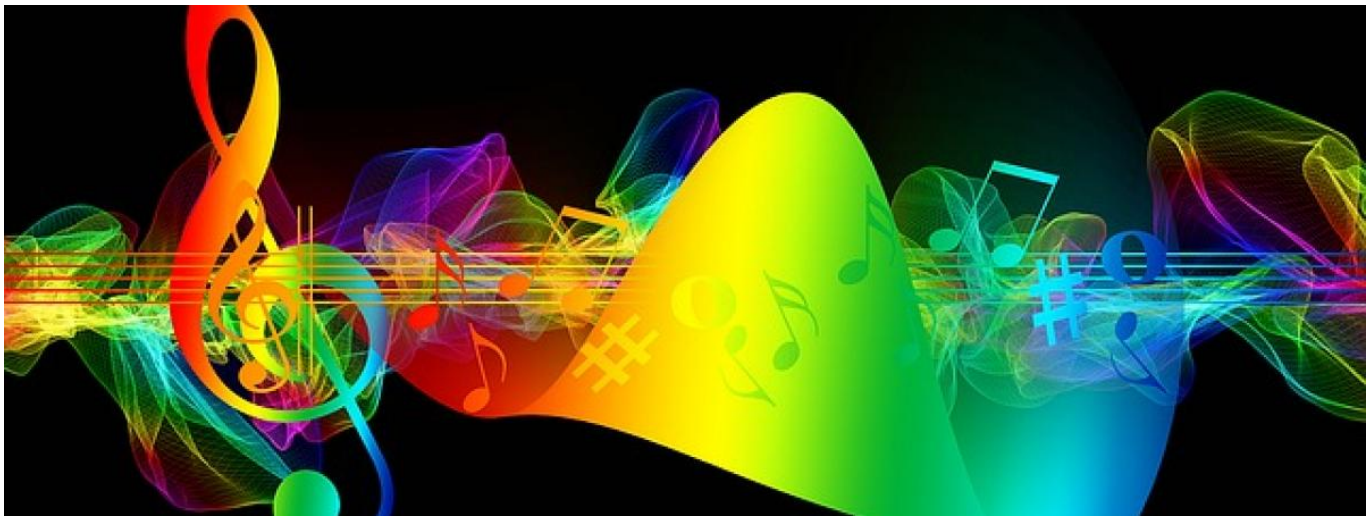
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link to Reader's Digest article [1]

brain [2] lungs [3] mental health [4] stroke [5]



“Killing me softly with his song” wrote one lyricist, the performer’s words somehow ‘singing her life’, exposing its intimate details and so embarrassing her. Medically speaking, though, singing can actually improve mental and physical wellbeing.

According to Kay Norton, Associate Professor of Musicology, the singing voice “remains a largely untapped resource in our quest for optimum health and wellbeing”. Here’s how it helps.

Singing to save souls (for seconds)

When the fog of dementia descends, the soul can seem lost at sea, even shipwrecked. There’s often no response at all – just a vacant stare and strange sounds. Singing, however, can “provide islands of arousal and awareness like nothing else can”, according to Alicia Clair, Professor of Music Therapy.

I’ve seen singing bring the person into the present for a passing moment, illuminating a face that seemed faraway. One mute lady completed the chorus of ‘Daisy, Daisy’ before descending into dementia again.

When consciousness is instead lost through stroke or head injury, singing can affirm the individual as ‘alive inside’. Chaplain Hazel Reese recalls a totally paralysed man, with ‘locked-in’ syndrome, mouthing the words to ‘Amazing Grace’ as she sang it to him. Amazing indeed.

Singing for swollen lungs

If you’ve got a lung disease like COPD or emphysema, your lungs may be hyper-inflated as breathing out is difficult. It then becomes harder to breathe into the swollen lungs.

Singing may help you to breathe more easily by strengthening muscles and improving posture. Across the country, people with breathing conditions are meeting up in ‘Breathe Easy [6]’ Support Groups and being led in song.

