

# The rat-a-tat-tat cure for stress

**An age-old remedy  
balances biochemistry to  
restore a sunny disposition**

Sharon Silverstein had dealt with stressful periods before, but the anxiety she felt with the arrival of her newborn son seemed especially painful and unfair. "I was so on edge that I'd sit up all night and worry. I knew it wasn't normal, so I sought help from a psychiatrist. But since I was breast-feeding, I didn't want to take the meds he prescribed." Instead, Sharon went to a homeopathic doctor, a sleep specialist and even a neurologist, but none of their suggestions helped her. Then after Sharon had been awake for a particularly difficult 24-hour stretch, a friend urged her to attend a drumming circle at a local yoga center. "The idea of music as therapy was appealing, so I decided to give it a try," says Sharon. "And when I walked through the door, I was immediately drawn to the laughter coming from the group and the pulsating cadences of the drums. It seemed so grounding, and I felt instantly at ease."

## How percussion therapy ushers in calm

Drumming circles, which have been part of the healing rituals of many cultures for centuries, are now backed by science. In groundbreaking research at the Mind-Body Wellness Center in Meadville, Pennsylvania, volunteers experienced significant reductions in levels of the stress hormone cortisol and reported feeling less depressed and anxious after just one hour of drumming. What's more, they showed significantly increased levels of disease-fighting natural killer cells. And in a study of individuals classified as "highly stressed," just 30 minutes of drumming

**Just 30 minutes of  
drumming can double  
levels of feel-good alpha  
brain waves.**



Sharon Silverstein,  
36, Hillsborough, NJ

was shown to double levels of alpha brain waves, which are associated with feelings of well-being. "Drumming resonates with the body's natural rhythms," explains Barry Bittman, M.D., lead researcher at the center. "By using the beat of the drum to synchronize yourself with these rhythms, you can slow heart and breathing rates, triggering a relaxation response that lowers stress levels." Drumming workshops can range from \$25 to \$300. To find one near you, inquire at your local music store or visit [rhythmweb.com](http://rhythmweb.com). Although most health insurance plans don't reimburse the costs, coverage of alternative therapies is always expanding, so check with your carrier.

## "The clouds finally lifted!"

"As soon as I started drumming, my mood improved and I felt more resilient," says Sharon. That experience made her such a believer in the healing powers of drumming that she started organizing therapeutic drumming workshops for children. (Visit [livingatpeace.com](http://livingatpeace.com) for details.) "What began as a personal journey has extended to my community, and seeing the impact it has on the kids lifted the clouds for me in a way I'd never known."

## The rhythms that mend your moods

### To outsmart anxiety...

Use the beat of the drum to synchronize your breathing to a relaxed state. "Taking deep breaths at steady intervals stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, the branch that promotes calm," says music therapist Barry Bernstein of [HealthySounds.com](http://HealthySounds.com). **To do:** Inhale to a slow beat of four as you tap your fingers to keep the pace. Exhale to another count of four and repeat until your heart rate has slowed and you feel at ease.

### To bring on bliss...

Combine the uplifting nature of rhythm with the study-proven benefits of acupressure, suggests Lisa Jakober, director of education at the National Massage Therapy Institute in Philadelphia. **To do:** Use your finger to tap up and down your sternum (the breastbone in the center of the chest) to the beat of a favorite energetic, rhythmic selection for 30 to 60 seconds. Stimulating this pressure point helps release the blocked energy that causes blue moods, Jakober says.

### To power up your energy...

Try an up-tempo tune to get your heart pounding and your blood flowing and to boost you into a wide-awake state. **To do:** Think of a song that reflects the vibe you'd like to be feeling (some energizing music-therapy favorites include "Fun, Fun, Fun" and "Good Vibrations" by The Beach Boys and "Marches" by John Philip Sousa). And since just listening may not be enough to bring about the desired effect (if your body and the beat aren't in harmony, the music becomes distracting noise), get in sync by drumming to the beat. If you don't have access to your chosen song, simply drum and hum.

### We're here to help!

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