

HASLAM'S VIEW



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The therapeutic power of music put to the test

DURING THIS EXTRAORDINARY CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, PEOPLE

are finding all manner of ways to keep up their morale and retain their sanity. Intriguingly, music seems to be one of the most important. On a logical level, music could be seen as an optional extra compared with healthcare or food and drink. However, it really does seem to matter.

Just look at all those film clips that are circulating on social media of individuals and families trapped in their homes and separated from loved ones, who relieve their tension by singing. Singing solos, singing in virtual choirs, singing out of their windows, singing here, there and everywhere. It is quite extraordinary, but it is very human.

Back when I was a medical student, my friends and I used to describe any great new album release as being so good 'it should be available on the NHS.' All of us recognise the therapeutic power of music, its potential to lift our mood, to inspire, to thrill, to soothe.

Research has proved that this was more than a human hunch. A study which was due to be presented at the American College of Cardiology's annual scientific session showed that the addition of regular music therapy to standard pharmacological therapy can lead to lower anxiety and pain after heart attacks, as well as a significant reduction in heart failure.

The study, from Serbia, recruited 350 patients who had suffered

heart attacks or early post-infarction angina. Half were randomly assigned to receive standard pharmacological treatment alone while the other half were assigned to receive regular music sessions in addition to standard treatment.

'The addition of music therapy was found to be more effective than the standard treatment alone in terms of reducing anxiety, pain sensation and pain distress'

Those patients who were allocated music therapy first underwent a test to determine which musical genre they were most likely to respond to positively. (It would have been no good offering me Wagner, for instance). The patients listened to nine 30-second samples of music they found soothing, while the investigators assessed automatic, involuntary responses to the music based on dilation or narrowing of the pupils. They then worked out the optimal tempo and tonality.

The patients listened to their designated musical selection for 30 minutes each day for seven years, documenting their sessions in a log. They returned for follow-up assessments every three months for the first year and annually thereafter.

At the end of the seven-year study period, the addition of music therapy was found to be more effective than the standard treatment alone in terms of reducing anxiety, pain sensation and pain distress. Indeed, anxiety scores were one-third lower in the music intervention group than in those who had received standard treatment alone and angina symptoms were a quarter lower.

Patients in the music intervention group also had an 18% reduction in the rate of heart failure; 23% lower rate of subsequent heart attacks; 20% lower rate of needing coronary artery bypass graft surgery; and 16% lower rate of cardiac death compared with the group who received standard therapy alone. If those results can be replicated, 'it should be available on the NHS', as we used to say.

From my own experience of dealing with cancer, the one thing that helped when nausea and apprehension threatened to overwhelm me in the early hours, was the beautiful quiet singing of the Irish folk singer Cara Dillon.

Music may not protect us from coronavirus, but it certainly still has plenty to offer to all of us – whether as patients, clinicians, or citizens. Play on...

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