

# Drumming for birth: Why drumming is a powerful support tool for pregnancy and birth

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Drumming practices have been documented across global cultures, often integrated into rituals surrounding major life transitions such as births, coming-of-age, marriages, and deaths. In many contemporary Western societies these drumming traditions have waned, becoming viewed as unconventional. Yet drumming has powerful neurophysiological effects demonstrated by research, which are well suited to supporting the birth journey.

**KEY WORDS:** *drum, drumming, pregnancy, birth, labour, postpartum, ritual, rite of passage, relaxation, trance, autonomy, intuition, empowerment*



*During labour, the beat held my focus and helped my attention move away from the sensations in my body, making it easier to flow through a contraction.*

*Credit: Sarah Holdroyd Hill (the mother), Ali Stewart (the photographer) and Anna Watts (drumming doula)*

**T**he historical use of drumming to support childbirth remains an under-studied topic. Redmond (1997) synthesises evidence that drumming originally held sacred roles in feminine-centred religions, with priestesses utilising rhythms for healing, spiritual transcendence, and ritual. With the rise of patriarchal societies, these feminine drumming traditions were actively suppressed, disconnecting women from ancestral rituals and knowledge.

Redmond's 1997 book, 'When the Drummers Were Women', contains references

to the use of drumming to support birth:

*Priestesses of the Goddess were skilled technicians in its (the frame drum's) uses. They knew which rhythms quickened the life in freshly planted seeds; which facilitated childbirth; and which induced the ecstatic trance of spiritual transcendence. (p169)*

*In menstruation and birthing rites, certain drum rhythms caused the womb to contract, aiding the flow of menstrual blood or facilitating labor in childbirth. (p22)*

While documentation is limited, cross-cultural accounts indicate drumming has long served integrative purposes surrounding childbirth.

The loss of this historical practice may engender a sense of disconnection from intuitive knowledge and power and in pregnancy and birth.

*Drumming for women during pregnancy and labour is a skill and tool to be reclaimed; this is something women have been doing for much, much longer than they haven't.* (Harwicke-Collings, 2011, online)

Reintegrating drumming traditions may have particular value in life events such as birth where contemporary medical practices lack spiritual elements, and may help bring a sense of sacredness back to the rite of passage that birth constitutes.

### THE SCIENCE OF DRUMMING FOR BIRTH

Drumming practices are often perceived as lacking evidence in the modern world; yet a growing body of research demonstrates significant neurophysiological and somatic effects. Controlled studies show that drumming can induce measurable changes in brain activity, hormonal levels, and physiological arousal. Reported outcomes include modified states of consciousness (enhanced alpha brain waves) (Konopacki & Madison, 2018; Maxfield, 1990), reduced pain and increased endorphin release (Dunbar et al., 2012), reduced anxiety and stress hormones (Fancourt, 2016), and other quantifiable responses of increased wellbeing. Current findings contradict outdated assumptions that drumming provides merely subjective spiritual or creative benefits. The experiments cited above substantiate drumming as a legitimate modality for inducing altered psychobiological states with applications spanning cognitive, emotional, social and physical wellbeing. The measurable impact of drumming on human neurobiology and physiology challenges its classification as an unscientific practice.

## Drumming induces changes in brain activity and hormonal levels

The most interesting recent research is being facilitated by Corine Sombrun, who was identified as having unique shamanic abilities by Mongolian shamans while filming a documentary. After training with them for eight years, she became the first Western woman fully trained in the Mongolian shamanic tradition. She then spent a decade trying to convince the medical and scientific community that her trances were not

signs of mental illness. Thanks to her experience and her ability to induce trance through willpower alone, she has been collaborating with researchers to understand the mechanisms associated with trance states. These research efforts led to the first scientific publication on Mongolian shamanic trance (Flor-Henry et al., 2017). Sombrun has co-founded the Trance Science Research Institute which brings together an international network of researchers dedicated to studying the mechanisms and therapeutic applications related to self-induced cognitive trance. There are several ongoing research projects studying the impact of trance on creativity, self-awareness, psychotherapy, post-traumatic states, functional motor rehabilitation and psychiatry.

### DRUMMING DURING PREGNANCY

Drumming during pregnancy can help reduce anxiety and promote a sense of calm, focus and empowerment (this applies also to enhancing fertility and when preparing for parenting in the pre-conception period).

