

Mental health research: The healing power of indigenous drumming

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Gilles Comeau, Senior Scientist at the University of Ottawa, Institute of Mental Health Research at The Royal, explores the healing power of Indigenous drumming

Drumming is a core part of Indigenous culture, essential for healing and community building. The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health has invited researchers from the University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research (IMHR) at The Royal to collaborate to deepen our understanding of the healing power of drumming.

Wabano – serving Indigenous peoples from diverse backgrounds, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis – strives to connect Indigenous practices and knowledge with Western scientific methods in this project.

Indigenous drumming background

Drumming has been a traditional healing practice for Indigenous Peoples for centuries. The drum is a sacred practice used in ceremonies, and its beat is considered the “heartbeat of Mother Earth”. For First Nations people, the hand drum (Dewe-i-gan in the Anishinaabe language) is not merely an object but a sacred being with which one enters a relationship. ⁽¹⁾

Drumming is recognized as a healing tool to foster or restore wellness and balance to the four elements of Indigenous health: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. ⁽¹⁻³⁾ This relationship with the drum provides a profound sense of healing and a sense of connectedness with one’s Indigenous culture, spirituality, and fellow drumming peers. ⁽¹⁾

At a time when Truth and Reconciliation is a major focus in Canada, drum circles are a way for Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their culture and heritage despite the devastating impact colonization has had on their community. ⁽³⁾ As part of this healing process, drumming is being used as a therapeutic practice with Indigenous Peoples all across Canada to help deal with trauma, create cohesion and purpose, and connect on a spiritual level. ⁽⁴⁾

Based on traditional ways of knowing, Indigenous communities have long recognized the positive impact of drumming on health and wellbeing. Yet few studies have scientifically assessed the impact of Indigenous drumming on healing, and published academic research on Indigenous drumming in Canada is limited.

The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health now seeks to co-design and co-lead scientific studies exploring the healing power of Indigenous drumming. They acknowledge the value of Western scientific research for future funding opportunities for drumming practices as a culturally based mental health initiative.

Two-lens approach: Two-Eye Seeing

Adopting a Two-Eyed Seeing (2ES) guiding principle makes this project truly transformational. The 2ES teaching was conceptualized and promulgated by Mi'kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall, and supported by their non-Indigenous collaborator, Cheryl Bartlett ⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

According to the Elders' teaching, one eye represents Western ways of knowing, and the other represents Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the world. This approach is about "learning to use both eyes together for the benefit of all."

With this approach, we will examine the benefits of Indigenous drumming with a mixed-method lens. This research project aims to gather rich data that reflects the participants' views and experiences and to understand how engaging in drumming sessions impacts various aspects of their lives, including health, social connections, and cultural engagement. This will be studied through Indigenous narratives (verbal narratives about the experience of drumming) and traditional oral teaching.

At the same time, Western research methodology will use observational approaches (to understand how the groups operate and what types of activities occur), focus groups (guided open discussion), and psychometric questionnaires (standard questions about mood, emotions, and wellbeing answered immediately after a drumming session, or over a period of time).

Through this blended and collaborative approach, we are seeking a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of Indigenous drumming on: 1) health and wellbeing (we will gather perceived improvements in physical, mental, emotional health, and overall wellbeing); 2) social connection (we will investigate how drumming sessions contribute to the participants' sense of community and social support and explore how the role of shared cultural experiences enhances social connections among participants); and 3) cultural significance (we will assess the importance of cultural reconnection through the drumming sessions and identify how participation influences participants' views on their cultural heritage and identity).

Additionally, at the request of our Indigenous partners, we will investigate the biological impact of drumming at The Royal's Brain Imaging Centre. By measuring heart rates and heart rate variability, breathing patterns, and changes in brain function using electroencephalography (EEG) and magnetic brain imaging (MRI), we aim to better understand the neural mechanisms that could explain the benefits of Indigenous drumming on mental health and wellbeing. This research will examine the immediate effects after a single drumming session and the cumulative impact over multiple weeks of group drumming sessions.

This collaborative research project is a commitment to learning from and through partnerships. Through co-design and co-leadership, we can be assured the research is shared with first-hand knowledge and expertise, which greatly helps validate the appropriateness of the research activities. Aligned with the principles of Two-Eyed Seeing, this approach will provide researchers and partners with tangible ways to share responsibilities and work in collaboration to co-create knowledge.

Mental health research: Outcomes

For the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, this project is a powerful opportunity to demonstrate the profound value of Indigenous culture to the broader population. Beyond enriching Western knowledge with evidence of the healing power of Indigenous drumming, it holds the potential to inspire greater recognition and investment in cultural interventions within Indigenous organizations.

For the IMHR at The Royal, this partnership represents a true collaborative construction of new knowledge that will provide a deeper understanding of the benefits of Indigenous drumming by considering both the interconnectedness of elements within a system (Indigenous perspective) and the analytical, scientific approach (Western perspective). This collaboration will transform how we think about conducting research, and building and disseminating knowledge.

Music to prevent and treat mental illness: Conclusion

This joint study is one example of the novel research underway at The Royal's new Music and Mental Health Research Clinic, which aims to understand how music can impact healing and to develop best practices for using music in preventing and treating mental illness.

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