Benefits of Hand Drumming to People with Brain Injuries
“Music is a form of sensory stimulation, which provokes responses due to the familiarity, predictability, and feelings of security associated with it.”

-The American Music Therapy Association
Who?

Who is able to participate?

Who benefits from a hand drum class?
Who is able to participate?

- Everyone is able to play a hand drum or hand percussion to some degree (think of a baby with a rattle)
- Every age and physical/mental ability level
- Requires little to no dexterity to create sound, but can become more complex depending on the ability level of the participants
- Can be held in one hand and played with the other
- Can be placed on the lap or on a stand
- Classes can be held with as many participants as there are instruments available. Small classes/lessons are also possible.
- Drums come in many different sizes and shapes
Who benefits from a hand drum class?

Everyone! Because…

- Creating sound is a very human and cathartic experience
- Movement of the arms is good for the cardiovascular system
- Coordinating hands/hearing/voice is a constantly developing skill
- Group activities in which the individual contributions create the whole are socially important
- Get out stress and frustration by hitting something
- It’s fun!
A note of caution 

- Though hand drum classes should be as inclusive as possible, it is important to remember that these classes can get loud and energetic and may not be suitable for people with sensory sensitivity, particularly those with PTSD.

- Things such as earplugs and noise-canceling headphones can be helpful in these situations.

- It is also important to have helpers other than the teacher who can assist a participant out of the room if they need to leave.

- When organizing a hand drum class communication needs to be clear with potential participants about what the class will involve so that they can make the decision ahead of time on whether or not it will be a positive experience.
What?

What is hand drumming?

What is involved in a hand drumming class?
What are hand drums?

- Hand drums are an instrument in the percussion family made with some kind of drum head stretched over a frame (body of the drum, shell of the drum).
- They are played with the hands rather than a stick/mallet.
- The head can be made from animal skin (goat, cow, fish, lamb, kangaroo…) or from synthetic materials.
- The body of the drum can be made from wood, ceramic, metal, or synthetic.
- The frame of the drum (body of the drum) can vary in shape.
Two of the most common shapes are frame drums – a round “picture frame” with a head on one side. They can include some kind of jingles (think tambourine).

“Goblet” drums, a drum with a goblet or vase shape with a drum head on the top and open at the bottom (think djembe).
- The pitch/sound of the drum will vary depending on the size of the drum and the tension of the drum head.

- Large drums usually have lower sounds, small drums usually have higher sounds.

- The tighter the drum head the higher the sound, the looser the drum head the lower the sound.

- With a few exceptions, hand drums are open at the bottom to allow resonance (as opposed to a snare drum that has a top and bottom head).
Other types of hand percussion can be included such as:

- shakers/rattles
- scrapers
- thumb pianos (mbira, kalimba)
- bells

They add dimension to the sound of the ensemble and can be easier to play for some participants.
During the Class

Hand drum classes at their most basic are a group of people playing hand drums together

- Beyond that they can include elements of:
  - Descriptions of the drums
  - History/origins of the drums
  - Playing technique
  - Sound creation
  - Rhythm recitation/vocalization

- Learning traditional rhythms
- Rhythmic composition
- Rhythm notation
- Stories
- Jokes
- Chanting
- Singing
- Dancing
Above all, classes should be:

- FUN
- Low pressure
- Inclusive
- Have a good continuous pace
- A positive experience
- NO FAIL
When were hand drums invented?

When is a good time to have a class?

When has hand drumming been used as a therapeutic/healing method?
When were hand drums invented?

- Hand drums are some of the oldest instruments in the world.
- They date back thousands of years and predate agriculture.
- For a very rough comparison, humans have been actively performing agriculture for c. 10,000 years and have been making art and music for c. 40,000 years. We can extrapolate from that the relative importance of music making and availability to other human necessities.
- Hand drums in various forms are found in nearly every culture.
- Their basic form and function has not changed much since their inception.
When is a good time to hold a class?

- Almost any time!
- The only restrictions are on noise levels, instrument availability, and space availability (though hand drum classes don’t have to be super loud)
When has hand drumming been used as a therapeutic/healing method?

- Music therapy is a rapidly growing part of mainstream western medicine.
- There are over 70 universities in the US with music therapy degree programs approved by the American Music Therapy Association
- One more caveat…I am not a certified music therapist, I am a hand drum specialist with a DMA
- In this context music therapy is used to improve quality of life, lower blood pressure, improve mood, control chronic pain, relax muscle tension
- Group classes are often used as a way to improve relationships between patients and caregivers and provide them an outlet for positive interaction.
When has hand drumming been used as a therapeutic/healing method?

In Native American Cultures

- Healing is approached through bio-psycho-socio-spiritual traditions
- Different rhythms are used for various ceremonies and purposes
- Drumming events involve both the patient and their family and community
- Health and wellbeing are viewed as intrinsically linked to spirituality in Native America culture
- Group events are believed to contribute healing energy to the patient. The more people involved the greater the energy.
When has hand drumming been used as a therapeutic/healing method?

In West African cultures

- Drumming is used by many cultures throughout West Africa, such as the Zar, Tonga, and Ashanti people, as a means of healing.
- Many of these cultures have designated drummers who are trained in the traditions and are high ranking people in their community.
- Many illnesses are not approached through a biomedical method, but through a spiritual and community method.
- Ceremonies often last for hours or even days.
- Drumming is often used as a means of communication, and this communication is an intrinsic part of the healing process.
Where do the drums come from?

