

Group Drumming with Senior Citizens

By Gary Huber and Christopher Karow

Drum circle facilitators have an opportunity to add interactive fun to the lives of senior citizens through a drum and a song. Rhythm and song connect with the seniors and add a positive social and emotional outlet to their lives. Participants with various age-related health issues, from simple physical changes to complex diagnosis such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, can enjoy and benefit from music-making and the group experience.

The authors, two interactive drumming group facilitators, describe an autoethnographic approach to group music making with senior citizens. Robert Friedman (2011) notes that the hand drum has been used for thousands of years in celebrations, rituals, ceremonies, and in healing.

Current research shows that rhythm and singing affect multiple areas of the human brain at once on a subconscious level. Because of brain plasticity (the brain's ability to develop throughout one's entire life), rhythm-making through percussion-based

activities can be used to help build new connections (called neuro-pathways) in the brain. This helps to improve brain function and to slow the aging process of the mind. Nothing can stop the aging process, but a drum and a song are a great combination to help slow down aspects of the process.

Many of the ideas presented here can be used for other ages and groups, including children and individuals with special needs, plus first responders and military veterans dealing with traumatic events. The facilitators' views and experiences are remarkably similar across groups. Like all music experiences, some ideas may work extremely well at times, but not so well at other times. Know though, that what appears to not work on the outside may have a positive health effect inside all participants.

PROGRAM SETUP

Preparing for an interactive group drumming program for senior citizens requires collaboration with a staff member. A first



step is to determine the best time for the event. It is advantageous to find out what the seniors' schedule is like after breakfast and during the afternoon. In our experience, participants in morning groups are generally more engaged, more willing to play, and are ready for some inclusive activity. A program that immediately follows lunch can be difficult, since many seniors may be ready for a nap. Programs that take place after 2:00 p.m. and before dinner time generally work out well. Evening events are rarely scheduled.

A second step is to assign the staff member the job of setting up chairs for the event. Much like a common seated drum circle, a chair with a drum in front of it is the best. The setup should include places for wheelchair access. It is very important for all participants to see each other, laugh, and connect. Staff members should move any tables in the event area out of the circle. People who are placed behind a table tend to watch rather than participate. Tables are barriers; participants will have a more enjoyable time when they are placed in a position to interact with the entire group.

A third step is to ensure that the staff contact understands the need for two staff members to be present for and actively assist with the group drumming event. On occasion, the staff may think this is their break time; it is not. It is paramount that staff members are present because they know the names and needs of the seniors. Additional staff may be required if there is a large number of seniors with special needs. Inform the staff that you may ask them for their help with instruments. Of course, all staff and visitors are welcome to participate. When staff members are willing to sit in on the circle, it promotes greater connection and engagement among participants.

As a drum circle facilitator, plan for your own arrival, and set up as you would for any performance situation. Be ready to talk and set up at the same time. Many seniors will show up early to enjoy the setting up of the drums. While you are working, participants may ask questions about the program or the instruments they see. Staff members may need to bring residents in wheelchairs to the drumming area early. This provides the opportunity to plan or adjust for wheelchair integration into the seating plan. Occasionally, you may receive comments that an individual does not want to be there. Reply with a smile and say, "Play as much as you want, or as little as you want, and you're welcome to just sit and listen." If you have songs planned in your program, mention that you will need some help singing if they do not want to drum. Asking about songs that individuals like can be a good way to bring potential non-participants into the group, and it may help them feel needed. Be set up and ready to play 15 minutes before the start time.

ADAPTATIONS

Some residents may be tilted back in a wheelchair or have limited physical ability. A tambourine or frame drum can be placed under their hand. Always ask permission and explain that you

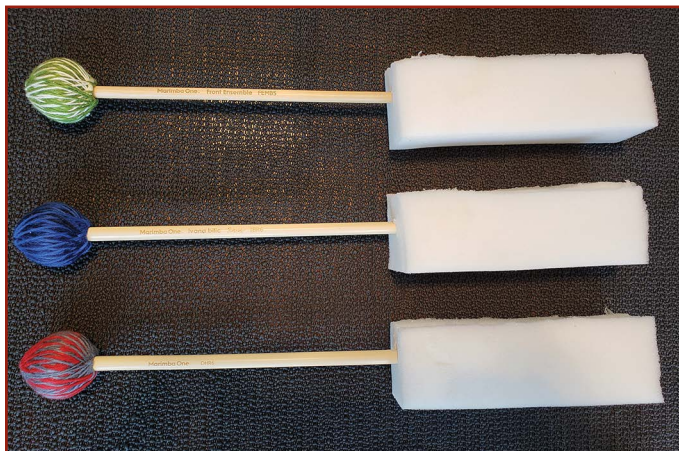
want to pick up their hand and place a drum under their hand. They may do nothing, they may hit quarter notes, or their fingers may move but not touch the head. A small maraca or egg shaker might be a good option for seniors with Parkinson's Disease. The key is that all are participating in their own way.

