyvagal Perspective*, *Biological Psychology*, 74. Rhonda, L. (1997). *When all the drummers were women*. New York: Three Rivers Press.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Faulkner is a leading practitioner in the design and delivery of evidence based interventions utilising rhythm to assist with social and emotional learning and recovery from trauma. Simon has created numerous programs for different populations, including young people 'at risk' and people with complex diagnosis such as autism and Asperger's syndrome. Simon conceived, designed and delivered both the multi-award winning DRUMBEAT intervention and its extension, the computer game DRUMBEAT Quest — both programs are used by health and education services in countries across the world. Simon has extensive experience working cross culturally and has delivered therapeutic interventions and training programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia as well as 1st Nations communities in both the USA and Canada. Simon has also worked closely with trauma services supporting refugee populations from a wide range of backgrounds. For further information on Simon's work, downloadable resources and courses visit [www.rhythm2recovery.com](http://www.rhythm2recovery.com). Simon's new book *Rhythm2Recovery*, an invaluable resource to those interested in this field, can be purchased here: <http://www.jkp.com/uk/rhythm-to-recovery-34485.html>.