Beyond the scientifically proven effects of drumming on the body and mind, drumming during pregnancy can provide the following:

- A sense of sacredness (something that is lacking within modern maternity care)
- Connection with intuitive knowledge, and with the baby
- A sense of community and support (for example, through attending drum circles)
- Help with making informed choices.

It is especially useful towards the end of pregnancy when women can feel anxious about the impending labour, or are getting impatient after 40 weeks of pregnancy and are perhaps struggling to cope with the pressure of consenting to induction of labour.

*I wanted a doula who could drum for me during pregnancy and birth for many reasons, to mark a huge initiation, a reminder of the vast context of the process I was going through.* (Ailsa, personal communication)

*Drum Journeying during my pregnancy allowed me to go deeply within, into my womb to journey and meet my baby... I was able to visualise my baby after each drumming journey with more clarity.* (Sophia quoted in Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)

*When I found myself rushing around in all of the 'doing' that comes with preparing for a new baby, I would pick up my drum and after only a few minutes of drumming, I felt as if I was coming back into my body.* (Lizzy quoted in Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)

*Throughout pregnancy, as I chose to freebirth, every morning I would drum. I didn't have*

maternity care or scans, so this was my connection. The drum was like an express train between me and baby, like a bridge between both of our souls. (Rafaella, personal communication)

*I came to the drum circle on my due date. I thought it would help me to ground myself, to feel the vibrations from the drumming, and that it could call my baby into coming into our world, to feel welcomed. Being in the sharing of the drumming community also helped my oxytocin flow. (Kamila, personal communication)*

### DRUMMING DURING LABOUR AND BIRTH

During labour and birth, having someone drum for you, especially if you have experienced drumming during pregnancy and developed a relationship of trust with that person, can be especially powerful.

Drumming during labour:

- Supports relaxation, trust, intuition
- Provides pain relief (via increased focus, endorphin release, altered state of consciousness)
- Supports the process of separation from normal life (nesting) and entering an altered state of consciousness
- Can be especially supportive during labour's unexpected twists and turns such as
  - Long early labour
  - Transfer from home to hospital
  - A lull or delay during labour.

*During my birth, the drumming felt like when you are jogging and you have power music on, it gave me a power boost. It felt like it was saying 'open up', relax, trust your body, have faith in the journey. It made me feel more confident in my abilities. (Leigh, personal communication)*

*Following the drumbeat, I could take away the rest of the situation and just focus on me and what was happening and what I was doing. I ascended and met my son's consciousness and brought him into the world. Meeting him in that way made what was happening in my body mine, as opposed to the consequence of some other person; it stopped me being traumatised because I knew the person that was causing that pain, and it wasn't just some random unknown person. (Ailsa, personal communication)*

*At home, I felt in my own space but in the hospital, I felt at the mercy of the system, a lot of vulnerability. The drumming stirred up the empowerment and standing up for myself. The drum calls upon strength and authenticity and celebration. (Leigh, personal communication)*

*During labour, when contractions were on top of each other, it felt like the speed of the labour was taking over. The drum*

*acted as a rhythm that I could hold onto, it held me open, soft, and I felt much calmer. (Malwina, personal communication)*

*The drum gave me a point of focus that allowed me to instinctively go within and be with the pain of the contraction. I was able to focus and relax and I noticed that as the contraction started with the drumming, the pain of the contraction would melt away as I felt the drum beat vibrate through my sacrum. The tension seemed to lift and this allowed me to experience many painless contractions. (Pip, quoted in Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)*

*I've seen in my practice as a doula, the wonderful way the drum enables women to relax, access and release the issues they have that have been blocking their labour from progressing. The drum almost effortlessly shifts and transmutes the negative energy or fears. (Cattalia, quoted in Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)*

*Drumming offers the Mother and her support people a 'tool' to use in labour and birth that provides information via internal enquiry without the need to physically enter the mother's body or disturb her instinctive behaviour at any time. This encourages the Mother to bring forth her own answers and maintain a sense of autonomy and empowerment throughout her experience. (Melinda, quoted in Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)*

### DRUMMING DURING THE POSTPARTUM

The postpartum used to be a period of seclusion and nurture, during which women were taken care of by the community and provided with support, rest, nutritious food and postpartum specific bodywork and healing rituals (Messenger, 2020). In the same way we have lost drumming, we have forgotten this, and we need it back.

