

Healing Through Music

How music therapy can improve your health

Music is such a large part of our lives that we do not usually stop to think about it. It is all around us, so much so that we sometimes take it for granted — at grocery stores, on TV shows, during sad soap opera segments, and on iPods as we go about the day. Think about your favourite movie. Chances are that the film would be missing a lot without music.

Music draws out intensity and excitement, sorrow, hope, dreams, and passion. Imagine a wedding without music, or an aerobics class. Most people would not feel motivated at the gym without music. Our bodies want to move to the beat.

The appeal of music is ancient. At a Neanderthal site in Europe, archeologists found a flute made of bone that is at least 43,000 years old, tuned to the same scale Western music uses today. It is amazing how music or a song can take you back to a time and place, to feelings that suddenly come alive again. Some music can stay in the mind for years, and the words often return even if you have not sung them in a very long time.

My dad had Alzheimer's disease, and his love for music actually increased with the illness. I grew up listening to his record collection: the Ink Spots, Sons of the Pioneers, Ella Fitzgerald, the witty Scotsman Harry Lauder, and Bing Crosby. While doing my Bachelor of Music degree, I worked in the admitting and switchboard departments of a hospital. When I heard about music therapy, it seemed like a great way to bring together health care and music.

My first job was at a nursing home. To start, I had reservations about working in a long-term care facility. Through personal experience with my father, I knew that music could tap into memories, calm an anxious heart, and uplift the spirit. What I dreaded as a job turned into a wonderful experience. As part of a talent night, three of us improvised music using percussion instruments and metal xylophones called metallophones. I removed some of the notes so that the instruments played a five-note (pentatonic) scale. This way, the notes we would play would sound harmonious. The other two performers were non-English speaking women – one born in China, the other in Japan. Both lived on the locked special care unit for those with advanced dementia. They laughed as they playfully made up beautiful music, and beamed when the audience clapped.

We also adapted ballet to the music of Saint-Saëns's *The Swan*. One patient, a woman born in Europe, had once taught ballet and now sat mute. On hearing the music, she bolted out of her chair, standing upright with perfect posture, poised and ready to dance. The rhythm and structure of music created order out of chaos for her. The grace of her body, the light in her eyes, and the human connection, brought tears to the eyes of many watching. Everyone deserves experiences of beauty, including those who have dementia.

About music therapists

Music therapy uses music-based experiences to bring about a desired change. A qualified music therapist has a minimum of a bachelor's degree, followed by a 1000-hour internship. After completing training, the therapist applies for accreditation with the Canadian Association for Music Therapy. The MTA, or Music Therapist Accredited, is the entry-level credential needed to practice music therapy in Canada.

Music therapists are accomplished in a variety of musical skills, including voice, guitar, piano, and improvisation, but also in assessment methods and psychology. Advanced levels of training, such as the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music, allow deeper study of personal growth and development. Music therapists are found in schools, palliative care units, nursing homes, private practice, rehabilitation centres, group homes, psychiatric facilities, and more.

Why does music therapy work?

Twenty-three years after becoming a music therapist, I continue to be amazed at this blend of music, science, and art. We know that music often works wonders, but not always how or why. Still, our understanding is improving. Music therapy is well known as one of the most effective ways to reach someone with dementia. Even those who have lost their language and thinking skills can often still remember music, such as the words to an old song.

The neurology department at the University of British Columbia is looking at how music helps the brains of people with dementia. Our research has found that music helps because it uses so many parts of the brain. When brain imaging is done, studies show that listening to music lights up, or activates, more of the brain than any other kind of stimulation.

In these music therapy sessions, we have tested the use of music to tap many areas, including memory, learning, physical movement, creativity, insight, and concentration. The results so far are promising. Music therapy improves depression, anxiety, behaviour, quality of life, and thinking skills. In other words, music is good for our health.

Music therapy works in many ways

In studies of movement disorders like Parkinson's disease, researchers have explored the benefits of music therapy. Choral singing, voice exercise, rhythm and free body movements, and musical improvisation were all studied. Music significantly improved movement (especially bradykinesia or slow movement), mood, activities of daily living (ADLs), and quality of life.

Music therapy is being used to help people recover their speech after a stroke. In most people's brains, the area for language is on the left side. Singing, though, is a skill found mainly in the right side of the brain. Someone who can barely talk, or who stutters, can often sing songs with ease. Using a technique called melodic intonation therapy, a combined singing and speaking method, can help create new brain pathways to improve speaking. I remember Leo, a patient in his early fifties and in a nursing home. A stroke on the left side of his brain meant he had a really hard time talking. Still, he was motivated and

worked hard. One day, a nurse came to his room with his medication. Leo said, "Good morning. How are you?" These were two of the phrases we had worked on. The nurse was shocked. She had never heard Leo speak before, and now he was able to have some conversation.

Music therapy is also very successful with children. Children often have so much fun singing, playing percussion instruments, and creating a story, that they do not realize they are learning new skills. They are learning hand-eye coordination, taking turns, naming the days of the week, counting, and more.

For children with special needs, such as those who have autism, music is especially useful because it can be done without words. Some children with autism live in a world of their own. They do not connect with others. In music therapy, a shared instrument like a xylophone can bridge the gap. Shared play lays the foundation for connections between people. At the same time, music can communicate feelings in ways that do not require words.

In my present work at the Burnaby Centre for Mental Health and Addiction, music therapy is part of a life skills development program. Part of the recovery process is the discovery of other abilities. Here, people can discover new skills like songwriting, feeling successful at a task, engaging in creativity, practising relaxation, learning an instrument, developing social skills through creating music together, and expressing emotions in safe ways and structured ways. One man with very challenging mental health needs rediscovered his love for playing a drum set. He had once been in a band. Drumming focused his attention, showed him he was still able to be successful at something, and calmed his anger. He said it really lifted his spirits.

A natural high comes from playing or listening to great music. Music, as well as some drugs, can release a feel-good hormone called dopamine. Research is showing that music itself is therapy, and that is music to our ears.

For more information about music therapy, please visit the Canadian Association for Music Therapy at www.musictherapy.ca.