Be aware that those with arthritis and misshapen fingers may find it too painful to strike an instrument; shakers or tambourines with Velcro are good options. The Meinl or Remo foot tambourine, Meinl hand motion shaker and foot shaker with straps are easy to use. Also, the Cotton Wood Works adaptive instrument mount for wheelchair use can be a solution. Before placing a Velcro or strapped instrument around a participant's foot or wrist, ask permission and explain that you are hoping this will help them hold the instruments.

Do not pass out drumsticks or claves, as these instruments are potentially dangerous and can cause someone injury. Instead, consider using yarn mallets. Barry Bernstein found that providing mallets for Alzheimer's patients increased their level of participation; "Put a stick in somebody's hand and there is nothing to think about" (Friedman, p. 59). However, consider that slender mallet shafts can be difficult to hold. Adaptive mallets such as a yarn marimba mallet with a foam handle can be helpful and easier to use for some participants.

To make your own adaptive mallets, visit the local hobby or craft store and purchase a sheet of #2 foam. It's relatively soft and most seniors can grip this. Cut the foam blocks to 2 inches by 2 inches by 6 inches and cut a slit along the middle of the block, lengthwise. Marimba One provided some mallets for the project, and they worked very well, as shown in the photo. After placing the shaft of the mallet into the block, glue it back together. Place rubber bands along the length of the block to hold everything in place until the glue has dried. The block shape and density of the #2 foam provides a better grip than round foam handles found, for example, on paddle drums.

When working with hearing-impaired individuals, an option can be to gently place their hand on the drum and play the pattern softly with your hand so that they can feel the beat. Usually, they can pick up the vibrations and join in. Identify indi-



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viduals wearing hearing aids and monitor their expressions for discomfort; some hearing aids cause a low-level rumble when bass-heavy drums are played. This is another reason for requiring staff members to be present to assist during the event. Reluctant participants may be encouraged if you approach them, kneel to get on their level, and play with them.

GARY HUBER'S OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prior to the pandemic, I would greet each participant and thank them for coming at the beginning and end of the program. A physical touch, eye contact, and a smile are extremely important to this group. Shake hands with men and lightly hold the hand of the women as you greet and thank them. Recognize physical limitations due to age and ability, but treat them all like royalty.

It is important to introduce the program by explaining that the drum and song circle is a participatory and interactive event where everyone can sing and play drums. Encourage everyone to help sing the songs throughout the program. If the residents have limited motor and/or verbal skills, humming is a great way to participate. "If you can say it, you can play it," so the saying goes; words or phrases are most often used to orally explain the patterns. Since there is no written score, whatever participants play in the moment will be "correct."

To start the group off, I use a 20-inch bodhran with a wood mallet and play a slow quarter-note pulse. It has a great bass note and residents react to it. I invite them to join in the drumming and get familiar with their own drum. In this environment, I do not frequently direct a fast drum roll ("rumble") from the residents because some may be physically unable to play one. When I use a roll, the duration is relatively short, maybe ten seconds or so. Watch the group and see how they respond; change accordingly. I introduce a longer roll with dynamics using shakers and ocean drums later in the program.

Observe participants for signs that they are unhappy with the instrument they are playing (e.g., the sound it makes is too loud or unpleasant, it is too difficult to hold, etc.). Offer them different ones. Attentive staff members can facilitate attention to this problem and are needed to maintain safety for the group members. If a drum falls over, your main concern is that no one gets injured.

The senior citizen group may not be able to play for 45 minutes straight; be sensitive to fatigue. Incorporate rest breaks by sharing facts and stories about the drums and songs. It is also informative to provide a brief history about the djembe and other drums being used, the African oral tradition, and other aspects

of drumming and group singing. Do some homework and learn enough to give brief talks about the frame drum, tambourine, and dumbek.

It is good to give a 30-second talk about your background (e.g., your experience in performing groups). Tell them something fun about yourself. If seniors want to join in the discussion, let them add their knowledge and experience. Start a conversation by asking if anyone has participated in a choir or played an instrument.

Another strategy for creating rest breaks is to reserve some unique instruments that are not shared in the circle. Keep them hidden until you see a need for a brief session of show-and-tell. Some special instruments to feature are agogo bell, claves, dumbek, talking drum, slide whistle, siren whistle, finger cymbals, ocean drum, bodhran, and riq. Tambourines and pandiero are always fun to introduce and play. Alternatively, if participants are smiling and most of the group is playing, let the groove continue while other group members rest and enjoy the music going on around them.

