

Rhythms of Life

Drum Circle Toolkit



Thank You!

Thank you to The Brenda Strafford Foundation (BSF) Therapeutic Recreation and Adult Day Program departments for taking the time to share their knowledge and skills for the development of this resource so that other older adults can experience the benefits of drumming that BSF residents have for the past four years.

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Introduction



Connecting hearts and building community through rhythm

When you walk into a Brenda Strafford Foundation community, it is not uncommon to find your senses awakened – hearing a beat from across the room, finding yourself stepping in rhythm, and feeling drawn to find out where this powerful and moving sound is coming from. When you approach, you will find a circle of people of all ages, with varying physical and cognitive capabilities, drumming together as one. On the calendar, it is called the BSF Rhythms of Life (RoL) Drum Circle, but to those participating it is often the highlight of their day.

BSF owns and operates five continuing care sites in Calgary and Okotoks, three of which

also include Adult Day Programs for older adults living in the community. Drum Circles have been a part of the BSF's core recreation programs since 2020 when a pilot project started at our most culturally and age diverse continuing care site, then expanded after discovering the benefits this activity provided for the residents.

The BSF RoL Drum Circles use the Integrated Community Drum Circle (ICDC) methodology developed by the Founder of Circles of Rhythm, Judy Atkinson. This methodology follows the principles of "The Drum Code" and includes the five components of body, mind, emotions, spirit, and music making in every





circle. ICDCs use drums inspired by cultures from all around the world as tools that will help participants connect with themselves and others, and to facilitate community development and healing. It is not meant to be a drum lesson, a musical expertise showcase, or be specific to one culture or religious belief.

Drumming is an activity for all ages but with the Drum Circles being implemented at our continuing care sites and adult day programs, the recreation team has gained invaluable experience in tailoring the program for older adults and accommodating their unique needs.

This toolkit was created by BSF's Dr. Barrie Stafford Centre for Learning, Innovation and Quality (CLIQ) to help other continuing care facilities, as well as other community partners and organizations, implement Drum Circles into their recreation programming with the hope that they can also use this activity to build a sense of community and inclusion to help enrich the lives of others.



The Brenda Stafford Foundation

BSF is a Calgary-based registered charity and social impact organization that operates in four key areas, locally and internationally: Aging Care & Senior Living; Community Support; International Healthcare; and Research & Innovation.

[Learn more at: theBSF.ca](http://theBSF.ca)



Dr. Barrie Stafford Centre for Learning, Innovation & Quality

CLIQ works to identify problems, opportunities for quality improvement, and innovative solutions within BSF sites that can be shared to make a broader contribution and positive social impact that shapes the future of the workforce, aging, health and wellness, and community supports.

[Learn more at: goinnovate.ca](http://goinnovate.ca)

Benefits of Drum Circles

Experiencing a Drum Circle can have a range of different benefits for the person participating. Each individual's experience is unique, which is what makes Drum Circles adaptable and a universal fit for residents, families, and staff alike. Whether actively or passively participating, residents can gain benefits from Drum Circles.

Drum Circles create a sense of community by accepting those with all levels of physical and cognitive ability, cultural backgrounds, age, and language, bringing everyone together to focus on a common goal. It is a safe, judgment-free zone where everyone is free to connect with themselves and with others. It also allows the participants to express themselves in ways they might not have been able to before by providing a creative outlet that is not limited by ability.

To participate in an activity mindfully and with intention is motivating and empowering, while instilling a sense of purpose and ability to succeed. It is not uncommon for participants to be moved to tears by the experience. One BSF facilitator recalled a memorable moment with a resident who expressed that drumming helps them “to feel normal”.

In addition to the benefits of connecting with ourselves and others, Drum Circles have been

shown to have therapeutic effects through inducing a deep relaxation state and lowering blood pressure. This can translate into:



Reducing tension, anxiety, and stress



Helping control chronic pain



Boosting the immune system



Releasing negative feelings, blockages, and emotional trauma



Producing an overall sense of well-being



Drumming can also provide benefits for those requiring support during times of illness or end of life. The beat of a drum can provide a connection to the beat of a heart, which can be soothing and comforting for some during difficult times. This non-religious way of expressing spirituality has been found to provide benefits for those who are healing or grieving through gentle drumming in times of illness, palliative care,

or during memorial services for residents no longer with us.