Where can classes be held?
Where do the drums come from?

- Hand drums can be found in every country and culture in the world.
- The hand drums that we are most familiar with in the USA come from Eastern Europe, Middle East, West Africa, South and Central America.
The most commonly used drums for these types of classes are:

Djembe (West Africa)
The most commonly used drums for these types of classes are:

Frame Drums (Eastern Europe)
The most commonly used drums for these types of classes are:

Bongos and Congas (South and Central America)
The most commonly used drums for these types of classes are:

Darbukas/Dumbeks (Turkey and Arabic Cultures)
Where can classes be held?

- Hand drum classes require very little besides the instruments themselves.
- They can be held anywhere with enough space and seating.
- Can be held outdoors or indoors.
- Chairs are best, but if the participants are ok sitting on the floor/ground that can work too.
Why hand drumming over other instruments?

Why group classes rather than one-on-one lessons?

Why is a “no fail” activity important to someone with a brain injury?
Why hand drumming over other instruments?

- No wrong notes
- Drums come in varying sizes and shapes – easy to hold regardless of size of person or level of strength
- Drums can often be mounted on stands for people who can’t hold them
- Many can be played either standing or sitting
- Though they are hand drums, many of them can be played with a stick – so classes can be built around the participants’ abilities to hold objects
- Large target area – doesn’t depend on precise hand-eye coordination
- It is very hard to damage a hand drum with just your hand – it is also hard to hurt your hand playing a hand drum (except if you hit the side of the drum)
Why hand drumming over other instruments?

- Participants do not need to be able to read or even see to be able to play them.

- The playing itself can be very simple (quarter notes) or very complex, even within the same piece/rhythm, so a single session can incorporate a range of abilities and experience comfortably without anyone feeling inadequate or bored.

- Can incorporate vocalization through drum phonemes and counting – can also incorporate singing.

- Can incorporate dancing and movement.

- Drums can be played effectively by a single person or a very large group.

- NO FAIL.
Why group classes rather than one-on-one lessons?

- For people with mental, emotional, and physical disabilities social interaction can often be difficult and stressful.

- Socially, drum circles are a way for people to interact with each other in a low-stress social environment. It does not require much person to person interaction or talking if one doesn’t want to

- However, it does give people something to converse about

- It helps participants get out of their own head and connect with others

- Participants often find that while there might be an element of drumming that is challenging for them, there are others in the class – even ones with perhaps a higher physical ability level – who also find it challenging.

- There is NO FAILING at playing drums

- Even if someone plays something that is different from the given instructions, it still sounds like a drum and will fit within the group sound.
Why is a “no fail” activity important to someone with a brain injury?

- Unlike congenital disabilities, someone with a brain injury often had skills and abilities that they suddenly don’t.
- Even simple things like speaking, walking, reading, writing that were once second nature can be a struggle.
- Many things in their lives involve facing those limitations (like physical therapy).
- Being in a public place can make them self conscious.
- It is important to have activities that don’t pressure “succeeding” or “improving.”
Why is a “no fail” activity important to someone with a brain injury?

- Having social activities with no expectations and no worry about being “a burden” are imperative

- The feeling of being an active contributor to their recovery process

- Release frustrations in a positive way

- The feeling of accomplishment without the worry of ability

- An uplift in mood that lasts beyond the end of the activity
How is hand drumming beneficial to someone with a brain injury?
Physical/Emotional Benefits

- Reduces tension, anxiety, and stress
- Helps control chronic pain
- Boosts the immune system
- Releases negative feelings, blockages, and emotional trauma
- Produces endorphins
- Increases blood flow
- Improves hand/eye coordination
- Connection between hearing/vocalization and motor skills
Physical/Emotional Benefits

- Use of patterns to retrain the brain
- Helps patients relax
- Improves mind/body relationship
- Vocalization in music can help bypass difficulties with speech
- Uses different movements than many daily activities to teach the body to move again in response to stimuli
“[T]he degree to which function can be recovered is phenomenal and we are just tapping into the extent that we can get recovery following stroke or injury or disease. We hope that music might play a particularly important role in helping [the regeneration of] those cells, in helping the individual learn to interpret the pattern and essentially to help that person learn again.”

- Joseph Arezzo, PhD, Vice Chair, Department of Neuroscience, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York (www.musictherapy.org)
Social Benefits

- Interactions with caregivers that are not centered around their injury or day-to-day struggles

- A not traditionally medical activity to talk about with friends and family
  - Particularly important if they spend a lot of their time on doctor’s visits, therapy, medication, etc.

- An activity with others in their peer group

- A way to interact with people who may have greatly different ability levels
“Music therapy enables people to sometimes put words together in ways that are hard for them to do otherwise. [I]t often seems to be easier if [the patient] has the rhythm and cadence that comes along with music. Particularly with people with certain kinds of neurological deficits I think that [music therapy] can be very helpful. The music seems to get through to the patient and in many ways it enables [them] to get through to us, which [may be] very hard to do with any other modality.”

-Susan Shurin, M.D., Chief of Pediatric-Hematology, Oncology at the Ireland Cancer Center, Cleveland, Ohio (www.musictherapy.org)
THANK YOU

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