The British Lung Foundation is fundraising research into the benefits of singing; their goal is to “make the case for a nationwide programme to bring singing into the lives of people with lung disease.” Funds have even been raised through singing! A charity single [7] was released in 2017.

Singing for speech

In the movie “The King’s Speech”, a speech therapist teaches King George VI to sing (and swear) to increase fluency in the face of his stammer. Musician Ed Sheeran [8] recognised rapping as a remedy for his stammer.

Musician Ed Sheeran [8] recognised rapping as a remedy for his stammer.

When speech is lost (perhaps through a stroke causing damage to the speech area of the brain), singing can also help. Oliver Sacks, the late neurologist, describes a totally speechless man after a stroke singing along to the words of ‘Ol’ Man River’; speech soon followed. For many stroke patients, speech therapists teach the survivor first to sing sentences [9]; the song can be turned into speech as recovery continues.

In Parkinson’s, speech may be slurred, slower or softer; singing [10] can help increase volume and reduce vocal fatigue when speaking.

Singing and stepping

When we walk, our steps emerge in a rhythmical stream; in Parkinson’s, the steps can be jerky and the rhythm broken – or frozen. Here, Oliver Sacks acknowledges that “music (including singing) can modulate the stream of movement, giving the person with Parkinson’s the steadiness and control they so lacked.” Of course it needs to be the right type of song: a crazy rhythm might have a bizarre jerky countereffect.

Sacks [11] himself tested this theory when he seriously injured his leg while hiking in Norway. Slowly pulling himself to safety, he began to sing. In his words, “I fell into a rhythm, guided by a sort of marching or rowing song, sometimes the Volga Boatmen’s Song, sometimes a monotonous chant of my own, accompanied by these words *‘Ohne Haste, ohne Rast! Ohne Haste, ohne Rast!’* (‘Without haste, without rest’), with a strong heave on every *Haste* and *Rast.” He “got into the music, got into the swing” and found his muscles perfectly co-ordinated by the rhythm, allowing him to slide down the mountain on his bottom, heaving and rowing himself with his arms and using his good leg as a brake.*

Soothing songs

Singing lullabies to babies can soothe them and help them to sleep; in adults, certain songs can have a similar effect: one study [12] showed that when monks sing Gregorian chants, their blood pressure and stress levels drop.

That singing can be a sanctuary for those under stress and strain is clear to see: Dame Vera Lynn sang songs to soldiers to help them dream of coming home; in one case study [13], a lady sang religious songs before knee replacement surgery to reduce her blood pressure. Whether she was helped from on high, or whether singing worked to trigger release of endorphins and oxytocin (a hormone that helps alleviate anxiety), is not clear.

Singing can also make you feel good because it brings, and bonds [14], people together. Voicing feelings in song that would otherwise remain unexpressed can also help mental health: Princes William and Harry [15] have been working alongside charities to encourage millions of people to have important conversations about their mental health. If singing can start that conversation, then sing out loud and proud.

Source URL:https://www.helencowan.co.uk/singing-could-be-key-healthy-life

Links
[1] https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/health/wellbeing/singing-could-be-the-key-to-a-healthy-life [2] https://www.helencowan.co.uk/../tags/brain [3] https://www.helencowan.co.uk/../tags/lungs [4] https://www.helencowan.co.uk/../tags/mental%20health [5] https://www.helencowan.co.uk/../tags/stroke [6] https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathe-easy [7] https://www.blf.org.uk/charity-single [8] http://www.digitalspy.com/music/news/a827817/ed-sheeran-used-eminems-music-to-conquer-his-stammer/ [9] http://researchandhope.com/melodic-intonation-therapy/ [10] https://parkinsonsdisease.net/living-with-pd/voice-exercises/ [11] https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/07/09/oliver-sacks-a-leg-to-stand-on/ [12] http://www.simonheather.co.uk/pages/articles/chanting.pdf [13] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3075493/ [14] http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2015-10-28-singing%E2%80%99s-secret-power-ice-breaker-effect [15] https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/campaigns/heads-together/