At BSF, the Drum Circles have received continuous positive feedback from residents and families. The facilitators have witnessed the benefits of drumming with the residents first-hand, and that is what makes this activity one of the most popular items on the BSF Therapeutic Recreation calendars.

“A drum circle hits a lot of domains. There’s a social aspect, there’s an emotional aspect, and a spiritual aspect. Without communicating with words, you’re actually communicating with your drums among the group.”
- Nicole B, Life Enrichment Manager at Cambridge Manor



Training

Facilitating a Drum Circle requires training but is not as difficult as it sounds! At BSF, the Therapeutic Recreation teams are trained to facilitate the Drum Circles, but it is not a requirement to be from a recreation background. Just as the residents are told, you do not have to have a musical background to be able to learn and facilitate. In the past, other professions have been included in the training as well, including Physiotherapy and senior leadership.

Training was initially provided in 2020 to the staff from one continuing care site and was eventually expanded to the others. Facilitator training was provided through Circles of Rhythm in Calgary, AB. With so many new facilitators requiring training with the activity's growth, BSF arranged organization-specific training with the instructor. There is benefit to having as many people trained as possible so that the activity can continue even when another facilitator is away. It also is helpful for the staff not facilitating the program to have training so they can be more aware of how to help the residents when required.

The facilitator training program BSF staff enrolled in has two levels that staff could complete. Since most residents participating

in the Drum Circles do best with a lower level of complexity, completing the first level of the course was sufficient to be able to facilitate the program effectively. BSF staff who completed the second level found it beneficial for increasing confidence as a facilitator and to further develop their skills, but providing the activity to residents at this level reduced the inclusivity of the Drum Circle since not everyone was able to keep up, and having an additional program for more experienced drummers was not feasible with the resources available. Although trying new techniques keeps things fresh, most residents continue to love Drum Circles, even if the same format is used over and over again!

Although there is no formal ongoing training required, BSF facilitators find it helpful to keep practicing and sharing ideas within their teams and across the organization. Team building retreats can be helpful for sharing techniques and strategies and gives an opportunity to practice together in a safe space for mentorship and feedback. Participating in community Drum Circles can also be a great way to keep up with new skills and see what others are doing.



Staffing

For a Drum Circle to run smoothly, and for the participants to feel supported, a minimum of 2-3 staff members are required. This may fluctuate depending on the size and level of experience of the group. It is important to know the residents participating as it can be helpful to foresee any disturbances or concerns that might arise during the activity, such as a resident needing to leave for the washroom, that may require the support of more staff.

At least one staff member should be designated to facilitate the group through the drumming exercises, often the person situated in the middle of the circle. Switching the leader during the activity, however, can be a beneficial way to mentor less experienced facilitators and allow them an opportunity to lead without committing to the full time.

Additional staff members are required to assist participants with other needs that might arise during the activity. This could include recreation staff who are not trained in drum circles, other staff members attending, or volunteers. Activities they can assist with include:



Portering residents to and from the program



Assisting those who need support during the program, such as changing their instrument to better suit their individual needs



Attending to other resident needs, such as answering questions or providing a glass of water



Having the appropriate number of staff available during the activity will keep control of the circle, otherwise the therapeutic benefits of the Drum Circle may be lost and could cause increased anxiety and stress for both the participants and the facilitators.



Participation

Participation is open to everyone, which is why it is such a wonderful activity to include in recreation programming. It can be adapted to meet all levels of ability, as well as allowing other participants to interact with the residents in a meaningful way.

The number of participants in Drum Circles varies by facility based on the number of residents and the space available. Some facilities choose to have large drum circles of 40-50 people at a time including people from all levels of care, while others divide into smaller groups, such as having a separate Drum Circle for those living in memory care.

