

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

Ms. Poorva D Shinde^{1*}, Dr. Mrs. Mrunal A Bhardwaj²

ABSTRACT

Academic stress and anxiety can be multifaceted. It goes on to impact the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the students. Music and active participation in music making have proved beneficial in stress management and emotional wellbeing. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the impact of drum circle on NEET aspirant's emotional and mental well-being. **Method:** The sample of this study includes 47 NEET aspirants between the age group of 16-18 (Girls=23, Boys=24) from a coaching institute based in Nasik. Observations and unstructured interviews were conducted to collect data. They were coded to deduce prominent themes. **Conclusion:** the drum circle session was found to be beneficial to improve the sense of wellbeing across physical, emotional and mental domain.

Keywords: Drum circle, group drumming, NEET aspirants, psycho-social wellbeing, qualitative study.

We are part of a fast paced and competitive world. Since childhood students are groomed to aspire for careers which exemplify excellence. Mediocrity in choice of career, one's performance in exams and eventually workplace efficiency is never appreciated. Admission to any professional course demands successfully clearing the entrance exam. The cut throat competition at these exams can push a person off his/her emotional, mental and physical balance. A career in medicine or aspirations to be a doctor are considered to be one of the top professional choices. The preparation is arduous and stressful.

The National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) is given by students aspiring to be doctors in India. The exam is conducted by National Testing Agency. In year 2021, a total of 16.4lakh students registered for the exam, out of which 8.7 lakh qualified. (Sagarika,2021). NEET's exam has a multiple-choice questionnaire. There is negative marking for wrong responses. The cut off score for each caste category determines the aspirant's rank, which further goes on to determine his/her eligibility to the course. Needless to say, this process can be full of anxiety, fear, uncertainty and stress. Competition, demands of perpetually superior performance, parental pressure, peer pressure, time pressure, colossal corpus of highly

¹Research Scholar

²Vice Principal, HoD-PG Department of Psychology, LVH college, Nasik

*Corresponding Author

Received: January 14, 2023; Revision Received: January 21, 2023; Accepted: January 25, 2023

technical and super specialized knowledge to be remembered and memorized can all create a compounded burden on the aspirant. A natural feeling of burn out during the preparation is also a natural result of the pressure.

Medical aspirants particularly are researched to experience high level of stress and anxiety (Kumar et al ,2016). The nature of the exam and intrinsic and extrinsic expectations puts an extra burden on the candidates. Stress is a common unavoidable denominator to all of us. Having said, it's not always detrimental. Stress can prove to be beneficial in a task performance when in moderate levels. The Yerkes Dodson Law, states that under or over arousal/stress can prove to be unfavorable to performance. Unexpressed stress that bottles up over a period of time can mar the task outcomes and the general wellbeing of the person. Stress impacts the psychological, social and the physiological health of the person.

The nature of the entrance exam and its preparation is an exhausting process. The student apparently is left with no time for any personal recreation or entertainment. This over a period of two years or more can be monotonous and overwhelming. The aspirant can feel totally off focus and harbor negative emotions of fear and pessimism. Anxiety, depression and stress positively correlate with relatively lower score on Quality of life in psychological and physical areas of the individual (Khursheed). The inability to handle performance pressure, meet parental expectations, and achieve aspirations may lead to psychological distress and subsequent suicidal behavior. (Kar et al,2021).

Psycho- social wellbeing implies the inter and intra-individual levels of positive functioning. It implies how a person relates to self and others, it also indicates one's sense of mastery and self-growth (Burns, 2016). Psycho-social wellbeing as defined by Carol Ryff has six components. These are as follows: Self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relation with others and purpose in life. **Self-acceptance** indicates accepting oneself even in moments of despair and tribulations. Being mindful of ones shortcomings and not berating oneself of it. **Autonomy** implies self-reliance here. how confidently one can evade the pressure to comply and be like others and rather be whole in himself. **Environmental mastery** implies how well a person can maneuver around the environment/ecosystem/context the person is put in. **Personal growth**, implies the perpetual need and action for personal development, it also includes how to improve one's understanding about self. **Positive relation with others**, to have more sustaining and worthwhile connect with others. To be emotionally intelligent and aware in relationships. **Purpose in life**, implies the ability to hold focus on a goal and keep ones energy channelized towards the goal. For the purpose of the current research, psycho-social well-being will intend the above holistic definition.

