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Drumming through trauma: Music therapy with post-traumatic soldiers

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Abstract

Combat stress reaction is common among soldiers and can develop to a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This distressing condition embraces symptoms such as feelings of loneliness and isolation from society, intrusive memories, outbursts of anger and generalized feelings of helplessness. Drumming has been receiving considerable attention in music therapy. Only few references relate to such activity among those who suffer from PTSD, and even fewer relate to combat induced post-traumatic syndrome, none of them empirical. The current study presents music therapy group work with six soldiers diagnosed as suffering from combat or terror related PTSD. Data were collected from digital cameras which filmed the sessions, open-ended in-depth interviews, and a self-report of the therapist. Some reduction in PTSD symptoms was observed following drumming, especially increased sense of openness, togetherness, belonging, sharing, closeness, connectedness and intimacy, as well as achieving a non-intimidating access to traumatic memories, facilitating an outlet for rage and regaining a sense of self-control.

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Introduction

Dancing and drumming have served as communal expression since the early ages of humanity. Communities used to beat drums before hunting and harvest feasts, during marriage and funeral ceremonies, and when preparing for and during battle (Beattie, 1963; Blades, 1970; Carrington, 1969; Gerson-Kiwi, 1950; Hanna, 1979; Moore, 1979; Okoreaffia, 1979; Putilov, 1979; Reck, 1977). Drumming has been receiving considerable attention in music therapy (see for example, Aigen, 1998; Amir, 1999; Edgerton, 1994; Kaser, 1991; Nordoff & Robbins, 1977, 1985; Watson, 2002). However, only few references relate to drumming with people who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Orth & Verburgt, 2004; Rogers, 1993; Slotoroff, 1994). Even fewer were found to relate to soldiers (Burt, 1995). None of them are empirical research.

Combat stress reaction is a common syndrome among soldiers and can take the form of PTSD. This distressing condition includes symptoms such as feelings of loneliness and isolation from society (Solomon & Mikulincer, 1990; Walker & Nash, 1981), intrusive traumatic memories, and outbursts of anger (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It may weaken the individual's strength and power of control while leaving the individual with feelings of helplessness (Herman, 1992; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Symonds, 1982).

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The current study explored the use of group music therapy with soldiers who suffer from PTSD induced by combat or terror attack. It examined spontaneous drumming as a way to facilitate a sense of belonging, intimacy, togetherness, and connectedness; to achieve a non-intimidating access to traumatic memories; to allow an outlet for rage; and to regain a sense of control.

Drums in wars

Until the noisy and lethal weapons of the 20th century made them vanished, drums were inseparable part of warfare. Drums have frequently been used before battle to inspire and boost the moral and on the battlefield to intimidate the enemy and give signals to troops as well (Reck, 1977). In the mid-18th century, the Turkish army of the Ottoman Empire marched to the sounds of kettledrum, tenor drum and bass drum among other instruments. This impressive percussion sound was soon adopted by European armies (Hart, 1990).

By the time of the Renaissance, armies in Europe had worked out musical languages to communicate information during battles. Warriors marched into the battle field to the beat of side drums. Changes in drum rhythm signaled march, approach, fire, battle, skirmish, retreat or cease fire (Blades, 1970; Hart, 1990), and each army had its unique set of rhythms (Blades, 1970). It was considered dishonorable to wound a drummer, although the capture of an enemy's drum was symbolically very important (Hart, 1990).

In the 20th century, drums served as a means to communicate between outer villages within virgin forests. During the four years Nigeria suffered from war (1967–1970), drums were used to announce the arrival of supply (Hindley, 1981). In North Africa, in a place named Kele, two lower beat tones followed by two upper ones signaled the arrival of the enemy (Carrington, 1969). In Ghana, after the Ashanti people submitted to British rule, whenever the Governor appeared for a durbar, he was greeted ceremonially with drum music. The Ashanti used talking drums which translated the text of an old song 'Slowly but surely we shall kill . . .' whose meaning was clear to everyone except the British (Rhodes, 1962).

Post-combat stress

In terms of the DSM-IV-TR (1994), psychological trauma is a response to overwhelming personal threat in which the psychic apparatus surrenders to a situation of terror and immediacy of death. PTSD is a complex array of symptoms which may appear in three forms, according to the onset and duration of the symptoms: acute, when the duration of symptoms is less than three months; chronic, when the duration of symptoms lasts three months or longer; and with delayed onset, when at least six months have lapsed between the traumatic event and the onset of the symptoms. PTSD comprises three sets of symptoms: intrusion, avoidance, and hyper-arousal. Some of its salient symptoms are intrusive traumatic memories and outbursts of anger. The latter can cause undesirable disturbances in interpersonal communication.

Combat stress is common among soldiers and can develop into PTSD syndrome (Solomon, 1989a, 1989b; Solomon & Oppenheimer, 1986; Solomon, Oppenheimer, Elizur, & Waysman, 1990). Soldiers who suffer from combat induced PTSD report feelings of loneliness and isolation from society (Solomon & Mikulincer, 1990; Walker & Nash, 1981), being left helpless and deprived of strength and power of control (Herman, 1992; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Symonds, 1982).

Between 27% and 29% of World War II veterans have suffered from PTSD (Rosen, Fields, Hand, Falsettie, & van Kammen, 1989; Speed, Engdahl, Schwartz, & Eberly, 1989). The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) estimated PTSD prevalence rate among Vietnam veterans to be 15.2% (Kulka et al., 1990). PTSD has been found among 16% of the frontline Israeli soldiers one year after the 1982 Lebanon War (Solomon, Weisenberg, Schewarzwald, & Mikulincer, 1987).

Group music therapy and PTSD

The powerful effect of playing music in a group may be due to its idiosyncratic merit. During group discussions it is impossible to talk simultaneously and feel 'we-ness' since it requires individuality for its intelligibility. This, however, is achievable in group music playing, since pitch intervals allow harmonious voice blending when sounding together and temporal regularity facilitates motor synchronicity (Brown, 2000). Moreover, an individual can simultaneously

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