

THE THERAPY OF MUSIC

Music is a true joy in life. No matter how you're feeling, there's always at least one song that will put a smile on your face. And there are plenty of health benefits too.

BY JESSICA ABELSOHN

There's something about music that seems to make things melt away. Whether it's jazz, rock and roll, classical or pop music, if it speaks to you, it'll do the trick. It makes parties livelier, dinners more interesting and if you don't have the company of a friend, strolls around the neighbourhood are delightful with some accompanying tunes. And now, there's actual proof that it helps in the healing process. Whether it's a sickness or an injury, the benefits of music are endless.

For more than 30 years, music therapists have been employed, albeit sparingly, by hospitals and palliative care centres in Australia. Most of the time, it's to soothe dementia sufferers, bring joy to people who are dying, or to distract children or patients from the anxiety often related to procedures. According to Associate Professor Lee-Fay Low, there are many non-pharmacological treatments

available in healthcare, including music. "Music, particularly familiar music, is usually strongly associated with emotions and memories," she explains. "Studies suggest that listening to music when sick, for example before an operation, can reduce anxiety and perceptions of pain."

The proof is in the pudding

A study done by Harvard Medical School recently looked at 60 stroke patients. While all received standard care, one third also listened to recorded music for at least one hour a day, one third listened to audio books and the other group didn't receive any auditory stimulation.

After three months, verbal memory improved by 60 per cent in those who listened to music. Compare this to the 20-30 per cent improvement in those patients who listened to audiobooks or nothing at all, and the benefits of music are clear.

Patrick Pickett, CSM, who among other things, currently conducts the Queensland Pops Orchestra, explains how music is being used to help older adults. "A program designed to train older adults to walk and perform various movements in time to music helped improve their gait and balance when compared with their peers," he describes. "I introduced a friend with severe Parkinson's disease to a singing teacher; I thought singing may help him cope with his disease. When my friend would find himself 'locked' and unable to walk or use his arms much, he would start singing a few notes of an aria, which unlocked his legs." »

“

Whether it's a sickness or an injury, the benefits of music are endless.”

This is supported by AProf Low. “There are many cases of people with stroke who can sing but not talk,” she says. “Some clinicians report using singing to help people regain their ability to speak.”

Memory recall

When it comes to dementia, music is a form of therapy, not only emotionally but mentally too. “We know that people with severe dementia still recognise and enjoy music,” AProf Low says. “My experience is that people with dementia will often still sing familiar songs even though they don’t talk beyond single syllables.” There are also studies suggesting that music helps to alleviate agitated behaviour. “Music is able to ‘activate’ some people with dementia; switch them on so that they are more attentive and lucid for a while,” AProf Low explains. “There are groups trying to use this music ‘activation’ to help people with dementia participate in tasks such as physical therapy or before meals.”

Around the world

There have been many shifts towards music therapy around the



After three months, verbal memory improved by 60 per cent in those who listened to music.”

world. In the UK, GPs have been prescribing creative activities to help improve people’s health. Music, art and writing have been recommended and there have been hundreds of case studies showing that it works. In the US, doctors have trialed positioning musicians outside of centres in a bid to alleviate the stress associated with a doctor’s visit. Two music therapists in Massachusetts positioned violin players outside a breast imaging centre. A patient noted that by the time her name was called, her thoughts had shifted from worrying about the mammogram to whether she was listening to Schubert or Beethoven.

But it’s not just in the medical area where music therapy seems to work. “Some of my major experience over the past 25 years has been in war torn and countries with civil unrest,” Pickett explains. “Music played a significant part of bringing

communities back together. The music worked best in countries where western music has been introduced into the culture over a long period of time, for example it worked very well in places like East Timor, Boganivelle and Solomon Islands, but didn’t show much progress in the Middle East.”

Regardless of how or where it’s used, it’s abundantly clear, music matters. ••

WHAT TO DO AT HOME

You don’t need to go to a hospital or clinic to enjoy the health benefits of music. Here are some things you can all do on your own.

- Join a choir. According to AProf Low there are choirs specific for people with dementia and carers.
- Make music at home. Sing, dance and play musical instruments.
- Put together a personal playlist. Think about all the songs you loved as a kid and those you enjoy now.