The entire preparatory journey can be detrimental to the psycho-social wellbeing of the aspirant. The stressors from their academic life makes daily coping and recovery from the stress difficult. In such scenario looking for options which are recreational yet rejuvenating from the mental and emotional burden is important. In the same breath it is essential that such recreational avenue should allow the candidate to not just have a perceived sense of well being but instead a tangible improvement in their state too.

Thinking of avenues for stress management, research proves that music is not just recreational but also therapeutic in nature. It allows people to express and connect beyond language and culture barriers. A vast body of research has been growing to investigate the positive influences of music on humankind. Music boosts expression of personal inner

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

feelings and also improves positive affect. (Welsch.G et al,2020). Listening to music improves the sense of agency relating to self-efficacy and general wellbeing of adolescents (Saarikallio et al,2020). Research goes on to prove that active participation in music making activity trumps over passive music intervention.

Identifying a musical activity which doesn't call for musical expertise, is communal in nature, is engaging, fun and which can be facilitated by an expert to achieve set goals is the most crucial aspect. One such musical intervention which is drawing lot of attention and research is drum circle. Drum circle is a coming together of people to play a percussion instrument which can be a drum or any such instrument like drum (Kalani 2004). They are facilitated by trained and certified professionals. People are seated in a circle. the facilitator can move in the empty space in the middle. Various percussion instruments can be used. African Djembes are commonly used during drum circles as they are light and easy to carry. Djembes gives an individual a vantage point to sit with the instrument fixed between their two crossed limbs. This gives the person the ease to play the instrument.

Rational

The perpetual stress to keep rapt attention, focus and intent can be burdensome for any exam taker. Depression, anxiety and substance abuse is a common and an alarming issue in students. The issue is aggravated by the suicidal ideation. Stigmatization of mental health issues aborts any steps towards help. The need to find alternatives which can dissipate pent-up stress and frustration and which are fun to indulge in has become crucial. Drum circle gives a feeling of generativity and creative expression too and is viewed as a fun activity. Inclusion of cathartic strategies like drum circle can offset the serious issues of suicide and poor well-being among the youth in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We see colossal research being done with medical students and the psychological and physiological impact they go through due to their academic stress and preparation. Similarly, a lot of anecdotal research being done on the impact of drum circle and its therapeutic impact. However, drum circle has not been used with medical aspirants.

Khursheed and Naseem (2021), studied 220 (124 females, 96 males) students preparing for medical entrance exams from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. They studied levels of depression, anxiety and quality of life amongst the students. The results indicated high levels of anxiety, stress and depression. The quality of life portrayed a negative correlation between stress, anxiety and depression. Female participants were found to have higher levels of anxiety, stress and depression compared to the male participants.

Yadav and Shrivastav (2020), investigated the correlation between academic stress and suicidal ideation among students from Kota, Rajasthan. A sample of 200 students was studied. The sample was a mix of 100 IIT aspirants and 100 NEET aspirants. No significant difference was found in stress levels between both the aspirant groups. A positive correlation between academic stress and suicidal ideation was established.

Sharad Philip et al (2021), did a cross sectional national survey to study substance use, psychological wellbeing and burn out of all the medical aspirants across India. A total of 341 respondents participated in the survey. 60% of the respondents were females, 39% were males, while one respondent identified as transgender. 86% of respondents reported burnout while 80% reported exhaustion. A deterioration of mental health was reported amongst

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

respondents. Reported conditions ranged from mood disorder, anxiety disorder, substance dependence, stress-related disorder, adjustment disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder. Multiple stressors were found to be impacting the respondent's wellbeing. 70% reported stress from academic work, 52% from relationship while 26% reported stress from financial condition. The researchers found medical students susceptible to mental health issues than their age mates. The study indicates an urgent need to optimize mental health to decrease academic burnout.

A study done by Ashton and Kamali (1995) studied a sample of 186 participants (77 males, 109 females) with a mean age of 20.4 years. They studied students of second year of medical college from the Newcastle University, United Kingdom. They reported an alarming use of alcohol, illicit drugs and high anxiety rates among student.

Snow and D'Amico (2010) did a qualitative study to explore the effects of drumming with at-risk youth in an alternative high school. They studied a total of participants and did a phenomenological study to understand the impact of group drumming on them. Videotapes, questionnaires and observations were used for data collection. The research indicated an increased feeling of psycho-social wellbeing, motivation and confidence, decreased stress and frustration.