Introducing a resident to Drum Circles upon move-in during the initial intake interview can help to spark an early interest in the activity, but it is never too late to invite a resident to participate. Good opportunities for inviting a resident to participate includes:

- 🐦 **One-on-one conversations**
- 🐦 **Care conferences**
- 🐦 **Initial move-in intake interviews**
- 🐦 **On review of the monthly recreation calendar**
- 🐦 **A personal invitation just prior to starting the activity**

Although Drum Circles are enjoyed by many residents, residents who have difficulties with loud noises can be sensitive to the program. Knowing your residents and keeping an eye on them during the activity and watching for verbal or non-verbal signs of discomfort can be indicators that someone is uncomfortable or overwhelmed. In these situations, an activity assistant can offer the resident a beverage and assistance to leave the room or offer them earplugs. It is important that the resident's right to refuse to participate is respected.

Families also enjoy Drum Circles and are encouraged to join. This can be a meaningful way of connecting with their loved ones so having it on the calendars for them to plan their visits around can be beneficial.



It is common for a resident to reply, "I am not musical!" or "I have never played the drums before." Challenging a resident to come for the first time often results in them being hooked, even if they only watch and listen on the first day. Sometimes the activity is so popular that everyone is already seated before the leader arrives!



*"I like drumming. Drum Circles help me relax and I like listening to the sounds. There's a lot of company, and we all work together."
- BSF Resident*

Some families assist their loved one while others prefer to watch or participate alongside them. It can sometimes be a good reminder of what their loved one is capable of. A family member may also be inspired to play their own instrument during the Drum Circle, such as a flute or piccolo.

Staff members can also find benefit in participating in Drum Circles, whether with the residents or as a team-building activity. One of our sites even reports a staff member dancing in the middle while the residents drum the music. Drum Circles are really an activity that can be enjoyed by all.



Resources, Supplies, and Care

When implementing Drum Circles at a new facility, it is important to consider the resources that are required for the activity to run smoothly and effectively. Budget is at the top of most organizations' minds when planning to implement a new program at their facility. Other considerations also include space, time, and maintenance.

Cost

The bulk of the cost occurs during the initial training and purchasing of the drums and percussion instruments themselves. This is an excellent fundraising opportunity if the upfront expense is challenging. Training and instruments used by BSF were purchased through Circle of Rhythm in Calgary, AB. Ensure your budget includes:

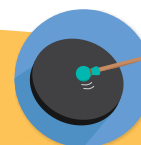
- ✔ Cost of training program x number of staff members requiring training
- ✔ Cost of instruments and supplies
- ✔ Cost of employee salary during training
- ✔ Cost of any additional storage required

Supplies

It can be challenging to decide what initial equipment is required when the organization is just starting to implement Drum Circles. Discussing your needs with the place you are purchasing from can be beneficial to ensure you are getting everything you need. Consider the number of participants and facilitators you expect for your activity. Suggestions for equipment to initially purchase includes:

- ✔ 3 different types of drums
- ✔ Drumsticks
- ✔ A small variety of percussion instruments for shaking, such as maracas, egg shakers, ocean drums, rain sticks, tambourines, rhythm sticks, etc.

As time goes on, the facility can continue to grow their collection of instruments once interest in the program grows, and funding becomes available. This includes expanding to a larger variety of drum choices, more variety of percussion instruments, or more options for adaptive devices. Please see Appendix A for a sample order for your first drum set.





Space

Drums take up a lot of space and are not something that can be easily tucked away. It is also important to store them properly to avoid damage, such as avoiding areas at risk of water damage or where they will be prone to getting banged up. Many of our BSF facilities use large laundry carts for storing their drums, which makes them easy to store and transport. A dedicated storage room also works if the space is available.

Time

When adding Drum Circles to your recreation calendar, it is important to consider the time it takes to complete the activity, but also the time required for set up and take down. The activity itself can range from 30 minutes to one hour, however, it is important to consider the needs and ability of your group when determining how long to drum for. Watching your group for cues is important and if you notice people are starting to lose interest or get tired, the Drum Circle can always be stopped before the allotted time is up. When choosing the time for your activity, it is also important to consider key times in the resident's day, such as avoiding mealtimes or common times for napping or sundowning. See the section in this toolkit on Implementing the Program for a general timeline for the activity.

