

Parkinson's patients sing in tune with creative arts therapy

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Twice a month a jam session takes place on the third floor of Northwestern Memorial's Prentice Women's Hospital. A diverse group of men and women, ranging in age and ethnicity, gather in a circle with instruments in hand and sing together. This is no ordinary jam band; all its members have Parkinson's disease. They are participating in Creative Arts for Parkinson's, a music and drama therapy program offered through Northwestern's Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorders Center.

Creative Arts for Parkinson's is lead by specially trained music and drama therapists from the Institute for Therapy through the Arts (ITA). The participants are asked to reach deep into their emotions and to push themselves physically to achieve the therapeutic benefits which address both the symptoms of the disease and its psychological burden.

On a recent Monday afternoon, the group took turns singing something that describes who they are while keeping the beat with percussion pieces. A small woman with a slight tremor sings in a loud, strong voice: "My disease made me stronger!" The group around her enthusiastically joins the chant, clapping their instruments, singing "My disease made me stronger! My disease made me stronger!"

"Patient care is much more than just medical; it's caring for the whole person," said Tanya Simuni, MD, a [neurologist](#) at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and director of the Parkinson 's Disease and Movement Disorders Center. Simuni is also an associate professor of

neurology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "By providing music and drama therapy, we are hoping to help these patients find new means of fulfillment in their lives while also addressing some of the physical components of their illness."

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative brain disorder that affects nearly 1.5 million Americans. Progressing slowly in most people, the disease involves a lack of [dopamine](#) in the brain which causes symptoms including tremor, slowness of movement, muscle stiffness and balance problems.

"Our goal is to find new approaches to help these patients address their illness," explained Diane Breslow, MSW, LCSW, coordinator and social worker for the center. "Very often with Parkinson's disease there is a fear of the future and the unknown; we want to give these patients a better way to live with their disease in the present."

Music and drama therapy addresses many of the physical and emotional components of Parkinson's disease. Benefits include improvement of physical coordination and functional movement, postural awareness, as well as speech and voice enrichment.

"In the music portion, the patients are learning the concept of rhythm which helps them improve their gait and movement," explained Breslow. "Reading scripts during the drama portion increases word recall and articulation, while the voice is exercised in both parts of the class."

Beyond the physical benefits of the therapy, Creative Arts also enhances mood and positive attitude. The patients use the opportunity to set personal goals and encourage one another to address specific challenges they face because of their illness. During one session, the group read through a scene from the Academy Award winning "King's Speech." One of the men in the group acknowledges the similarities between the

main character's experience and his own. He tells the class that when first diagnosed, he would speak softer or take smaller steps in anticipation of the disease eventually limiting these abilities. After this revelation, he proposed a challenge to the group: "Let's make it a goal to use our loud voices and make sure we can be heard. We need our loud voices."

Moments like this are why Breslow loves her job. "I've seen firsthand how these techniques bring out feelings the patients might not otherwise have access to," said Breslow. "Music and drama are a beautiful way to access and deal with life experiences and [Parkinson's disease](#). I learn more from these patients than I give."

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital

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