Ascenso et al (2018) studied the effect of group drumming on a multi-dimensional aspect of well-being for mental health care givers and users. A total of 39 participants were studied in the group drumming sessions followed by semi-structured interviews and focus groups at the end of each session. The overarching themes of wellbeing were reported as hedonia, accomplishment, agency, redefined self, social wellbeing and engagement. Participants reported an improvement across all the themes and sub-themes of wellbeing.

Fancourt et al (2016) studied the effects of group drumming interventions on anxiety, depression, social resilience and inflammatory immune response among mental health service users. An exploratory study was conducted over 10 weeks of intervention between a musical and non-musical group. Fifty-nine participants were recruited to the two groups of whom forty-five completed the study: 30 experimental and 15 controls. Results indicated that group drumming leads to enhanced psychological states, specifically less anxiety and depression and greater social resilience. The participants were found to have physiological improvement by shift towards anti-inflammatory activity.

P Ho et al (2011) researched the impact of group drumming on social emotional behavior of children from low-income group. A pretest-post-test non-equivalent control group design was implemented and the study was conducted over a 12 week. The study comprised of rhythmic drumming and group counseling sessions. A sample of 101 students was assessed. The researchers found a significant improvement in multiple domains of social-emotional behavior of the participants.

Sample

The study consists of 47 participants (f=23, m=24) from a coaching class. Only NEET aspirants between the age group of 16-18 were eligible for the sessions. The setting of the study was voluntarily paid and participated by students from a coaching class located in Nasik, Maharashtra. Recruitment was done via private referral and voluntary participation. Purposive sampling was adopted.

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

Informed consent was obtained before participation in the session. The coaching class premise was used for conducting the sessions.

Design

Eight weekly drum circle sessions lasting one hour each were planned. Before commencing the drum circle, the participants were a part of group counselling sessions. The sessions were conducted in a group of ten students each and were conducted by an experienced clinical psychologist. Participants discussed various issues like poor concentration, poor time management, burn-out, self-doubt, frustration, anger, mobile addiction, gaming addiction, poor sleep pattern, poor dialogue with family and social circle, fear of failure, fear of future out-come, anger for being forced into medical stream, to name a few. These themes were discussed with the drum circle facilitator.

Procedure

The group was co-facilitated by the principal investigator who is also a certified drum circle facilitator, who privately and professionally conducts drum circles. A demonstration video was shared with the students to inform them about how the circle is conducted. The research was explained to the participants and their consent was sought. This was followed by eight-weekly sessions of ninety minutes each. Regular participation was expected. The sessions were conducted on Saturdays after their academic classes.

In the drum circle setting each participant has his individual seating space and an individual djembe to play. The circle was spread in a manner to have an empty space for the lead facilitator to move around and have a one-on-one engagement with the participants. All participants were essentially at the same level of elevation in the circle. Participants were encouraged to keep changing their seating for each session and also to sit next to a new participant for each session.

Each session was initiated by a warm up activity. The session does not call for musical acumen. Basic hand drumming exercises were taught. This was followed by 'call and response' activity. Active and attentive participation from the participants was encouraged. Basic drumming rudiments were introduced. Exercises and games were introduced, 'hear me out', 'odd and even' and 'clash of the drums', to name a few. The session typically lasted for 75 minutes, followed by meditative silence of 15 minutes at the end.

The activities encouraged the participants to listen keenly, to communicate non-verbally through rhythm and to display self-control and respect for others fellow participants. They were also encouraged to express without 'the fear of going wrong' or 'out of sync'. Each creative rhythm was welcomed. Each initiative was encouraged. The exercise also included visualization of venting all anxieties through their drumming.

Data collection

Data was collected on the basis of a two-pronged strategy.

- i. Unstructured interview.
- ii. Observations of participants and the group as whole during the activity.

Unstructured interview: Participants were encouraged to express how they felt after their session. Their sharing was audiotaped with their consent. Content analysis of the recording was done to deduce the core themes. The interviews were conducted at the end of the eighth session.

Observation: The observations included documentation of all the overt and observable behaviors and responses of the participants and the facilitators. This was done on individual level as well as on the community level. A running commentary of all the events were noted. An independent clinical psychology researcher made the observations which were coded for the prominent themes by another clinical psychology researcher. Observations were done for all the sessions.

