

This article on the healing power of music is from Faces magazine's September 2013 issue.

## The Healing Power of Music

*by Christine Graf*



*Some say laughter is the best medicine, but could it really be music?*

- 1 People relied on shamans to cure their illnesses long before there were doctors or medicine men. Shamanism is the world's oldest method of healing, and it relies on communication with the invisible spirit world. Shamans have been important to tribes around the world for thousands of years. They use singing and drumming as part of their healing rituals, and they were the first to incorporate music into the healing process. Shamanism is still practiced throughout the world.

### **Music and Healing**

- 2 More than 2,500 years ago in ancient Greece, Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, used music to treat his mentally ill patients. Pythagoras, the famous Greek philosopher, mathematician, and musician, also believed in the power of music. He said that listening to music every day was good for a person's health. Aristotle and Plato, also famous Greek philosophers from that time period, included similar statements in their writings. The ancient Greeks recognized the connection between music and medicine so much so that their god Apollo was the god of both medicine and music.
- 3 It wasn't until thousands of years later that the link between music and healing was widely recognized. When World War II ended in the 1940s, many United States soldiers returned from the war with terrible injuries. Musicians began visiting military hospitals to perform for the wounded. Doctors noticed that patients felt better, both physically and emotionally, after visits from the musicians. They began asking their hospitals to hire musicians to play for patients on a regular basis. As a result, the field of music therapy was born. Music therapy involves the use of music to improve

a person's physical or emotional well-being.

### **Want to Study Music Therapy?**

- 4 In 1944, Michigan State University became the first university to offer academic programs in music therapy. It wasn't long before other colleges established programs of their own. Music therapy course work combines the study of music with the study of psychology. By 1950, the field had grown enough that the National Association for Music Therapy (NAMT) was created. The NAMT developed educational standards and training requirements for music therapists. Music therapists must graduate from college and pass a licensing exam in order to work in the field.
- 5 Music therapists work in many different places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and prisons. They design personalized sessions for each one of their patients based on the needs of that patient. There is no such thing as a typical session, and many different styles of music are used. Some patients listen to music while others write songs, play instruments, sing, or discuss song lyrics.
- 6 A lot of research on the use of music therapy has taken place since the 1950s, and the results have been very positive. Music therapy has proven to be effective for treating many physical and emotional conditions. It has been shown to improve a person's mood and decrease his or her stress level. For that reason, music therapy is often used to treat patients with anxiety or depression. Studies have shown that antidepressants can work more effectively in patients who are also receiving music therapy.

### **Kids and Music Therapy**

- 7 Children who have experienced trauma or grief have also been shown to benefit from music therapy. They are taught to express their anger and grief through the use of various forms of music and song writing. Kids with motor skill problems have benefited from therapy sessions where they are taught to play the drums and tambourine. Blind children have been able to improve their listening skills by working with music therapists, and children with autism have been able to improve their communication skills.
- 8 Music therapy can even be used with babies. Some premature infants--babies born many weeks before their due dates--drink more from their bottles when music is playing. As a result, their tiny bodies are able to gain weight more quickly. Playing music for these newborns can also reduce their high heart rates and help them to sleep more deeply.
- 9 Babies and children are not the only ones who benefit from music therapy. Adults with Alzheimer's disease, a disease that destroys the memory, are less agitated and more cooperative when they are receiving therapy. People with Parkinson's disease, a disease that affects motor skills, show improvements in balance and coordination.

- 10 Music therapy helps people of all ages who are recovering from brain injuries. Studies have shown that music can help the brain grow larger and work more efficiently. For example, after only a few weeks of learning to play the piano the area of the brain that is in charge of hand control grows larger. The neurons in the brain also become better able to communicate with each other.
- 11 Cancer patients and chronic pain sufferers are among the many others who are benefiting from music therapy. New uses for the therapy continue to be discovered, and the field of study continues to grow. Who knew that the song playing on the radio had the power to heal!

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