



GROOVE is in the
HEART

We know it instinctively, but research is showing us that music is not just good for the soul but can be good for mind and body as well.

The clinical role of music as therapy for people who are ill or injured or who suffer cognitive or mental issues is expanding as evidence grows about the benefits of 'music as medicine'. That's a message for us all to start clearing our throats and strapping on our dance shoes, because music can help to make us healthier and happier.

"Music has got to be the most pure form of 'brain gym' you can find," says Royal Melbourne Hospital music therapist Emma O'Brien. She points to research showing that professional musicians' brains have a different size, shape, density, connectivity and functional activity to the rest of us. But we don't all have to be concert pianists to benefit. "Even if we're just singing in the local choir, we're engaging the whole brain: looking, listening, reasoning, feeling, even feeling adrenalin. It's a total workout."

Healing tunes

O'Brien is a trained opera singer, who founded the Royal Melbourne's music therapy program in 1997. At the time, she recalls, there was interest but also scepticism in the role of music in healing.

"One doctor asked what was the difference between me and a clown who was coming in to cheer up the kids. I said I had a bigger guitar and smaller shoes!"

Now the award-winning program is an integral part of the hospital and helps patients reduce pain before and after operations, helps stroke survivors regain their speech, comforts people who are terminally ill and even builds immunity. Beyond hospitals, music therapy is helping children with autism to build skills and connections, enabling people with mental health issues to explore and voice their pain, relieving distress in dementia, improving respiratory function for people with breathing problems and – with dance – preventing falls.

"It's not the answer to everything but music can work for us on many levels," says Dr Katrina McFerran, Director of the National Music Therapy Research Unit at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. "Someone with a brain injury who has to learn to walk again may use the rhythmic drive of music to push through with challenging physical exercises. But in the meantime, the actual piece of music might tap into their emotions and give them a chance to express the sadness they're feeling about what has happened to them or induce a sense of happiness that can counter the impact of trauma."

Music also makes us healthier and happier in a much more everyday sense. It doesn't have to be structured: yes, singing in the shower can be a great stress reliever; dancing around the kitchen with your children is good for you and them; and listening to your favourite pieces can help you jog or walk faster and longer.

Combined voices

But it's in getting out and making music with others – singing in a group, signing up for ballroom dancing, learning to play the ukulele – that is proving best for wellbeing, both mental and physical.

"In a choir, you may have completely different political views, come from different cultural environments and have different belief systems. But as your voices join together you're essentially in agreement," says Dr McFerran. "Being able to be an individual but still strongly connected to others is what's so powerful about making music in groups."

Let's dance

Dancing can be a way to stay fit for people of all ages, shapes and sizes. The Victorian Department of Health says its wide range of physical and mental benefits include:

- healthier heart and lungs
- weight management

Striking the right chord

A respected British review of more than 103 studies of the effect of music on the psychological and physiological outcomes of hospital patients found the following:

- **Maternity:** Music intervention during childbirth and postnatal care promotes early mother-child contact and reduces the length of stay in hospital
- **Neonatal care:** Music has a beneficial effect on an infant's weight gain, oxygen saturation improvements, and feeding and crying patterns
- **Children:** Research has shown that music is beneficial by promoting good behaviour
- **Cardiovascular conditions:** Music has been shown to reduce a patient's level of anxiety and stabilise vital signs
- **Surgery and pain management:** Music significantly reduces anxiety and stress and helps normalise vital signs, consequently less anaesthetic is required, reducing costs
- **Lung disease:** Music and singing play an important role in the functional activities of the respiratory system, benefiting patients with breathing problems
- **Oncology:** Music has been shown to reduce anxiety and depression levels in cancer patients, and it can also help control some of the side effects of the treatment.

- more endurance, motor fitness and aerobic fitness
- improved muscle tone and strength
- stronger bones and reduced risk of osteoporosis
- better coordination, agility and flexibility; improved balance and spatial awareness
- increased physical confidence
- improved mental functioning.