Cleaning

The importance of infection prevention and control is also something to consider when running a Drum Circle. Since the supplies are shared amongst residents, consider encouraging residents to wash or sanitize their hands prior to starting the activity. Cleaning the equipment is also important to consider, being sure to follow manufacturer instructions to ensure the drums and other instruments are not damaged in the process. This activity may also require review when a neighborhood or facility is on outbreak.

Maintenance

Fortunately, the supplies required for Drum Circles require little maintenance. With proper storage and care, the drums and shakers can last for a long time. Drumsticks do tend to get dented over time due to the wood being banged up against the edge of the drum and can sometimes be fixed by sanding them, or may require replacement.



Implementing the Program

Implementing a new program in continuing care requires an adequate amount of planning and support. Learning from others who have already implemented the program can be helpful, however, each continuing care site has their own specific needs, and often trial and error is required to ensure the program is a success.

Support

It is crucial to ensure that there is support from leadership when starting this program. This will help to ensure that the appropriate amount of resources are allocated to the program, as well as ensuring communication on the Drum Circles is being circulated. Share with leadership the benefits of the program, successes found at other organizations, or take them along to a community drum circle to help them to understand why you want to incorporate the program at your own site.

It is also important to have support within the team facilitating the activity. This can be done through discussing how the activity will flow, what to do when different circumstances occur, and having more experienced facilitators provide support to beginner facilitators to improve their confidence and success in hosting the program.

Location

Choosing a location for the Drum Circle is important for the comfort of the resident participating, but also for the comfort of those who are not. A closed room with a lot of space to set up the drums, and additional space for

residents who use walkers or are in wheelchairs, is ideal. Consideration of how close the space is to resident rooms is also important as not everyone will enjoy hearing the beat of the drums when they are trying to sleep or having a private conversation in their room. For a change of scenery, some BSF sites have also held their Drum Circle outside in the courtyard but be mindful of who the sound may impact.

Frequency

How often a Drum Circle is held depends on the facility, resident's preference, and the resources available. At BSF, the frequency varies with some sites offering Drum Circles twice a week, while others offer it once or twice a month.

Timeline

Although each facility can differ in how the Drum Circles are run, most activities are run in a similar format. The follow is a general timeline that is followed:



Setting up the space: This can include removal of tables and setting up chairs in a circle, leaving space for those in wheelchairs.



Collect the instruments: Some facilitators prefer to have drums already set out at each chair, while others prefer to hand out the instruments once all participants are seated in a circle.



Invite and porter residents to the activity



Introduction to the activity: Each facilitator has a different strategy for introducing the residents to the activity. Some take time to explain the drums to the residents, inform them that there are no wrong beats, and dedicate the Drum Circle to someone (eg. the firefighters, someone who passed away). Other facilitators like to start drumming and have the residents follow suit as they arrive. Allow time for residents to personalize the experience since some may have their own ritual before starting drumming, such as rubbing the top of the drum. These techniques are learned in the Facilitator Training Program and can be adapted to your participants' needs.



Drum Circle hosted by facilitator: Many facilitators expressed residents having positive responses to incorporating beats familiar to the residents, such as walking or a heartbeat. This can also be encouraged through words, such as having residents beat to “I-Love-Ap-ple-Pie” if that is what they had for lunch! Residents may also enjoy the opportunity to switch their instrument halfway through.



Closing the activity: Some facilitators prefer to end the Drum Circle with a lighter beat (drum wash) to help bring down the energy before residents return to their neighborhoods.



Porter residents back to their home neighborhood: This is a great opportunity to ask the resident for feedback on the activity.



Clean up: This includes cleaning and removal of the drums and cleaning up the space.

Additional Drum Activities

Besides hosting the Drum Circle in a group setting, drumming has been used for other intentions within the BSF facilities. These can be explored with the instructor during facilitator training if interested in learning more.

