

reclaiming

children and youth



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A photograph of a group of young boys, likely of African descent, sitting in a row and playing djembe drums. They are wearing bright yellow polo shirts and blue visors. The boy in the foreground is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is slightly blurred, showing other participants and a bright, outdoor setting.

Drumming Up Courage

Simon Faulkner

The DRUMBEAT program is used across Australia and New Zealand with young people at risk. The author summarizes the theory, practice, and evidence base of this intervention and its link to the principles of the Circle of Courage® model.

The Holyoake DRUMBEAT (Discovering Relationships Using Music—Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes, & Thoughts) program was first developed in 2003 as a means of engaging Australian Aboriginal youth who were resistant to talk-based therapeutic approaches. Aboriginal Australians, like indigenous peoples in many other countries, are over-represented in a wide range of negative health and education statistics and cultural differences have found Western therapeutic approaches often confronting, inappropriate, and insensitive (Aboriginal Health Improvement Unit, 2012; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The DRUMBEAT program was designed to provide a safe environment for young people by using the incentive of playing music as a tool for engagement and inclusion.

The Holyoake Institute in Western Australia is a leading drug and alcohol treatment service with a strong emphasis on prevention, self-determination, and support for the whole family. The DRUMBEAT program was designed to address the major risk factors associated with drug and alcohol misuse—factors common to a wide range of alienating behaviours and circumstances. Among these risk factors are poor peer relationships, low self-esteem, dislocation from school, alienation, experimental drug use, and poor use of recreational time (Loxley et al., 2004). The DRUMBEAT program incorporates key exercises and conversations that directly address each of these risk factors.

DRUMBEAT is a formal program designed to be delivered across ten sessions, with each session exploring a different theme, such as Peer Pressure, Feelings and Emotions, Bullying, Identity, Social Responsibility, and Teamwork. DRUMBEAT is a flexible program that combines experiential learning with cognitive behavioural therapy (See Table 1: The DRUMBEAT Process). The experiential process replicates traditional modes of learning (Trudgen, 2000) with the physical action of drumming, stimulating attention and allowing for the release of feelings. The drumming also provides for a safe connection to others, builds trust, and allows people to open up and discuss relevant issues and personal perspectives with the trained facilitator. In DRUMBEAT, the drum is used as a tool for engagement, as a means of self-expression, and as a cue for self-reflection.

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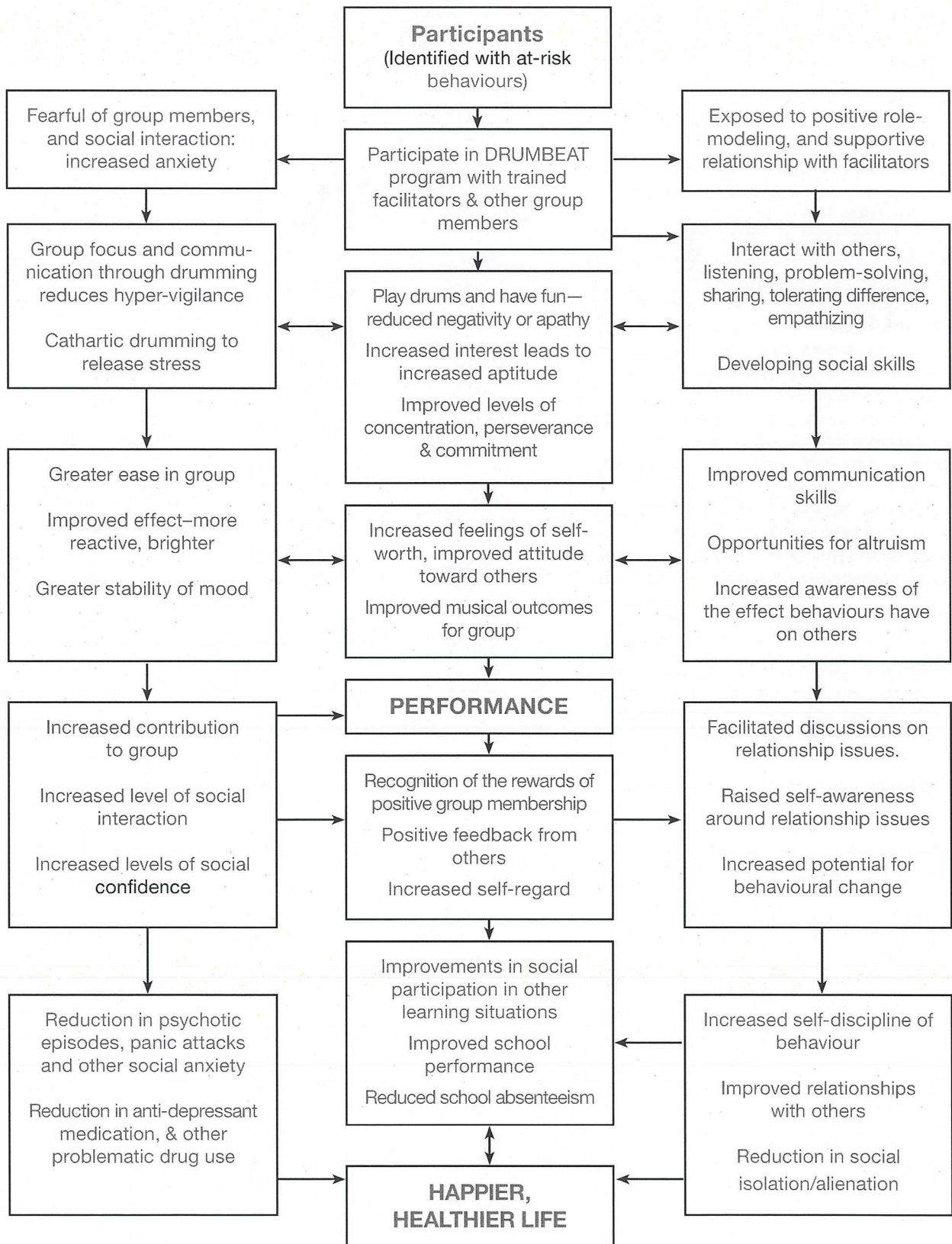
Drumming has long formed part of traditional healing rituals in many cultures worldwide and now is being used increasingly as a contemporary-therapeutic strategy (Freidman, 2000). Music provides young people with a strong source of emotional support when they feel troubled or lonely and contributes strongly to their sense of identity and connection to the world around them (Hallam, 2009). DRUMBEAT draws on that innate connection to provide a safe environment and explore issues central to a meaningful and happy life.

