

The medicine of music

THE IMPACT OF MUSIC THERAPY ON OUR HEALTH, BEHAVIOR AND MINDS

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WITHOUT SKIPPING A BEAT

The sound of instruments, as well as singing, can lower blood pressure and increase oxygen levels, Hoffman said. This is good for your whole body, but especially your heart. Music therapy can aid those recovering from heart problems. As you move to the beat, it's the rhythm and timbre of instruments that work the magic. Singing is good for you because it requires deep breathing. It gives your lungs a workout. Increasing your oxygen means increasing your energy, and we could all use a little more of that. Diaphragm breathing also can help those with chest conditions.

STUCK IN YOUR HEAD

Music's ability to trigger memories is perhaps one of its most important benefits. Hoffman said music therapy can conjure associations with the past. This is displayed well in people with dementia. John Ratliff is a musician who performs at Memory Matters and assisted-living centers with his daughter, Amélie Ratliff, a classically trained violinist. The duo is well known

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around the area for brightening faces with their music. Ratliff said performing for people who have suffered memory loss is rewarding, to say the least, as they get to watch people who may not remember anything else sing a song with overt recognition. “They’re back,” Ratliff said, “even if it’s only for two minutes, or as long as the song lasts, they’re there.”

SET THE MOOD

If you’ve ever been to a concert, you probably know a “concert high” is a real thing. Music has the ability to change how we’re feeling, and it usually makes us feel better. There’s a reason. According to Hoffman, **music increases serotonin and dopamine levels in the brain.** Serotonin is a mood-stabilizing hormone that makes you happy. Dopamine is a hormone associated with pleasure and reward. Singing in a group can increase oxytocin, too – the feel-good hormone released by hugging and social bonding. Is the song “I Feel Good” by James Brown stuck in anyone else’s head now?

SOUND BODY AND MIND Music therapy can reduce anxiety, ease pain, facilitate rehabilitation and improve quality of life for people with dementia.

What do vegetables and workouts have in common with music? Not much, except they’re all good for you. As it turns out, belting out your favorite song or taking up an instrument isn’t just fun, it has health benefits. Music therapy is a field that focuses solely on these benefits. Board-certified music therapist John Michael Hoffman of Memory Matters said music therapy uses music to influence behavior and the brain. During his music therapy education, he was taught how to break down the elements of music and their effects. Some activities in music therapy include playing instruments, writing songs and singing. Piano, guitar and percussion instruments are most common.

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That’s why music therapy works – and works well. **Here are a few of the many benefits of music therapy:**

SING THE BLUES

Those dealing with grief and loss also benefit from music therapy, Hoffman said. **Music helps with its ability to improve mood and invoke memories, but it also can help those grieving by putting words to what they are going through.** Music often dives into topics or feelings that are hard to talk about. It can be used as a temporary method of escape, as music can transport us to other times and places. Both sad and happy music can help those going through difficult times.

GET VOCAL

Singing can help with talking. Hoffman said music can be used in speech-language pathology. Those with an impaired ability to speak may be able to start with singing, as singing allows one to say things more slowly. Singing also uses a different part of the brain than talking, according to Hoffman. Music could be the bridge to get someone talking again. The universal language of music opens a door of communication. Combining music therapy and speech therapy means twice as effective treatment.



THE RHYTHM OF RECOVERY

Music therapy is also beneficial for those who have experienced trauma, both physical and psychological. Hoffman said elements of rhythm are important for individuals who have undergone traumatic brain injury. This is partially due to the fact music and motor control share brain circuits. Retraining the brain is no small task, but music can help. Researchers formerly thought music's impact on those who had undergone trauma was based in its social value. However, recent research shows there's more to it than that – it's scientific. Neurologic music therapy is an effective treatment continuing to develop as researchers discover more of its benefits. *LL*