Drum wash: The facilitator lightly drums with the intention of providing therapeutic benefits to a resident who is experiencing stress, anxiety, or illness in a one-on-one setting.

Prayers or quarterly memorial services: An opportunity for residents to provide a prayer for another resident experiencing a difficult time or provide a beat in memory of a resident who passed away.

Palliative care: Gentle drumming provided by the facilitator in times of illness or palliative care in a one-on-one setting.

Staff engagement: An activity facilitated by the recreation staff for the purpose of staff teambuilding, such as for Recreation Therapy Month or staff engagement.



Adapting the Program to Resident Needs

Inclusivity is a key component of the Drum Circles in a continuing care facility. It is important to ensure that staff assist in whatever way they can to ensure the resident is able to participate.



Accessing the Program

The first step is ensuring that mobility is not a barrier for residents to attend the activity. Some residents may require assistance getting to the activity or may need a gentle reminder that the activity is occurring. Residents may require a space to store their walker or need additional space for maneuvering their wheelchair. Ensuring the program is hosted at a time of day that most residents are available is also something to consider.



Level of Experience

Considering the level of comfort and experience in the group is important when adapting to the resident's needs. If the residents participating in the program are new, it can be helpful to take time to introduce the drums to help them get acquainted with the activity. More experienced residents may be able to challenge themselves and the facilitator may have more options for introducing new techniques or games. Residents who are more advanced in their drumming techniques might also enjoy having the opportunity to lead the group. Some BSF sites have also found benefit in strategically sitting the less experienced residents next to more experienced residents, so they have someone close by to follow or provide guidance.





Visibility

Ensuring good visibility for the participants is important for promoting participation in the Drum Circle. Having the facilitator stand in the centre of the circle and rotating to face everyone, while providing eye contact at some point during the activity, is often beneficial and can help everyone to feel included. It can be difficult for residents to spot the facilitator if they are sitting as part of the

larger circle. As the number of participants increases, setting out two rows of chairs in a circle, rather than one large circle, can help to bring residents closer to the facilitator. Visual cues can also be beneficial for residents to follow along with the activity, such as using your fingers to count down and having a signal indicating for the drumming to stop.

Adapting the Program to Resident Needs



Adaptive Participation

While facilitating the program, continuously watch for residents having difficulties using the drumsticks or coordinating the drum. It can be useful for teams to develop a discrete way for the facilitator to identify residents that activity assistants should check on, such as a nod of the head, so the activity can continue without disruption to other participants and does not single out the person who is struggling. The staff can use this opportunity to try different strategies with this resident, such as swapping the drumsticks for a handheld shaker, encouraging them to try with a different hand, or have a staff member use a hand-over-hand technique to provide assistance. Some residents will even benefit from clapping along to the beat, or putting their hand on the drum to feel the vibrations while the staff member drums along.



Adaptive Tools

The drumming equipment can also be adjusted with the help of the facilitator or the Occupational Therapy team. Some ideas for adaptations that have been used within BSF include having the drumstick handles built up, so it is easier for a resident to grip, or purchasing a stand to help keep the drum in the tilted position it is required to be in for sound to come out the bottom. There is also an opportunity to purchase lighter mallets that are easier for some people to hold. Some residents who have trouble tolerating loud noises could also benefit from earplugs. This is a great opportunity to use creativity to figure out a strategy that works for your individual resident.





Making small adaptations to suit the needs of your residents can make a big impact and help make your drum circles more inclusive, accessible, and enjoyable!



Evaluation and Feedback

Evaluation of any new program is important for ensuring that you are meeting the needs and wants of the people who live in the facility.

Informal feedback, such as while portering residents to their rooms after a Drum Circle, is often the most effective way to receive feedback since it is timely and allows the resident to further explain what they enjoyed or what could be improved. Simple questions often suffice, such as:

- ❓ “How did you enjoy the Drum Circle today?”
- ❓ “How did the Drum Circle make you feel?”
- ❓ “Do you feel better leaving the room than when you arrived?”
- ❓ “Is there anything you would like us to do differently next time?”

Residents who are more musically inclined can also be asked more in-depth questions, such as providing suggestions on new beats for the facilitator to try.

