

Drumming Circles: Keeping the TS Beat

by Candida B. Korman

Many people with TS experience relief from tics during rhythmic activities. From swimming and running to singing and dancing, keeping a steady beat blows off excess tension and eases some tics. The science behind this phenomenon has yet to be thoroughly explored but the anecdotal reports are, if nothing else, fun. One original application is drumming circles. Matt Giordano has TS and leads drumming circles. He says that it's a great way to release, ". . . bottled-up energy, tics and frustrations."

What is a drumming circle?

The participants sit in a circle, each one is given a drum or other percussion instrument—shaker, tambourine, cow bell, etc. Matt usually spends five minutes getting everyone comfortable with the instruments. The drumming starts slowly, usually on a steady quarter beat and then gradually works up until everyone is wailing away. The activity is not confined to tapping, shaking and striking instruments as clapping, stomping, toe tapping, vocalizing and dancing are all encouraged.

"Sometimes we have half the circle doing one beat and the other half another beat. We work our way up to a crescendo of energy and at a certain point we're not just playing, but yelling and stomping feet and dancing outside the circle. I like to keep the drummers in the center—as if they are the fire at the center of the circle. It's a tribal feeling. Nothing exists outside of the rhythm." Matt says of the experience, "It's quite a blast to experience and an amazing thing to be a part of."

Everyone works up a heart pumping sweat so Matt gradually slows the pace down, ending the drumming circle with a quiet and relaxing meditation.

How do participants feel during the circle?

Matt and other drumming circle aficionados say that it's a joyful experience that's both invigorating and relaxing. Matt led a drumming circle for children at one of the TSA national conferences and can say that kids who are often shy about their tics found the drumming circle liberating. "A lot of people with TS enjoy releasing their tics into the drumming."

Most people with TS use a great deal of energy to suppress tics, so in contrast to nearly all social situations, a drumming circle is a venue where they can feel comfortable fully participating—tics and all. Letting loose is encouraged.

Drumming circles are for everyone, but what do professional musicians with TS think?

Jazz musician Michael Wolff took a quick look in on one of the drumming circles at the TSA national conference. What struck him most was simply that the experience was fun for the kids involved. "Part of what I've always loved about making music is interacting with other people—interacting with the listeners and

other musicians too. A group thing for kids who might not always be so comfortable is awesome.” The drumming circle of children with TS made him imagine a group of people with TS visiting Brazil during Carnival. “It would be the perfect place for everyone to get lost in the rhythms of the crowds.”

What’s so important about rhythm?

According to pianist Eric Barnhill, rhythm may hold the key to diminishing tics.

“From the earliest time I had TS, at about 10, those around me noticed that whatever the symptoms I had disappeared when I played the piano, which was already a strong interest for me. This later also proved to be true when I practiced Tai Chi. I’ve since found many other stories corroborating that rhythmic movement is a great reducer of the symptoms of TS. People often think of rhythm as simply being able to keep a beat or hold correct time. But rhythm is only partially about timing. Rhythm is the confluence of multiple forces or energies in time. Someone who dances rhythmically doesn’t only keep the beat, which many terrible dancers can do—but coordinates all the diverse motions of the body into some sort of organic, intelligible whole that responds to the diverse elements in the music. Similarly, in rhythmic music making the time is often not strict, but adjusts to accommodate the events of not only meter, but pitch, harmony, and/or words.”

To Eric, TS can be thought of as a rhythmic dysfunction. He believes that if people with TS learn to develop their rhythmic sense they will be better able to both ease their minds and symptoms. He uses a system called Dalcroze Eurhythmics, developed by the Swiss composer Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) early in the 20th century.

Dalcroze emphasized the effect of movement on the perception of music and trained physical awareness in the entire body—not just the fingertips on a keyboard and the brain. It became a popular method for music education before WWI and attracted many important figures in all the arts, physiology and psychology.* It is still a highly thought of method of music education in both the U.S. and in Europe.

High school music teacher and jazz saxophone player, Michael Buzzeo, has observed the phenomenon of his own tics disappearing while he’s playing music. He’s also noticed the heightened level of focus in students with attention disorders. “ADD and ADHD tend to make them roam the room, but I’ve seen kids with ADD able to focus and concentrate on music. It’s like

working with the other side of the brain—the side without TS.”

Paige Vickery, a conductor, also finds that her tics diminish during conducting, playing the flute or other instruments, “. . . people comment frequently about how my tics go away while I’m conducting. I have always considered myself a rhythmic person over a melodic one. Most musicians sway one way or the other. I thrive off of the rhythm—the more rhythmic instruments and compositions.”

Paige thinks that anyone—with TS or without—would find drumming circles or minimalist classical music** very peaceful. She considers the repetition of patterns to be hypnotic and likens them to meditation.

