

Sound Advice for Health: The Musical Elixir of our Minds

by Barry Bittman, MD

Ever found yourself humming in desperate anticipation or while engaged in a stressful situation? I have.

Ever been in the dentist's chair tapping a deliberate beat on the armrest while awaiting the next drilling session? My dental hygienist is sworn to secrecy!

Ever found yourself strutting precisely to the beat of a television commercial jingle for no apparent reason? I seem to do it more often than I'd like to admit.

In fact ... most of us do, and right on cue. Just ask the advertisers who make millions creating those 30-second scores that predictably alter our spending habits. I've always been challenged by the inevitability of forgetting to bring home a loaf of bread, yet being unable to rid myself of those ridiculous jingles like "away go troubles down the drain." This and a host of other 10-second commercial tunes seems to remain indelibly etched in my memory despite the fact I last heard them played more than 30 years ago!

Let's face it, the music that predictably impacts us is more than just a random collection of sounds. Despite the individuality we prize, people (within a given society and at times, universally) apparently move to the beat of a common drummer. As a neurologist, I'm convinced our species is hard-wired biologically to respond acoustically in a conditioned manner to certain melodies, rhythms, tones and vibrations.

While basic scientists throughout the world are eagerly searching for specific music genes, it doesn't take a genius to realize music, emotions and our nervous systems are inseparable. A recent article quoting Sandra Trehub of the University of Toronto points out that mothers throughout the world sing to their infants in a manner universally consistent with a high pitch, a slow tempo and a distinctive tone. Across cultures and despite language barriers, these songs are clearly recognizable even to the untrained ear as lullabies.

I also believe music has been an catalyst for societal evolution/survival since the dawn of our species. Some experts believe the first instruments were developed 40,000 years ago. It is also assumed that singing or chanting predates that estimate considerably. Yet even from an anatomical perspective, it is well-established that the primary and secondary auditory areas of our brains are closely linked to specialized regions serving emotions, memory and not surprisingly, survival.

It is therefore probable that our innate capacity to relate to, or create music/rhythms may have played a key role in forging the evolution of civilization. No doubt, individual existence was obviously impossible. Groups were necessary to brave the elements and survive the threats of savage beasts. One can logically assume that utterances with recognizable intonations and rhythms likely predated what we recognize as "language" today. Building upon those sounds, the camaraderie of survival was sculpted through group activities such as drumming which emotionally expressed collective sentiment, empowerment and the will to persevere.

In consideration of these historical roots and known biological connections coupled with recent research linking music-making in the form of group drumming to positive immunological outcomes (our soon to be published research, in press Jan. 2001- *Alternative Therapies*), we now have a unique opportunity for harnessing these age-old insights in a practical manner. This is our chance to encourage the development of effective, enabling self-help strategies for those who wish to condition wellness or aid in the reestablishment of their health. Why not consider beginning by:

1. Encouraging more singing and group music-making activities in schools and during religious services.
2. Extending music listening and music-making into your personal self-help strategy for stress reduction.
3. Setting aside family time each week for music appreciation/making integrating music listening into exercise sessions on a regular basis.
4. Incorporating music in the workplace as a catalyst for improved mental focus and performance.
5. Joining a chorus or band.
6. Enrolling in a music-making class or drum circle.

It doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to realize that affordable and enjoyable opportunities for music appreciation and music-making abound. Yet when one realizes that in times of illness or personal challenge the things we love the most are often set aside first, it becomes apparent that we must make a deliberate effort to bring music back into our lives. It sounds like a great approach for nurturing the spirit of healing.

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