



Music is Medicine for Body and Soul

Music has been known to have a positive effect on both mental and physical health since ancient times, when people used singing, dancing and chanting as a part of rituals to throw out the evil spirits that supposedly caused disease.

Experiencing and making music have been linked to lower heart rate, decreased blood pressure and reduced stress. Music also has been shown to offer pain relief, although that has been controversial until recently. When two German researchers published results of their look at music's effect on the chronic pain associated with fibromyalgia, myofascial pain syndrome and polyarthritis in 1997, they noted the lack of research on the

subject. However, they found a significant reduction of pain intensity and pain-related disability in patients exposed to music compared to a control group with no music exposure. French research published in 2005 found music to be effective in controlling chronic low back pain in hospitalized patients.

In an article published last year in the *Southern Medical Journal*, researchers Dr. Kathi J. Kemper and Dr. Suzanne C. Danhauer of the Department of Pediatrics at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, NC, observed that music is increasingly being used to enhance well-being, reduce stress and distract patients from unpleasant symptoms.

Rockabye Baby

Any parent can attest to the calming effect on a baby of gentle motion and quiet music. Babies are born with a natural sense of rhythm. Those late-night swaying sorties around the house to entice the little one back to sleep can nurture that musicality. And if movement and music are a part of your child's life from an early age, a love of confident, creative movement will likely stay with him or her for life. Dancing and singing with your baby will provide an introduction not only to music but to healthy physical activities. It is also a great way to communicate with your baby and provides good, stress-relieving exercise for mom.

Music, by itself, can especially benefit sick babies who are hospitalized, according to recent research. A project led by a researcher from the University of Western Sydney has found that music therapy can help sick babies in intensive care maintain normal behavioral development, making them less irritable and upset, and less likely to cry.

The project studied 40 infants, some of whom received music therapy involving up to 12 sessions of a therapist gently singing to them and touching them. It was found that the infants who experienced music therapy maintained the same levels of irritability and crying that they had at admission, while those babies in the Neonatal Unit who did not have music therapy deteriorated in their irritability and crying behavior, coping less with their hospitalization as time went on.

"It's likely the babies who received music therapy used up less energy when compared with the babies who did not receive the therapy. If a baby is less irritable and cries less, this has implications for rate of healing and weight gain, two significant factors which contribute to the length of a hospital stay," says Dr. Stephen Malloch, a Research Fellow at the University's MARCS Auditory Laboratories.

And if you want to use music to soothe a bothered baby, consider beginning before birth. According to research conducted at Leicester University, babies can remember sounds they heard in the womb more than a year after birth. *The Child Of Our Time* study involved a small group of mothers playing a single piece of music to their babies for the last three months before birth. More than a year later, 11 of the babies were tested and showed a preference for these pieces of music compared with very similar pieces of music they had not heard before.

One woman told BBC reporters working on a story about the research how her daughter had developed a taste for jazz. "I used to have a daily bath and listen to Ella Fitzgerald at six PM. It was my peace time," she said. "When she was born she was very fractious with colic. We used to play Ella Fitzgerald at three AM to try to settle her, and it really worked."



“Although there are wide variations in individual preferences, music appears to exert direct physiologic effects through the autonomic nervous system,” they wrote. “Music is a low-cost intervention that often reduces surgical, procedural, acute, and chronic pain.”

Listening to soothing music and gentle sounds like the ocean or a heartbeat is a common aid to meditation. The key to using music for healing is not to listen critically but to allow yourself to be bathed in the sound, allowing it to carry you away on its waves. Become part of the music and your rate of respiration will slow, your blood pressure will fall and you will become deeply relaxed. Do this for five or ten minutes on a daily basis, and you should begin to feel the benefits.

Sing Your Troubles Away

Some of the best health effects are associated with active involvement in music, such as singing. A recent survey of 1,780 drivers for the British car-insurance company Privilege Insurance found that listening to music may help reduce road rage and decrease the chance of an accident. Most respondents with good driving records said music relaxed them when driving and aided their concentration. Half of the motorists said they often sing along to music while driving. Safe drivers in the survey tended to play easy listening and classical music in their cars.

Dr Nicola Dibben, a music psychologist from the University of Sheffield who carried out the study on behalf of Privilege, says: “Singing while driving stimulates not only the mind but also the body which in turn produces heightened alertness and reduced fatigue. Singing may be less distracting than conversation because drivers recall words to songs they already know, or because it is fairly easy to learn the words to music where it uses repeated lyrics.”

If singing in your car (or the shower) has health benefits, group singing adds emotional and social benefits to the experience. In a study published in 2001 in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Health*, the authors queried members of the Canterbury Christ Church choir about their experience. A large majority of respondents said they had benefitted socially (87 percent) and emotionally (75 percent), with 58 percent saying they had benefitted in some physical way. The health benefits cited included improved lung function and breathing, improved mood and stress reduction.

Singing is also being used to help people with dementia. In a project begun in 2004 in the UK, Dr. Nicholas Bannan of the International Centre for Research in Music Education and Chreanne Montgomery-Smith of The Alzheimer’s Society held a series of workshops for people with dementia, their caregivers and health workers.

For the *Singing for the Brain* pilot project, Bannan devised and led activities which allowed the maximal experience of musical communication and interaction, including musical games, choral singing and movement routines. Video and audio recordings were made of the sessions and Montgomery-Smith conducted questionnaire research immediately after each session, and also subsequently in retrospect.

The researchers concluded that group singing may have clear benefits for caregiver-patient relationships and for provid-

ing a varied channel of communication between them and as a means for patients to engage effectively with strangers. Ongoing research involves learning about the neurological features of participation in group singing.

Music Therapy

An increasing number of colleges and universities are offering courses in music therapy. Graduates offer services in skilled and intermediate care facilities, adult foster care homes, rehabilitation hospitals, residential care facilities, hospitals, adult day care centers, retirement facilities, senior centers, hospices, senior evaluation programs, psychiatric treatment centers and other facilities.

Music therapists also work for agencies that provide in-home care. Some therapists are self-employed and provide individual and group music therapy services on a contract basis. They may improvise or compose music with clients, accompany and conduct group music experiences, provide instrument instruction, direct music and movement activities or structure music listening opportunities. They are usually members of a health care interdisciplinary team that is poised to help bring the healing benefits of music to the ill and elderly.

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Too Much of a Good Thing

Loud music can have a negative effect on our well-being. It can cause temporary and even permanent hearing loss in people of all ages. Researchers have found that hearing loss is directly related to a variety of health and emotional issues including high blood pressure, headaches, insomnia, respiratory ailments, negative effects on fetal development, anxiety, irritability, antisocial behavior and learning difficulties.

Noise-induced hearing loss can be caused by a one-time exposure to a loud noise as well as by repeated exposure to sounds at various loudness levels over an extended period of time. The loudness of sound is measured in units called decibels. For example, usual conversation is approximately 60 decibels, while a rock concert can expose you to 110 or 120 decibels, depending on where you sit. The discomfort level for sound is around 120 decibels. Any noise over 75 decibels is thought to cause hearing damage. Studies have shown that teenagers and young adults may be aging their ears at between three to ten times the usual rate by exposing them to dangerously high levels of music from concerts and the use of portable music players.

Symptoms of hearing damage include ringing or buzzing in the ears, difficulty in understanding speech, light muffling of sounds and difficulty understanding speech in noisy places or places with poor acoustics.



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