

“Health benefits of drumming can’t be beaten, many say”

By [Joe Blundo](#) *The Columbus Dispatch* • Thursday October 4, 2012

Nancy Buehler arrived at drumming class with a toothache. An hour of percussion later, she was feeling no pain.

“I feel great,” said Buehler, 82. “I’ve forgotten all about my tooth. It really helps.”

Every two weeks, Buehler sits in a circle with her classmates — most in their 80s — at Westminster-Thurber retirement community in Victorian Village and pounds out polyrhythms on hand drums with teacher Roger Myers of Gahanna.

Myers, a musician and music educator, believes in the therapeutic benefits of group drumming: Research has suggested, he said, that the pastime improves concentration, reduces stress, alleviates pain and boosts the immune system.

What’s more, the mental and physical engagement is exhilarating.

“There’s this multi-sensory engagement involving visual, audio and tactile,” Myers said. “We’re talking about stimulation.”

He isn’t alone in his enthusiasm.

At Grant Medical Center, therapists take percussion instruments into patients’ rooms and invite them to play as a way of relieving pain and stress, and engaging them socially.

And, about a year ago, the African American Alzheimer’s and Wellness Association, a nonprofit organization (www.africanamericanalz.org) based in Columbus, began inviting clients with dementia to participate in drum circles. The circles are part of a larger arts program that the group runs to help such patients.

Even people with Alzheimer’s can keep time to music, which often helps clients become less withdrawn, said Kim Lawson, CEO of the association.

“Research shows the brain forms new neurological pathways when performing arts,” Lawson said.

How drums are used varies with the program and the participants.

During a recent class at Westminster-Thurber, Myers distributed hand drums to the eight participants and instructed them to close their eyes and follow his simple rhythm. He gradually increased the tempo, then added variations. Later, he led them through a session in which group drumming was interspersed with improvised solos.

When the group drumming really got going, some participants were shouting with glee at their efforts.

“It released our tigers,” Jean Lundstedt, 85, explained afterward.

For Buehler, drumming provides a substitute for dancing, a lifelong passion that she does less of these days.

“When I realized I was getting older and couldn’t dance like I had danced, I thought, well, at least I can dance my fingers on a drum.”

The idea that drumming can be therapeutic isn’t surprising, given how the brain works, said Dr. Douglas Scharre, medical director of the Neurobehavior and Memory Disorders Clinics at Ohio State University’s Wexner Medical Center.

“The brain is designed to identify music and rhythm patterns readily,” Scharre said. “It triggers frontal and limbic parts of the brain, and helps the brain draw specific attention to the sound. In some, it may be therapeutic and calming, just like other forms of music.”

Grant began using drumming about seven years ago, said Paula Kobelt, clinical outcomes manager for pain management and complementary therapies. Usually, two or three staff members take percussion instruments to rooms and invite patients to join them in playing rhythms.

“We’ve seen it release people’s tensions,” Kobelt said. “Their mood seems to improve.”

In one case, she asked a patient whether he minded her drumming for his roommate.

“He said, ‘No, no.’”

Then he produced a guitar and played along.

Another patient requested drummers when he had his dressings changed because the music helped him cope with pain.

“I think it has to do with just letting yourself relax,” Kobelt said.

Drumming at West-minster-Thurber, Sue Milligan said, gave her some comfort after her husband died this year.

“Your mind goes right to the drumming, and you don’t think of anything else,” she said.

Milligan, 81, acknowledged that the idea of senior citizens jamming on drums might seem strange to the uninitiated.

“Some of my friends say: ‘You’re drumming? What on earth are you doing that for?’”

Her classmate Diane Persinger, 66, would happily tell them that anything that helps her deal with the complications of aging is welcome.

“You go for drumming, and you don’t even think of anything else,” Persinger said. “And when you come out, you just feel like you can continue the challenges.”