

To Your Health, Healing Harmonics: Performance can facilitate health

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Music therapy research indicates that music can reduce stress symptoms and pain, enhance immunity, serve as an anesthesia, increase endorphins and other neuropeptides, and cultivate positive mood states that are necessary for good health. With the encouraging data in mind, a research team at New York University endeavoured to see how musicians fared with respect to the therapeutic value of playing music. Twenty professional pianists were asked to play their favorite piece of music in a nonstressful performance situation. At baseline, before, and after the performance, the team measured the musicians' levels of salivary IgA (an immunoglobulin that acts as a first line of defense against upper respiratory illness) along with their mood states and other personality traits. Surprisingly, exactly half of the pianists experienced an increase in immunity after performing, while the immune measures of the other half actually decreased.

In analyzing which factors were responsible for the divergent results in immune change, two personality types emerged. Those musicians who had a low sense of personal control and who denied or rejected difficult emotions associated with performing had a decrease in immunity, as opposed to the musicians with a healthy sense of control who embraced uncomfortable feelings and channeled this energy directly into the performance. These unexpected results suggested that the performer's state of mind actually determines how "healing" the act of playing music can be. It also became quite clear that the musicians' ability to acknowledge and deal constructively with emotions was primary in allowing them to reap the therapeutic benefits of playing music.

It is interesting to note that music has long been associated with the realm of emotion. Music therapists use music to help clients in understanding, expressing, and transforming difficult emotions associated with trauma and disability. Through intentional engagement with music, the music therapist assists clients in connecting with their "essential musical intelligence", the innate ability to use music as a self-reflecting, transformational tool in the process of healing.

What makes music such a powerful force in facilitating emotional health? Neuropsychological research shows that music bypasses the defences of the rational, conscious mind and moves directly to the emotional centers of the brain where unconscious conflicts, memories, and feelings reside. Music stimulates right-brain functioning which is associated with imagination and feelings; and, as a kinetic force, music facilitates movement. Finally, the universal element of music helps us transcend differences between gender, race, nationality, and disability to find common bonds.

So why are so many musicians immune to the therapeutic quality of their own music? While many were originally drawn to music because of its healing essence, the pressures of making a living playing music has forced them to relegate these positive associations to the back burner. Because many musicians were forced to grow up too fast due to early performance responsibilities, they perhaps missed out on normal emotional development and instead became overly perfectionist. They learned to place the *product* — the perfect performance, before the *process* of being with the music and themselves, performance being just one aspect of an integrated life. Under the pressure of having to perform flawlessly, the musicians innate understanding of the emotional impact of the music is often forgotten. Musicians need to be reminded of this. The following practical tools can help musicians reconnect with their essential musical intelligence

Improvisational Singing. A great way to tune in to your emotional life is through singing. Singing a poignant song can instantly open your heart and allow emotions to flow. Improvisational singing is even more powerful. Start by creating a simple chord progression in a slow to medium tempo on a harmonic instrument. Begin simply singing about the events of your day. From there you can give voice to any uncomfortable feelings, letting the musical form create an envelope of safety around you. On a lighter note, try communicating with a friend in the form of a recitative, musical dialogue. Music therapists use this vocal improvisation technique as a way of making contact with children and adults to facilitate mind-body integration.

Activate the giving-and-receiving feedback loop. Practice giving your audience what they need as opposed to what you think they want. As Beethoven wrote, "From the heart it comes, to the heart it must go.: The more you can express the truth within your music during your performance, the more the audience is moved and the more they give back their gratitude to you — establishing a feedback loop that leads to a profound musical experience for all.

Listen Differently. Go to the library and check out the most obscure music you can find - Japanese Noh music, Kachina chants, etc. Relax and let the music take you where you need to go. In this state you can enter the realm of the imagination and feelings - a place rarely visited by driven musicians. Let the music provide the impetus for self-discovery and creative expression. Challenge yourself to experience music from this new perspective - one of exploration, discovery, and self-healing.

Play by ear (or by heart) Explore the realm of emotions through musical improvisation. Improvisation forces you to be totally in the moment, which can be quite exhilarating and a bit scary. Start by allowing your breath to become deep, full, and rhythmic while at the same time stilling your mind. Begin by playing one note or rhythm. Connect with this note/rhythm and listen intently for what wants to come next. The whole idea is to let go of your need to control the music based on worries from the past and fears about the future, but instead to surrender to the present moment where absolute perfection resides. In the words of T.S. Eliot, "You are the music while the music lasts."