Drumming during the postpartum can help support:

- Emotional wellbeing (mindfulness, reducing anxiety and depression)
- Physical wellbeing (relaxation, stress relief, releasing trauma)
- Spiritual wellbeing (sacredness, honouring, connecting with intuition)
- Healing through postpartum ritual experiences (such as closing the bones)
- Connection with the baby (babies love to hear drumming too)
- Community support (through drum circles, group postnatal ceremonies)

*It felt so natural and normal to have the sound of the drum during the ceremony (closing the bones). It gave me the same feeling as when I rode a horse, when you*



*and the horse are in the same rhythm together. Sophie didn't have to have her hands on me - with the sound I could feel her presence and good wishes. The song of the drum allowed me to soften, trust, and surrender.* (Malwina, personal communication)

*A week after giving birth, I had the closing the bones ritual, with the drumming. I wept and released something, really opened up the gates to my connection as a mother, and the realisation that I'd arrived as a mother - really landed. It was beautiful, I cried tears of joy.* (Leigh, personal communication)

### DRUMMING RHYTHMS FOR THE BIRTH JOURNEY

Studies of shamanic rituals have found that drumming at a fast tempo between 180 to 220 beats per minute is often used to induce trance states. This aligns with research indicating that a high frequency drumbeat around 3 to 4 beats per second (180 to 240 beats per minute) is effective at shifting brain wave patterns into slower frequencies associated with deep relaxation and altered states of consciousness (Maxfield, 1990).

However, having practised shamanic drumming for over ten years whilst supporting women during pregnancy, birth and the postpartum, my experience has shown me that the most powerful drum rhythm is an intuitive rhythm guided by the situation and the mother's needs at that time. Drum rhythms tend to be fluid, ebbing and flowing in both speed and volume. I often feel like the drum is playing me rather than the other way round, taking a life of its own through a process that requires no conscious decision on my part.

## The most powerful drum rhythm is an intuitive rhythm

Similarly, there is no set or right time or location for when to drum during the birth journey. I have drummed for women during pregnancy, during early labour, established labour, during the second stage of labour, and during the postpartum. I have drummed at home, in the birth centre and the delivery unit. With some clients, drumming was included during every stage of the pregnancy, birth and postpartum, and sometimes only for one particular stage.

For example, a woman hired me as her doula specifically to drum at her birth. She was a shamanic drum practitioner herself. During her pregnancy, I drummed for her or with her regularly. It was especially useful to release anxiety and trauma as her previous

birth had been difficult. I drummed during several parts of her labour, during early labour at home and in the hospital's birth centre during established labour. Yet when I picked up my drum as she started to push, thinking that she could benefit from the support of the drumbeat, she said, 'No!' in a very assertive tone. It just wasn't right at that time for her.

On another occasion, I attended a homebirth, and I didn't start drumming until the beginning of the second stage of labour. My client later told me she wished I had done it before, as she found it so helpful, but my instinct told me that she didn't need it before that.

*For labour, the best drumming is live, a drum and an intuitive drummer who you know and trust, who you feel comfortable to have in your birth space. This way the actual vibration of the drum beats will help reduce the pain of the contractions. If that isn't possible, you can reach the same level of focus with a recorded drum beat.* (Hardwicke-Collings, 2011)

There are three main ways that drumming can be used to provide support during the transition to parenting journey:

- **Sound bath:** simply drumming near the person and encouraging them to relax and enjoy. This provides the benefits of the sound and vibrations.
- **Drum journeying:** where the intention is to get an answer to a question, or guidance from someone (for example, the baby). The drumming is accompanied with guiding words (like a meditation) at the beginning, followed by a period of pure drumming. This takes advantage of the modified state of consciousness that drumming provides.
- **Drum healing:** drumming over the person with an intention of healing. This combines the sound with a more direct effect of the drum vibrations over the body.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, drumming is a practice deeply rooted across cultures, intertwined with feminine-centred healing and sacred rituals surrounding major life transitions. While drumming was suppressed historically in patriarchal societies, a growing body of research now substantiates its measurable effects on human neurobiology and physiology. Drumming during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum can provide numerous benefits - physiologically through endorphin release and stress reduction, emotionally through empowerment and intuition, spiritually through sacredness and connection. More research is needed, but many women's accounts speak to drumming's value in bringing calm, focus, community, and trust to the journey of pregnancy and birth. Reintegrating drumming traditions may help



*Credit: Ali Stewart (the photographer)*

restore a sense of the sacred feminine to this profound rite of passage, reconnecting women with their personal autonomy and inner wisdom.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like to contact the author about her work, please visit her website at:

<https://www.sophiemessenger.com/>

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