Residents who have difficulties expressing themselves verbally can be observed for changes to their expression or body language to help identify if they are enjoying themselves or finding the activity challenging.

Feedback can also be received from discussions with family members, or through formal evaluation such as organization-wide resident and family surveys, at Resident Family Council Meetings, or surveys through resident and family portals, such as Activity Pro.

It can also be beneficial to have a debrief with the facilitator and the activity assistants to discuss what went well and what can be improved from one activity to the next. If the organization has multiple sites who host Drum Circles, it can also be helpful to have facilitators from other sites observe each other's Drum Circle to provide ideas and feedback to help guide the activity to being the best it can be.



Tips for Facilitators



Facilitating a Drum Circle in a continuing care setting is an enjoyable experience for many, but for others, it can cause some anxiety, especially for someone who is just starting out! Our facilitators have provided some tips and tricks that they found helpful for building their confidence and becoming more comfortable leading the group.

- The best way to understand what a Drum Circle is like is to observe and participate in one! Once you see one in action, everything seems to click. This can be done by participating in a Drum Circle in the community, or connecting with another continuing care facility that offers this activity.
- Take the drums home and practice in the comfort of your home. This is a great way to build confidence and take the pressure off of having others watching you.
- Co-lead a Drum Circle with a more experienced facilitator. They can lead the program but swap you in for one beat.
- Every site is a bit different with what works for them. Do not be afraid to invite smaller groups to participate if a larger group is intimidating or too much to handle. Trial and error is often the best way to find out what works for you and your facility. Make notes of what works and what does not, so you can pass it on to other facilitators within your site.
- Create an outline with your group of how you want to run the program – it can always be adapted in the moment during the activity. Print out a “cheat sheet” with a plan for your activity and tape it behind the drum if you need some cues for how the activity should flow.
- Do not be discouraged if the activity does not always go as planned. Success takes time. Even those with a lot of experience might host a Drum Circle that does not go as planned. Do not quit - keep practicing to build your confidence, keep learning to read the room, and keep trying to provide this inclusive activity for everyone to enjoy!

Appendix

Appendix A: Sample Order for First Drum Set

QUANTITY	PRODUCT NAME
1	Rhythm Tech:Large Fibre Maracas,Black
1	Mano:36 Egg Shaker Set
2	Mano:Tambourine, Cutaway White
1	LP:Jam Block - Medium Pitch
1	LP:Aspire 6" Pro Triangle With Striker
1	LP:Hand Bar Chimes
1	LP:Dharma Metta Drum - 12" Earth Gold
4	REMO:Mondo™ Djembe Drum, 10"
2	REMO:Mondo™ Djembe Drum, 12"
8	REMO:50-Series Tubano® Drum - Pre-Tuned, Tropical Leaf, 10"
4	REMO:50-Series Tubano® Drum - Pre-Tuned, Tropical Leaf, 12"
5	REMO:Bahia Buffalo Drum, Fixed Bahia Bass, Black Earth, 16"
5	REMO:Buffalo Drum With Mallet, Standard, 16"
2	REMO:Buffalo Drum - Standard, 22"
1	REMO:Bahia Bass Drum - Gypsy Red, 16"
1	REMO:Dual Slider 130"Percussion Strap
50	12", suede or vinyl covered mallets
2	16", suede or vinyl covered mallets

Additional Resources



Training Program

Circles of Rhythm: Integrated Community Drum Circle Facilitator Training Program, Calgary, AB

Contact: info@circlesofrhythm.com



Video

Rhythms of Life Drum Circles at The Brenda Strafford Foundation



- Watch on YouTube

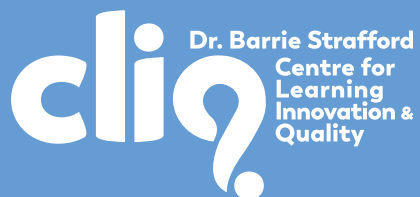


Book

The Drum Code: Living Well Between the Beats - by Judy Atkinson



The Preservation of Dignity and The Pursuit of Happiness



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