RESULTS

On doing content analysis of the unstructured interview responses, certain significant themes were identified. They are as follows:

Participants reported that time was just a concept and this made them feel much in control of the situation. Participants reported catharsis of their pent-up frustrations, anxieties and fear. Participants described a sense of connect with others in the session. A strong sense of accomplishment was generativity was reported by them. By the end of the eighth session, they reported the ease of expression and initiative. They felt connected with the community. They found this intervention as a novel way to feel better. They reportedly enjoyed themselves throughout the session. They reported feeling happy and relaxed.

On the basis of the observations made, themes were classified under rhythm-based themes, participant-based themes, leader-based themes and transformation themes.

Rhythm-based themes observed were as below:

- Playing in tune
- Playing out of tune
- To have fun
- To initiate a new rhythm
- To mimic the leader
- Increasing the tempo
- Decreasing the tempo
- Increasing the volume
- Decreasing the volume
- Drum battle
- There is nothing right or wrong, its okay to make mistakes
- Match up the rhythm to an African folk song

Participant-based themes have been clubbed as enabling and disabling themes

Participant enabling themes

- Cohesiveness
- Displaying attention and interest
- Open to experience and have fun
- Initiative taking
- Ready to experiment
- Healthy peer communication
- Patience and support to the community

Participant disabling themes

- Hesitation to initiate
- Unable to create and impose their rhythm
- Seeking negative attention

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

- Lacking participation
- Disregarding the instructions
- Disrespect for the facilitator
- Lacking patience for the group
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of attention

Leader themes

- Tutoring the group with rhythm
- Fostering the session with a tangible framework
- Implementing and enforcing basic rules and framework for the session
- Facilitating the entire process to make it an all-inclusive and seamless process
- Moderating experiences of all participants.
- Encouraging and appreciation for initiative, support and creativity
- Deterring and confronting deprecating responses towards self and others

Transformation themes

- More confidence
- More initiative taking behavior
- Better focus
- Increased attention and respect for instructions
- Increased social support in the group
- Persistence in the playing time
- Increased cohesiveness

DISCUSSION

The researchers do understand that the human scape of emotions and behaviors is quite dynamic and cannot be reduced to binary numbers. A qualitative study gives the scope to understand the complexities of the human nature at a deeper level.

Drum circles is a relatively new intervention strategy especially in India. The reviewed literature for them is not indigenous in nature. It will be assuring to have more quantitative and qualitative research studying the efficacy of this intervention strategy. This will help better the strategies that are implemented during a session. Indigenous research will bring out finesse in the techniques which are most suited and efficient to the domestic population.

An assertive and emotionally intelligent leadership is crucial while handling a drum circle. Working with a varied group, particularly children, adolescents and youth, the facilitator needs to be adept with ways to moderate disciplinary and attention issues. Sometimes the line between having fun and creating nuisance in a session can be easily blurred.

All target groups have issues relevant and specific to them. A prior understanding and dialogue with the participants to understand their issues is important. This allows the facilitator to do some study in advance and craft a session addressing those particular issues. Though this particular study used African Djembes for the sessions, use of various local percussion instruments can make the drum circle a unique experience. It will qualitatively increase the multi-sensory experience one derives from participation.

CONCLUSION

Participants reported ease of expression and better emotion management and a renewed sense of communication with others around. (**Positive relation with others**). An increased ability to deal with burn out, frustration and feeling of alienation was reported (**personal growth, environmental mastery**). Some of the significant insights include increased ability to focus and increased duration of study time (personal growth, **purpose in life**). Some even reported better sleep, especially the night following the session. Boost of confidence and initiative was reported. They also affirmed renewed initiative taking behavior (**autonomy**). The participants also affirmed the ease they felt with self even when they were not in sync with the group. (**self-acceptance**).

The drum circle sessions reportedly improved the emotional and social quotient of the participants.

Limitations

Qualitative studies lack the ability to generalize. They can also be polluted by the subjectivity of the researcher. The findings of qualitative studies can augment and encourage quantitative work.

