

Sound Healing

How music therapy helps troubled minds LAURA DECARUFEL

As the English dramatist William Congreve told us back in 1697, “Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast, To soften Rocks, Or bend a knotted Oak.” And just about everyone has used a favourite song to brighten a gloomy day or ease emotional pain.

For more than 50 years, Canadian music therapists have been putting the conventional wisdom about music’s healing powers into practice. They’ve employed active listening, singing, and playing and composing music to improve the lives of people with diverse problems, including autism, brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorders stemming from physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

Wanda Gascho-White has been a music therapist in Toronto for 20 years, long enough to apply music therapy to some exceptionally difficult cases — from errant teens channelling their anger by writing rap lyrics to socially isolated kids with autism creating improvised musical duets. She has also helped patients with advanced Alzheimer’s disease unlock pockets of memory by listening to pre-World War II dance tunes.

But for her, the potential of music therapy is best exemplified by one seven-year-old boy, a client with learning disabilities and a level of self-absorption that raised concerns about autism. “His parents felt that



he didn’t have many feelings for other people,” she says. “He would walk down the school hallway and not notice anyone else. He would ride in a car and not notice that he had a sibling or friend with him.”

Gascho-White worked with the youngster for two years, helping him create music to reflect and compare different emotions. One day, the boy saw a teacher walking down the school corridor looking at the floor.

He asked her what was wrong. When she told him that she had lost a valued necklace, the boy looked at her and said, “That’s so sad.”

“He had become a different child,” says Gascho-White, adding that he was now able to recognize emotions in himself and empathize with the feelings of other people.


Scientific research is starting to back up traditional claims of music’s therapeutic effects on the mind and

the body. According to Dr. Laurel Trainor, a psychology professor who heads the research team at the McMaster Institute for Music and the Mind at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., "Music seems to affect almost every part of the brain. It activates cognitive areas, and it also activates emotional areas."

As for physiological effects, a 1997 study at Michigan State University in East Lansing reported that listening to music increased blood levels of interleukin-1 from 12.5% to 14%. This immune-boosting protein protects cells against such diseases as AIDS and cancer. And listening to quiet music with a headset had been shown to lower blood pressure in hypertensive people.

A 2005 study from Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., found that musical training improves the ability to recognize subtle variations in human language, an effect that has helped children with learning disabilities master reading.

Several studies have shown a correlation between learning to play a musical instrument and improved math skills, reading skills and spatial processing — likely through the enhancement of such functions as memory and attention. "Not only does the process of musical training stimulate the brain, but it also positively affects the powers of concentration, a skill that's going to help you learn almost anything — language, chess, math," says Trainor.

Just how much direct impact music can have on your health is still being debated, but there's no doubt that people will keep reaching for their MP3 players at the end of a hard day to boost their moods. "I think all people have their own music that speaks to them," says Gascho-White. "Music helps us to think and feel, and, most important, to connect with that space in our minds where we can start to change things for the better." 

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- Are 18 to 65 years old
- Experience 5-14 days with a migraine per month
- Have ever experienced any of these symptoms before or with a migraine:
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 - Blurred vision
 - Difficulty speaking
 - Tingling
 - Numbness
- Have tried at least 2 medications prescribed by your doctor and taken every day to prevent migraines

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