
Healing effects of art and music

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If you attended the recent Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Festival, you may have witnessed a demonstration of music therapy by neurologist Dr Kamal Chemali of the Cleveland Clinic and his pianist Prisca Benoit.

This is part of an ambitious new initiative by the clinic to harness the healing effects of art, music and theatre, and it is expected to be available in Abu Dhabi via the clinic's Arts and Medicine Institute in three years' time.

Music therapy itself is, of course, nothing new. Three centuries ago, when Congreve wrote 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast', he was echoing a sentiment of long standing. But there have been exciting advances in our knowledge of how the brain interprets different musical tones and frequencies and reacts by issuing specific commands to the body.

For example, when you listen to music, you automatically start breathing more deeply, which reduces the heart-rate - the standard prelude to relaxation. There is also a surge in your production of serotonin, which suppresses anger and aggression, and helps you sleep.

By experimenting with different tones and frequencies, it is possible to improve left-brain right-brain synchronisation, and listening to a favourite melody is known to lift your mood in a way that makes you more receptive to stress therapy.

No wonder the medical profession is now making active use of music therapy in many applications, including the relief of cancer symptoms, and some universities are planning to make it the subject of a formal PhD.

As a keen instrumentalist from a musical family, I often used to wonder whether this therapy would work on a non-musical type.

Then came one of my most testing stress-counselling assignments. He was a top Harley Street dentist, so good that at least three American patients were willing to cross the Atlantic to be treated by him. He was also a difficult, prickly character, one of the few clients with whom I could not establish a rapport.

After a couple of sessions, I decided that we should try music therapy. Knowing that his luxury bathroom was equipped with audio speakers, I gave him an easy-listening flute concerto and suggested he took a 20-minute 'sound bath' before our next session. I told him there was no need to try and understand the music, in fact, better not - just let it wash over him.

I soon noticed the difference. Whereas he had been slow and reluctant to talk about his problems, our sessions were now able to start 'in full swing', although he didn't seem to want to mention the music. Maybe he was not wanting to admit that it worked.

But a couple of months later, one of his patients amazed me by reporting that his dental practice now had piped music, both in reception and in the surgery. And that was all the testimonial I could have asked!

Facts

Soothing sound: Key points about music therapy

- Music has always been known to enhance mood and relieve stress

- Medical research now indicates many specific proven benefits
- Even non-musical patients can benefit from the therapeutic effects.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.