

The positive effects of music on wellbeing

Dr Ria Keen

"Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without."
Confucious

Whatever we do and whoever we are in life, from bank managers to retail assistants, from graphic designers to full-time mums, we all have one thing in common: everyone has a positive emotional response to music on some level. This response is hard-wired into our brains. Recent research by Dr. Mark Tramo of Harvard Medical



School strongly indicates that the part of the brain governing music and dance developed long before the part of the brain governing speech. There is no known culture on earth that does not have music interwoven into the fabric of its society.



Half section of the song Dynasty version of night revels of Han Xizai, original by Gu Hongzhong. Musicians entertaining guests in the 10th Century

It is well known that babies in the womb respond to music, and it is thought that babies are born with a pre-determined 'taste' in music, rooted in the music to which they responded positively before birth. As early as four months, babies will turn away from dissonant sounds in a melody, and turn towards sounds which they perceive to be melodic. My Mother has always told me that before I was even a year old, I would not sleep until she had played me an Elvis record. Now, it is probable that this should be filed under 'myths and legends of the Keen family', but I don't doubt that it is rooted in truth.

As a singing teacher, I am often told by my students that they still love the music that their parents played to them as children. That same music also seems to have a profound effect on their own singing voices, and how they interpret melody, even if music was not a central part of their young lives.

Science has also shown us that we use many different areas of the brain in order to process music, with these 'processing centres' occurring in both the left and right hemispheres, whereas it had previously been thought to have been primarily a right-brain function. The comprehension of musical information is a highly sophisticated activity, with rhythm and patterns being processed in one part of the brain, pitch in another, language in another, and so on. Yet despite the complexity of the activity, 'understanding' music is something that we all do with ease, on a subconscious level. Music also creates cognitive, emotional and physical responses in all humans - and that

is a powerful force indeed!

Music surrounds us all. There is no escaping from it - it is on every television screen, radio, computer and mobile 'phone, in every shop and bar, and increasing numbers of people carry mp3 players. We are immersed in music - and it is used by advertisers, film and television programme makers to manipulate our feelings, but how do we, on an individual and very personal level, use the amazing resource of music in a pro-active way?

Improving your mood with music

There are many easy ways in which we can use music to improve aspects of our health and well-being. To begin with the simplest of ideas, music is of course a mood-altering commodity; so if you are feeling particularly worried, anxious or stressed, then take just ten minutes to sit down somewhere and listen to some carefully-chosen, calming and relaxing music. This could be anything from Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik or Tchaikovsky's Polonaise to specially-written 'new age' relaxation music, or your favourite pop or jazz standards. It really doesn't matter what music you

choose, only that you find the music calming and peaceful, and that you take the time to actually sit and listen to it, without doing anything else. Many people make the mistake of not taking some genuine 'time out' from everything, even if it's only ten minutes. If you give yourself those ten minutes - and really, the world will not stop turning if you take them - then you can 're-charge' your mental and emotional batteries enough to cope better with the rest of the day. During that time you can also slow down your breathing, and lower both your heart rate and your blood pressure - just by listening to a few minutes of relaxing music!

If on the other hand you are feeling a little low and de-energised, then putting on some lively, vibrant and exciting music will have an uplifting effect. Choose something that makes you want to tap your foot, or hum, or sing along, or dance! If you choose something that has really happy, positive memories attached to it, then so much the better.

Using music to change your mood is so easy to do - even music played in the background will have a positive effect, provided that it is music that you have chosen specifically for these purposes.



Improving your mind with music

It may be of interest to students, parents of young children, and anyone interested in improving their intellectual capabilities, that making music is known to improve mental acuity. It is well documented that music lessons which develop motor, visual and auditory skills have a positive impact on reading skills. (Learning to sing is as complex an activity as learning an instrument and has the same effects, but I would caution parents against sending their young children to formal singing lessons, as the larynx is not sufficiently hardened until about the age of fourteen).

Basically, our brains work by forging a network of links or pathways from one part of the brain to another, and just like pathways, they widen and strengthen as they are used more, until they become more like roads, and then motorways! Our ability to form these pathways is called 'neuroplasticity', and one of the best ways to increase the brain's neuroplasticity is to learn to play an instrument (or learn to sing, if you are over 14). This is because learning an instrument forces your brain to think in a different way, and thus it forms new pathways. Learning an instrument literally improves your ability to think. There is a substantial body of evi-

dence to suggest that participating in music making, as well as listening to music, stimulates creativity and conditions the brain to think more efficiently in general. For example, children exposed to musical training are proven to be far better at problem-solving than their non-musical peers, and have an astonishing 80% greater spatial intelligence. One study also showed that pre-school children taught with song and games have an IQ of 10 - 20 points higher than children taught without song, and show far better reading and maths scores by the age of 15. What more encouragement do you need to send your children off to music lessons, or to campaign for more music in schools?

Better yet, these findings do not only apply to children - adults show similar improvements, after a period of time, when learning to sing or play an instrument. These activities not only keep the brain active, but also encourage new brain function. Singing lessons have also been shown to be highly effective in helping adults with brain damage, helping the individuals to re-form their damaged or broken neural pathways. Add to this the 'feelgood factor' that is



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inherent in making music, and it becomes a matter of some wonder that music lessons are not prescribed on the NHS!

Improving your physiology with music

Despite the fact that Neanderthal Man had rudimentary musical instruments, and that music as we understand it has existed for over thirty thousand years, it is only really in the last thirty years that any detailed research has been carried out into the healing effects of music. Poets and philosophers have always waxed lyrical about the healing powers of music, knowing instinctively what science can now prove - that music has exceptional health-giving properties. Music therapists use music in a huge variety of ways: for example, dance music might be used to retrain a patient's brain in how to make rapid movement, and waltz music might be used to encourage fluidity of movement. The making of music in general - and singing in particular - is known to increase the production of endorphins - a natural morphine-like substance that inhibits pain and induces an euphoric state. Singing also produces the other 'feelgood' chemicals, dopamine and serotonin. The playing of all music instruments - and again, especially singing - releases immune-system boosters into the bloodstream. Music-making really is a health-giving activity!

Asthma sufferers have long been sent to singing teachers to help them improve their lung function, and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that snorers can be helped (and perhaps, in the long term, cured) by intensive singing lessons which are structured specifically to strengthen the soft palate. Singing is also known to improve posture, lower stress levels and boost self esteem.

So, what are you waiting for? Book those music lessons now! Or teach yourself, using one of the huge number of instructional DVDs, books and CDs currently available. You will still gain an enormous amount from the process.

Music is not just entertainment, it is a crucial part of human existence, and is proven to be beneficial to mind, body and spirit.



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