Underlying the success of the program is a strong focus on values—a focus that mirrors the underlying philosophy of the Circle of Courage model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). The Circle of Courage model of positive youth empowerment is based on a combination of the traditional Native American approach to child rearing and modern, evidence-based, youth work practice. In the DRUMBEAT program the bass note is connected through metaphor to the same values that support people and communities in healthy relationships. In the same way that core values support healthy relationships, the bass note supports the rhythm—if the bass is inconsistent or unreliable or if it is taken away altogether, the rhythm breaks down and people are left disconnected.

Other commonalities between the Circle of Courage model and the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program include a focus on empowering students through success and fostering responsibility; building on strengths and recognising the inherent good in young people; encouraging new behaviours through intrinsic motivators such as belonging, acceptance, recognition, and autonomy; and providing opportunities for altruism and acts of generosity.

Although the DRUMBEAT program is a formal template for instruction, a key element in its design is the flexibility within the program that enables the facilitator to adapt the course content to the needs of the group members on any particular day. This allows it to be used with a wide range of young people from different cultural backgrounds, of different ages and genders, and at different developmental stages. This adaptability is actively encouraged and also allows the facilitators to draw on their own strengths.

Table 1: The DRUMBEAT Process



The universal relevance of the relationship themes in DRUMBEAT also allow it to be applied to people facing numerous types of social challenges, as most of these are in some manner caused by relationship dysfunction and will benefit from healthy relational support (Cohen, 2004).

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Many of the core strategies for youth engagement, support, and the mediation of conflict are common to both DRUMBEAT and the Circle of Courage. In the three-day DRUMBEAT Facilitator training program, significant time is allocated to exploring the development of the therapeutic relationship, examining effective facilitation, and considering appropriate, non-punitive responses to conflict or challenging behaviours. This aspect of the training parallels many of the underlying principles of the Circle of Courage RAP curriculum and best practice group-work counselling.

The DRUMBEAT program is now being taught to and used by young people and adults across Australia and New Zealand in a variety of settings such as schools, youth services, drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities, child protection residential facilities, mental health services, children's hospitals, refugee trauma associations, and prisons. The program is the core therapeutic intervention for The Department of Child Protection with an adapted version for young people with complex needs used in all metropolitan residential units. An extended version of the program is also taught in high schools as a recognised unit of curriculum in personal development.

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Evaluation has informed the design of the DRUMBEAT program since its inception and has led to significant changes in program content over the years. To date, eight studies have been published on the impact of the program, including three in

peer-reviewed journals. Settings for these studies included schools, prisons, refugee trauma services, and mental health services. The findings have all shown similar effects with increases in self-esteem and emotional control, reductions in behavioural incidents and school absenteeism, and improved relationships with peers and teachers (Faulkner, Ivery, Wood, & Donovan, 2010).

Over 2,500 professionals have undertaken the DRUMBEAT Facilitator training course, predominantly teachers and youth workers. Since early 2010, Holyoake has implemented an accreditation system, which serves as both a form of quality control and a mechanism to capture more data on where and how the program is being utilised. Facilitators are required to provide feedback regarding a range of outcomes for the young people with whom they work. For facilitators delivering DRUMBEAT regularly as part of their work, a senior level of accreditation is available that requires a more detailed evaluation.

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From the returned data, as part of this process, over 2,000 young people have been assessed as part of nearly 220 DRUMBEAT groups across Australia. Young people attending these programs come with a broad range of challenging behaviours and traumatic backgrounds.

Findings from these assessments report that:

1. The average improvement in group members' relationship with peers and other adults was 42%. Many facilitators reported an increased sense of belonging and community connection for their DRUMBEAT students.
2. The average improvement in group member levels of emotional control was 44% leading anecdotally to reductions in school suspensions and improved behaviour outside the DRUMBEAT class.
3. The average increase in group members' levels of self-esteem was 56% with common remarks about shy and withdrawn students finding their voices.

4. The average increase in levels of teamwork and cooperation was 75% leading anecdotally to improved levels of group cooperation in main-stream classes.
5. Other consistent qualitative feedback noted improved levels of focus and concentration and a new sense of pride—both for the individual and as a group.

Working with young people who are in need of support is both a huge responsibility and a huge privilege. For those who dedicate their lives to this work, the pleasure of establishing strong and respectful relationships with young people as well as building trust and watching the personal growth that often eventuates is extremely rewarding. At the same time, support for young people is limited and a lack of focus or commitment on the part of the worker can add to the despair that many young people feel as a result of the betrayal of adults in their lives. Having models and programs that engage young people, are flexible and practical in meeting the changing needs of young people, and are grounded in good theory and proven research is critical. With a good tool, the right experience, and the right attitude, the challenge of reclaiming youth thought lost is that much easier.

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For information on becoming a DRUMBEAT facilitator visit www.holyoake.org.au

Photo on page 18 used with permission from the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program.

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