

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Music Therapy for the Elderly



Music can be a natural and effective healing agent. With some client populations, like the elderly in nursing homes, it can be the most effective way of providing therapeutic service. It can provide a joyful experience that can lift the spirit of a depressed person and bring a feeling of calm to an agitated one. Some old favorites and gospel songs can bring about reminiscences of happy times, and stimulate a memory that may be faltering under the weight of Alzheimer's disease, as well as calm the agitation often brought about by that malady.

Sometimes music therapy is just listening, or singling or clapping along; other times it may involve letting others play the music, or several in the group playing together. This can lift people's self esteem when they are praised or just pleased for their efforts.

There have been documented studies that show how music can also bring relief to patients with chronic pain, or to those suffering with dementia and Parkinsonism. Other studies have shown that music familiar to a person's life can help that person remember the history and stories of his or her life, previously buried deep in the chambers of memory. A Swedish study, done in 2006, compared the blood pressure of two similar groups of elderly women. One group discussed their hobbies, and the other group listened to music and looked at art pictures. Amazingly, there was a significant drop in the blood pressure in the art/music group.

Another study discussed the use of music therapy in improving the physical and mental functioning of elderly frail persons, especially those with dementia; this study found that there were marked improvements in pain relief, lowering of depression, increased relaxation, better memory function, improved family interaction and communication, and significant increase in reminiscence which improved memory.

I will cite one more article from the journal Music Therapy, which studied 20 residents of a nursing home (aged 60-95 years old) matched with a close sample from another nursing home who did not get the therapy. The experimental group showed significant improvement in life satisfaction after only five weeks.

Each one of us is musical in some way. Our heart beats rhythmically and continually, we move with a certain rhythm, often graceful; when we speak our voices have an unmistakable quality based on the rate of speech, the tone and pitch, the volume, and the timing. We are attracted to musical sounds and respond to them. Music, and even style of speech, can be used therapeutically to help others to feel emotionally better, to act more calmly, and to think more clearly and positively. When combined with talk therapy, or even on its own, music has the ability to change others for the better, to bring people in groups together in positive interaction, and to teach people to listen and react in a more improvised manner. It is a shared activity that unites.

Music therapy can be done anywhere in groups both large and small. It is best done in a private setting allowing for few distractions, or can be done in a client's room if they are unable to attend a larger meeting.

Music can be an important part of the regular routine of a nursing care center; it is not only a social interaction between group members who sometimes only come together for the sessions, but can be very therapeutic for those who attend. So it is not only an activity, but a therapy as well.

It serves as a means of encouraging the appreciation of music, of reminiscing about life experiences and events, it may include talks, and it often includes group participation vocally and with movement. On special occasions, such as major holidays and birthdays, it helps the group express the joys of their community, and even allows participants to be creative, if they wish to be.

I work weekly with the residents at a residential facility, the clients at an adult day care center, and some members of a senior citizen center. Each place is obviously very different, and very unique, and the style and intent at each is different. At the residential

facility the need for support and assistance is a full-time necessity, while at the senior citizen center members are fully independent and functional adults who have just happened to have reached a certain age, and like each other's company. In all cases, though, music brings people together, brings them joy, helps them to remember other happy times, and makes life feel normal. In each location I feel like an integral part of the group, and I fully enjoy being part of this shared activity.

After doing this work several times a week for the past 19 months, in several locations, I am convinced of the power of music to provide meaning between people, even to those who have lost their ability to understand or express themselves; with music they still can use their minds and their bodies more effectively, maintain interest in life, improve their mood, and feel part of a bigger family, especially those who have reduced contact with their biological families.

TIP OF THE WEEK: ATTENTION PREGNANT WOMEN - Sad but true: A study just released in the British Medical Journal states that a cup or more of coffee daily during pregnancy is enough to increase the risk of having a low-birth-weight baby. The higher the coffee consumption (and this would include caffeinated drinks such as Pepsi, Coke, and Mountain-Dew [check the labels], as well as tea [other than herbal teas], and could include chocolate, which is also a source of caffeine).

Even Sadder but true: Children who live in households with smokers are at much higher risk NOT to get enough food everyday, partly because a significant part of the family income is spent on tobacco, and partly because smokers often have different dietary behavior than non-smokers, according to an article in the current issue of Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine (November 2008). The lower the family income, they demonstrate, the higher the risk.