

Music therapy helps patients cope with illness, regain health

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Music therapist Elizabeth Fawcett works with two patients at North Carolina Children's Hospital.

In the months since the shooting that left Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords with a critical brain injury, music therapy has been a key to her recovery.

Although at first Giffords could not talk, she could sing. So she and her music therapist sang “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” and other classics together. Because music and speech are closely linked, singing helped her injured brain relearn how to form words for conversation.

In addition to aiding recovery in [patients](#) with brain injuries, music therapy can help chronically ill children cope with their diseases, said Elizabeth Fawcett, MT-BC, a music therapist at North Carolina

Children's Hospital.

At the children's hospital, Fawcett spends 20 hours each week with pediatric patients. She plays the guitar and the piano, and she also helps children write their own songs. Music therapy provides a time for her patients to express their feelings in a safe way, she said.

"I'm not coming in there to poke them again, to draw blood, to give them good or bad news," she said. "I'm just there to have fun with them."

But music therapy provides more than just a good time for patients. Fawcett works with each child's treatment team to assess the patient's abilities, to set goals and to help him or her return home faster. In July, Fawcett will begin working 12 hours each week with geriatric patients.

In studies, music therapy has been shown to have a number of benefits. It can reduce anxiety and pain and ease the symptoms of depression. Several studies suggest that it can help autistic children learn to be more creative and tolerant of change. The therapy can also help older patients maintain motor functioning through movement to the music. In fact, more than 60 percent of hospice centers offer music therapy services, according to a [2007 national survey](#).

When they work with geriatric patients, music therapists can use music as a tool for reminiscing and discussion, Fawcett said.

"If you hear a song, you think, 'Oh my gosh, I was in junior high when that song came out,'" she said. That can trigger old memories and work a patient's mental muscles.

At the children's hospital, Fawcett's music room contains a Wii, a Playstation 2, a drum machine, keyboards, a child-size electric guitar, plus a digital recording studio. There, patients can sing karaoke and learn

to play the instruments.

Fawcett said that in some cases, [music therapy](#) involves well-intentioned trickery. For example, she encourages children with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease that can cause lung infections, to sing.

“They think they’re just singing karaoke, but really they’re working their lungs,” she said.

One patient learned to play the guitar while he was in the hospital. He wrote a song and recorded it using Fawcett’s studio.

“Not only was he fighting cancer, he was becoming a rock star,” she said.

Music therapy at home

Even healthy people can benefit from using music for stress relief, and you don’t need musical talent to take part. Try taking a break by listening to calming music and breathing deeply. You may need to experiment with several styles of music to find the kind that helps you relax, Fawcett said. Slow music with 60 or fewer beats per minute may help you reduce anxiety, she added.

If you can’t take a break – because you’re stuck in a stressful meeting, for example – it can help just to sing a song in your head.

More information: To find a music therapist in your area, contact the American Music Therapy Association at 301-589-3300 or at the organization’s website, www.musictherapy.org/find.html .

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