

ADDICTION PROFESSIONAL: WHAT'S WORKING IN TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

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Catching the Beat of the Drum: Drumming's effect on individuals, groups make it a promising complementary therapy

By

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The conscious and the unconscious

Steven Angel has been drumming since he was 3. A prodigy drummer, he immersed himself in the Los Angeles rock scene of the late 1960's, touring with prominent bands of the era. Fast forward to the 1990's, when Angel wanted to get back into drumming. At that point he had a moment when "drumming and psychology and mysticism sort of came together."

The result was a drumming methodology he developed, steeped in the Shamanic healing tradition. He first had success working in detention camps and curbing impulsive behavior. He also has worked with elementary school students on short- and long-term memory, calling the program "reading and rhythm."

In the addictions arena, Angel worked with therapists at conventions in California and Tennessee. He also has worked with psychiatrists at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center as part of their grand rounds.

Angel, who runs the Drumming for Your Life Institute in Santa Monica, California, says drumming isn't about music but is a vehicle for traveling inside, breaking apart unhealthy relationships and opening healthy ones. "What we're able to do is have the conscious and unconscious mind both actively awake and participating as the patient is an active participant through the drumming and their own re-creation," he says.

Clients with addictions have so many walls that have been put up as survival mechanisms that it takes some time to get through the complexities. But at some point, drumming "cuts through it like a laser and we're able to open up the unconscious," says Angel. "The conscious is open because they are playing, and as they're playing they're actively changing themselves."

Unlike most other drumming practitioners who work with addicted clients, Angel considers the therapy stand-alone, not necessarily an adjunct to other types of addiction treatment. Angel usually conducts 20-to-25 minute sessions followed by discussions with participants about the experience. The discussions are designed to help participants hold the experience in their conscious mind and understand it intellectually.

Like Mikena's groups, Angel's groups start playing chaotically, as each person is on an individual journey. But the group inevitably will start playing the same rhythm as "a plateau of healing takes place with new healthy relationships," says Angel. Through verbal phrasing, Angel will take participants through different body regions to facilitate healing in those places, he says.

"We take therapy out of an observational state and into an experiential state—the therapist actually experiences the therapy as well as acts as the therapist," says Angel. "They are going to feel it the same way the patient does." From a clinical perspective, the therapist, through drumming, is able to travel within a patient, seek out unhealthy relationships, and heal, says Angel.

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