

Music as Medicine by Simon Heather

Most of us listen to music for relaxation but few people realise just how powerful sound and music can be for healing. In ancient times, sound and music were used as a healing tool for both body and mind. Now, studies show that music may be an effective treatment for conditions as varied as heart disease, depression and stroke.

Heart Disease

A recent review of 23 scientific studies of the use of music in the treatment of coronary heart disease showed that those participants that listened to music as part of their treatment had better health than those who just received standard care (the studies involved 1,500 participants).

Listening to music also had beneficial effects on blood pressure, heart and respiratory rates, anxiety and pain. In most studies participants listened to pre-recorded music as well as their routine care. (Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009).

Surgery

Other studies have shown the benefits of listening to music for those under-going surgery. Listening to music reduces anxiety and pain in adults and children alike. (South Medical Journal, 2005; 98: p 282–8).

In one study, listening to music proved to be just as effective as sedatives in relieving the anxiety of 207 patients before an operation. The researchers found no significant differences in anxiety, cortisol level, heart rate and blood pressure between those taking diazepam and those who listened to music in the run-up to surgery. (Medscape Journal of Medicine 2008 June 25).

Stroke Patients

According to a study carried out in Helsinki, Finland, listening to music for a few hours every day can boost recovery in the early stages following a stroke. The results showed that the recovery of verbal memory and attention improved significantly more with the group of patients who listened to music compared with those patients who listened to audio books or did nothing at all. The music group also felt less depressed and confused than the no-music group. These differences were still present six months later, suggesting that music may have long-term effects on brain function and mood (Brain, 2008; 131: p 866–76).

It is thought that music may directly stimulate recovery in damaged areas of the brain. Another theory is that the positive emotions elicited by music may result in more efficient brain neuronal signalling.

Depression

Listening to music can reduce chronic pain by up to 21 per cent and depression by up to 25 per cent, according to a paper in the Journal of Advanced Nursing. It can also make people feel more in control of their pain and less disabled by their condition.

"The people who took part in the music groups listened to music on a headset for an hour a day and everyone who took part, including the control group, kept a pain diary" explains nurse researcher Dr Sandra L Siedlecki from the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Ohio.

(The effect of music on power, pain, depression and disability - Journal of Advanced Nursing. 2005 Volume 54.5, p 553 to 562.).

Sleep

Research by Professor Good and Hui-Ling Lai, published in the Journal of Advanced Nursing in 2005 showed that listening to 45 minutes of soft music before bedtime can improve sleep by more than a third. (see reference above).

Live Music in Hospitals

The Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London have regular live music performances and have seen impressive results. A scientific study by the hospital has found that patients who listen to live music need fewer drugs and recover more quickly than those patients who don't listen to music.

According to Dr Rosalia Staricoff, who carried out the study, there is growing scientific evidence that listening to music can help to heal the body. She said: "The physiological benefits have been measured. Music reduces blood pressure, the heart rate, and hormones related to stress." (BBC News Wednesday, 19 July 2006).

Dementia

Professor Clive Holmes, from Southampton University, studied the effects of live music on dementia patients. He says: "Suddenly they came alive – some hadn't spoken for three years." (International Psychogeriatrics - Cambridge University Press 2006)

A recent study looked at the impact of live performances on patients with severe dementia. Bands played popular classics such as The Blue Danube and Glenn Miller's Chattanooga Choo Choo, while researchers scored patients in terms of awareness and alertness. Some residents, who were so profoundly disabled by their dementia they could hardly hold a conversation, danced and sang along with the music. (The Sun 2nd November 2006).

Cancer

Patients having chemotherapy experience less pain and discomfort when they listen to music during their treatment. Patients at the Velindre Cancer Centre in Cardiff are treated to live music with a professional harpist during their cancer treatments. The soothing effects of the music have been shown to ease the side effects of chemotherapy. (BBC News Thursday, 5th January 2006).

In a review of several trials by scientists from Stanford University, music was reported to be an effective treatment for the chronic, often debilitating, pain experienced by cancer patients. Listening to music also improved the patients' quality of life. (Hawaii Medical Journal 2007; 66: 292–5).

Singing

Singing is fun and it actually singing actually makes us healthy and happy according to a number of recently published studies.

In a study published in the Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health the authors questioned members of a university choir. They found that no fewer than 93 per cent agreed that singing made their mood more positive; 89 per cent reported feeling happier; 79 per cent said it helped to reduce stress and 78 per cent felt calmer. At the same time, though, 74 per cent were more energetic and 76 per cent more awake and alert. 74 per cent of choral singers agreed that singing was "good for my soul". (The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health, Vol. 121, No. 4, 248-256 (2001).

Other studies have shown that choral singing increases immunity, reduces depression, improves cognitive function, lowers stress levels and releases endorphins, the feel-good hormones. A joint Harvard and Yale study even found that it increased the life expectancy of the population of New Haven, Connecticut, by promoting a healthy heart and a better state of mind. (Why take Prozac when you can sing Prokofiev? - The Times January 18, 2007).

Professor Graham Welch, an expert in music and medicine at the University of London, says that regular singing reduces stress hormones and gives the cardiovascular system a good workout. (The Times January 18, 2007)

Singing has physical benefits because it is an aerobic activity that boosts oxygenation in the bloodstream and exercises major muscle groups in the upper body. The charity Heart Research UK is planning a publicity campaign to get us all singing to boost our heart health.

Singing in Schools

A former UK Education Secretary, Alan Johnson funded a £10 million campaign to encourage singing in schools.

Children have become better behaved since teachers began singing to them in school. Teachers at 70 British primary schools have joined an experimental scheme to improve the performance of their pupils by singing to the children in lessons. Organisers of the scheme say the project brings a whole new dimension to classroom learning and they are hailing it as a success.

At the Oxford Gardens primary school, West London, music has played a prominent role in the school's curriculum ever since the school teamed up with The Voices Foundation. Teachers have found the project so successful that in some classes they only need to sing to restore order.

Children sing their two and three times tables in maths classes, appear happier and even go home and sing to their families, say the scheme's organisers. The staff at Oxford Gardens School have seen an improvement in pupils academic success and in their behaviour.

Headteacher, Liz Rayment-Pickard, said: "I do feel foolish but it is just one of those things that is so enjoyable and so much fun. (BBC News January 21, 1998).

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