REFERENCES

- Khursheed, Manal, Naseem, Sufia A study on depression, anxiety, stress, and life quality among medical aspirants and medical students of Aligarh City in North India 2021, Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences. pages-87:94,vol-9.<https://www.amhsjournal.org/article.asp>
- Hope V, Henderson M. Medical student depression, anxiety and distress outside North America: A systematic review. *Med Educ* 2014; 48:963-79.
- Dyrbye LN, Thomas MR, Shanafelt TD. Systematic review of depression, anxiety, and other indicators of psychological distress among U.S. and Canadian medical students. *Acad Med* 2006; 81:354-73.
- Archambault, K., Porter-Vignola, É., Brière, F. N., & Garel, P. (2020). Feasibility and preliminary effectiveness of a drum circle activity to improve affect in patients, families and staff of a pediatric hospital. *Arts & health*, 12(3), 221–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2018.1536673>
- Sagarika (2021, November 2), NEET 2021Result Statistics:8.7L Qualified, 16.14L Registered, Complete Highlights. Aglasem. <https://www.news.aglasem.com/neet-2021-result-statistics/>
- Saarikallio Suvi Helinä, Randall William M., Baltazar Margarida. (2020). Music Listening for Supporting Adolescents' Sense of Agency in Daily Life. *Frontiers in Psychology*. Vol.10.2911 <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02911.10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02911.1664-1078>
- Kar, S. K., Rai, S., Sharma, N., & Singh, A. (2021). Student Suicide Linked to NEET Examination in India: A Media Report Analysis Study. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 43(2), 183–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620978585>
- Welch.G, Biasutti.M, MacRitchie.J, McPherson.G, Himonides.G.(2020). The Impact of Music on Human Development and Wellbeing
- Yadav, Sheetal & Srivastava, S. (2020). Correlational Study of Academic Stress and Suicidal Ideation among Students. *Indian Journal of Public Health Research and Development*. 11. 56to 61.
- Philip, S., Molodynski, A., Barklie, L. *et al.* (2021) Psychological well-being and burnout amongst medical students in India: a report from a nationally accessible survey. *Middle East Curr Psychiatry* 28, 54. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43045-021-00129-1>

Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants

- Ascenso, S., Perkins, R., Atkins, L., Fancourt, D., & Williamon, A. (2018). Promoting well-being through group drumming with mental health service users and their carers. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 13(1), 1484219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1484219>
- Ashton. C, Kamali. F. (1995) Personality, lifestyles, alcohol and drug consumption in a sample of British medical students. *Medical journal* vol.29 no.3. 179-261. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.1995.tb02828.x>
- Fancourt, D., Perkins, R., Ascenso, S., Carvalho, L. A., Steptoe, A., & Williamon, A. (2016). Effects of Group Drumming Interventions on Anxiety, Depression, Social Resilience and Inflammatory Immune Response among Mental Health Service Users. *PloS one*, 11(3), e0151136. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0151136>
- Schwenk, T. L., Davis, L., & Wimsatt, L. A. (2010). Depression, stigma, and suicidal ideation in medical students. *JAMA*, 304(11), 1181–1190. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.1300>
- Kumar DS, Kavita HS, Kulkarni P, Siddalingappa H, Manjunath R. Depression, anxiety and stress levels among medical students in Mysore, Karnataka, India. *Int J Community Med Public Health* 2016;3:359-62.
- Kumar, Sunil & H.S., Kavitha & Kulkarni, Praveen & Siddalingappa, Hugara & Manjunath, Renuka. (2016). Depression, anxiety and stress levels among medical students in Mysore, Karnataka, India. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*. 359-362. 10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20151591.
- Kalani. (2004). *Together in rhythm: A facilitator's guide to drum circle music*. Los Angeles, CA: Alfred Pub. Co.
- Ascenso, S., Perkins, R., Atkins, L., Fancourt, D., & Williamon, A. (2018). Promoting well-being through group drumming with mental health service users and their carers. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 13(1), 1484219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1484219> Citation
- Wood, L., Ivery, P., Donovan, R. and Lambin, E. (2013), "'To the beat of a different drum': improving the social and mental wellbeing of at-risk young people through drumming", *Journal of Public Mental Health*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 70-79. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-09-2012-0002>
- Burns, R. (2016). Psychosocial Well-being. In: Pachana, N. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-080-3_251-1
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(4), 719.
- About Mental Health. (n.d). [cdc.gov. https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index](https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index).
- Ho, P., Tsao, J. C., Bloch, L., & Zeltzer, L. K. (2011). The impact of group drumming on social-emotional behavior in low-income children. *Evidence-based complementary and alternative medicine: eCAM*, 2011, 250708. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ecam/neq072>

Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Shinde, P. D. & Bhardwaj, M. A. (2023). Psycho-Social Impact of Drum Circle: A Qualitative Study with NEET Aspirants. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(1), 078-086. DIP:18.01.009.20231101, DOI:10.25215/1101.009