

Music Is Good Medicine

THINGS DON'T COME easily to Matteo, a 4-year-old New Yorker with brown bangs and a cowboy bandanna. Afflicted by cerebral palsy, he moves awkwardly. He thinks slowly and doesn't talk much. Small frustrations upset him terribly. But when Matteo visits Clive Robbins, his music therapist, he bangs gleefully on a snare drum. Placing one hand on the rim to steady himself, he uses the other to rap in tempo to Robbins's improvised song. As the tune progresses, Matteo moves his act to the piano, banging along with one or two fingers and laughing excitedly. By following the rhythm, he's learning to balance his body and coordinate the movement of his limbs. He's also learning to communicate. "He's grown much more motivated and intent," says Robbins, the co-founder of New York University's Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy.

Disabled children aren't the only ones feeling the therapeutic power of music. A 79-year-old stroke survivor listens to Viennese waltzes on his headphones to help him relearn to walk. A woman in labor has LeAnn Rimes's country tunes blaring from a stereo to help her keep in step with her contractions. And, yes, ostensibly healthy people are listening to airy New Age discs, and maybe lighting a candle or two, to lessen stress and promote well-being. They may all be on to something. Mounting evidence suggests that almost any musical stimulus, from Shostakovich to the Spice Girls, can have therapeutic effects.

Music therapy isn't mainstream health care, but recent studies suggest it can have a wide range of benefits. In 1996, researchers at Colorado State University tried giving 10 stroke victims 30 minutes of rhythmic stimulation each day for three weeks. Compared with untreated patients, they showed significant improvements in their ability to walk steadily. People with Parkinson's disease enjoyed similar bene-

fits. A musical beat from any genre seemed to provide a rhythmic cue, stimulating the brain's motor systems.

Other body systems seem equally responsive. Scottish researchers have found, for example, that a daily dose of Mozart or Mendelssohn significantly brightens the moods of institutionalized stroke victims. Using psychological tests, the Scottish team showed that patients receiving 12 weeks of daily music therapy were less depressed and anxious, and more stable and sociable, than other patients in the same facility. Music therapy has also proved useful in the management of Alzheimer's and other neurological diseases. And Deforia Lane, a music therapist at University Hospitals in Cleveland, has shown that music can boost immune function in children. That's consistent with a 1995 finding by Louisiana re-

searchers that preemies exposed to lullabies in the hospital went home earlier.

Some of the most encouraging research has been done in pain management. Pregnant women who listen to music they like during labor are only half as likely to need anesthesia, according to a study done by two therapists in Texas. A Michigan cardiologist gave eight patients recovering from open-heart surgery a choice in pain medications: a morphine drip or a regimen of 20 minutes of low-frequency humming. The patients preferred the vibrations to being drugged, and their hospital stays decreased by four days.

How does music work all this magic? No one really knows. "It's a mystery," Lane says. But there are hints. Researchers have long known, for example, that listening to music can directly influence pulse, blood pressure and the electrical activity of muscles. Neuroscientists now suspect that music can actually help build and strengthen connections among nerve cells in the cerebral cortex. This is probably why listening to Mozart before an IQ test boosts scores by roughly nine points, as researchers at the University of California, Irvine, discovered in 1993.

The word is getting out. The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) now has 5,000 members, and 69 U.S. universities have started graduate programs in music therapy. But the medical world has yet to embrace it fully. Only 20 percent of music therapists reported third-party payments last year. Most health plans decided on a case-by-case basis whether it can be reimbursed. If you think that you or a family member could benefit from music therapy, call AMTA at 301-589-3300, or visit the organization's Web site (www.namt.com). In the meantime, you can always self-medicate. Therapists say music you like can be all you need. It doesn't have to be Andrew Weil's "healing vibrations." No prescription is needed to pop in a CD, turn up the soothing sounds of Ella Fitzgerald and relax.

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Whether you've had heart surgery or a bad day at the office, some soothing sounds may help. BY TED GIDEONSE