Michael Wolff also points out that there are many levels and kinds of rhythms in music, including harmonic rhythms and the timing at which melodic phrases change. It’s more than hitting the beat. His observation directly correlates to Paige’s ideas about the hypnotic sensation of repetitive phrases of music, as repetition of phrases and variations on themes are elements in many styles from classical and jazz to folk and Latin music.

Does rhythm have an impact on the stress related to performing?

Most amateur musicians find the prospect of performing on a stage before an audience daunting. In a drumming circle there are no stars or solos and the group effort helps to diminish any fears or shyness. It’s actually a wonderful place to “let go” of pent up tics, releasing them without embarrassment into the din of rhythmic sounds.

But what about professional musicians? What is the impact of rhythm on the stress of performing? Singer, songwriter and guitarist Rick Fowler points out that, “. . . the stage is not a place of stress for those of us who routinely perform. It is actually an escape from a much more stressful world. For me it is the only public place where I can feel comfortable. Walking through a grocery store or sitting in a waiting room are much more stressful scenarios to me because I feel like an outsider in that environment. I can’t imagine what it is like not to have tics. When I see someone take several relaxed sips of coffee without spilling any, it is like watching someone perform a superhuman feat. I simply feel a bit out of place and to be totally honest; a bit inferior.”

But on stage, in the midst of creating music, Rick and other musicians are at home and excel in the very environment that most people fear—the spotlight. Rick

believes that, “. . . when a person is focused on a task, particularly one that is hypnotic (such as playing rhythmic music) the Tourettic mind has difficulty breaking through this concentration.” He views TS as a saboteur bent on undermining the fluidity of his thoughts and movements. Participating in a rhythmic activity diverts his attention from these distracting impulses. “I find it easy to become engrossed in performing. The saboteur has more difficulty disrupting me during those times.”

Whatever else—drumming circles are fun!

Drumming circles have been credited with all sorts of healing powers and meditative properties. As of right now, there has been no scientific investigation of drumming—or the impact of music in general—on people with TS, but the personal observations of many professional and amateur musicians are worth a second look.

Is there a connection between the focused concentration needed to play an instrument and a marked decrease in tic symptoms? The anecdotal observations of many musicians support this theory. Is this phenomenon peculiar to drumming? It seems more likely that the experience is broader and that drumming is only one route to this positive end.

Drumming circles are particularly appealing to children and amateurs as musical talent and experience are required only of the leaders.

“Whenever I do drumming circles with kids they love it!” Matt stated. “A lot of them come into the room sad, frustrated or angry but as soon as they see the drums they light up. To a lot of kids being a drummer, even for a few minutes, is a dream come true. Participating gives them a sense of accomplishment and being a part of the group is fun too—almost magical.”

So get out there and drum! Or try Salsa dancing, listening to classical music, singing along with Broadway cast albums or jogging with an iPod loaded with your favorite tunes. Choose your beat and give it a try.

** Among the notables in the arts intrigued by Dalcroze were the acting innovator Stanislavsky, the playwright George Bernard Shaw, and the choreographer and founder of the Ballet Rambert, Marie Rambert. Contemporary music fans will recognize the name Eurhythmics from the music group of the same name featuring singer Annie Lennox who studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London.*

*** Phillip Glass, John Adams, among others.*

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ADDITIONAL TSA RESOURCES

Videos & Vignettes

AV-9 After the Diagnosis . . . The Next Steps

Produced expressly for individuals and families who have received a new diagnosis of TS. This video was developed to help clarify what TS is, to offer encouragement, and to dispel misperceptions about having TS. Features several families in excerpts from the Family Life With TS A Six-Part Series who recount their own experiences as well as comments from medical experts. Narrated by Academy Award Winner Richard Dreyfuss. 35 min.

AV-10 The Complexities of TS Treatment: A Physicians' Roundtable

Three internationally recognized TS experts, Drs. Cathy Budman, Joseph Jankovic and John Walkup provide colleagues with valuable information about the complexities of treating and advising families with TS. Emphasis is on different clinical approaches to patients with a broad range of symptom severity. Co-morbid and associated conditions are covered. 15 min.

AV-10a Clinical Counseling: Towards an Understanding of Tourette Syndrome

Targeted to counselors, social workers, educators, psychologists and families, this video features expert physicians, allied professionals and several families summarizing key issues that can arise when counseling families with TS. Includes valuable insights from the vantage point of those who have TS and those who seek to help them. 15 min.

AV-11 Family Life With Tourette Syndrome . . . Personal Stories . . . A Six-Part Series

Adults, teenagers, children, and their families . . . all affected by Tourette Syndrome describe lives filled with triumphs and setbacks . . . struggle and growth. Informative and inspirational, these stories present universal issues and resonate with a sense of hope, possibility, and love. 58 min.

An up-to-date Catalog of Publications
and Videos can be obtained by contacting:



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