Include in the program songs that connect with the residents to remind them of their youth. Favorite songs are a great way to engage and develop a relationship with the residents. It is important to know the song lyrics and be able to sing some of the melody. For this reason, be familiar with some standards.

Popular songs that are good for drumming with senior citizens include "How Much is that Doggie in the Window," "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue," "Take Me Out to the Ball Park," "If You're Happy and You Know It," "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," "Day-O (Banana Boat Song)," "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Rise," "Oye Como Va," "Yes, We Have No Bananas," and the classic commercial song "I Wish I Were an Oscar Meyer Weiner."

If you do not have a great singing voice, use this as an additional means to jokingly motivate participants to join with group singing. Tell them that it's like a marching band where they have to play and sing at the same time. Participants may play just the basic pulse beat or another simple rhythm to accompany. Participants may lead different versions of the songs you choose, so be flexible.

Solicit song suggestions from participants. My experience is that few volunteer song ideas because I mention that if they request a song, participants need to know the words. An unusual song suggestion that has been well-received is "Habanera" from George Bizet's *Carmen*. The bass line is like "Cake & Ice Cream." When participants are asked if anyone likes opera, usually a small number will respond. However, when I start singing the melody and playing the drum, almost everyone joins in.

PROGRAM WRAP-UP

It is important to be cognizant of the time and finish on schedule. There might be another program coming up or, more importantly, lunch or snack time. If the group is really involved and having fun, ask the staff if it is possible to play another 5–10 minutes. End the program with a simple drum pattern, limited roll or rumble, and a strong ending note.

For a group of 12 or fewer participants, consider moving from groove-based drumming to freeform soundscapes inspired by nature. An ocean drum is invaluable for this purpose. I often bring two ocean drums and “volunteer” one of the staff members to assist me in providing all participants a chance to play it. After giving the staff member a quick lesson on the drum, the two of you may quickly move among participants. This can then be expanded into an ocean composition.

Distribute wooden frog guiros; they have raised spines that make great frog sounds when scraped. Add maracas, shakers, and tambourines, then conduct the group with a rise and fall movement of your arms to signal dynamics. Circulate ocean drums and frogs so other participants get to play them, too. After a quiet finish, give a round of applause.

At that point, you and staff members can walk around the circle with a box to collect the instruments. It is important to stow the instruments before seniors begin to move from the circle so that the instruments do not become tripping hazards. This public collection also signals that instruments are not souvenirs or party favors.

Whether you ended with a groove or with an ocean drum, wrap up by thanking people for participating, expressing the hope that they had fun. Thank staff members who assisted during the program. Similar to setup, you may have an audience while packing up. Answer questions and acknowledge comments while you continue to pack the instruments. Professional courtesy requires that you keep smiling and talking as you work. Politely decline any offers of help in order to avoid injury to people or instruments.

CLOSING

Participating in group music making – particularly combining percussion-based activities and singing – can be a rehabilitative and restorative activity. Such activity has been shown to help slow brain dysfunctions, increase physical and social activity, and help reduce depression. The drop in depression comes from the activity of drumming and singing on a neural and hormonal level when dopamine, the “feel-good” hormone, is released. If participants have smiles on their faces, then you have succeeded.

Active participation in group drumming and singing also helps lower depression through group support and a reduction in isolation. Although it may look like there are a lot of people in an eldercare facility, until seniors join a group activity, many of them feel “alone in public.” With your drum facilitation skills,

you have the opportunity to impact the lives of senior citizens using drum and song. In fact, the positive emotional, neurological, and physical benefits extend to old and young alike. Your musical gifts can bring connection, fellowship, and spark to the lives of others.

RESOURCES

Training and experience are needed for leading any drum circle. Basic facilitator trainings are a must and are offered through several different in-person and online programs.

- Drum Circle Facilitators Guild: <https://www.dcfg.net>
- Remo Health Rhythms: <https://remo.com/experience/post/healthrhythms>
- UCLArts & Healing – Beat the Odds and Social Emotional Arts Certificate Programs: <https://uclartsandhealing.org/our-programs-list-pg>
- Village Music Circles: <https://villagemusiccircles.com>
- Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC): Sunday Facilitators Certificate Training. Also, PAS Interactive Drumming Committee Members are available to answer your questions: pulsekim2@gmail.com

REFERENCE

Friedman, R. L. (2011). *The healing power of the drum. a journey of rhythm and stories*. White Cliffs Media.

Gary Huber is the owner of Heartbeat Drum, LLC, and is a member of the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee and the Drum Circle Facilitators Guild.

Christopher Karow is a Remo Health Rhythms Trained Facilitator, facilitator-mentor for the Georgia College Community Drumming Group (part of the GCSU Music Therapy program), and a member of PAS and the American Music Therapy Association.