

Rx: Music
 Shelf improvement

Photo Credit: Jeff Noble



Robin Rio is associate professor of music therapy in ASU's School of Music and director of the Center for Community Music and Wellness.

Rx: Music

ASU music therapy initiatives instrumental in improving patients' quality of life

One of the most powerful treatments for a variety of health afflictions is as close as the opening lines of a familiar tune.

A truly universal language, music impacts humans positively on a number of levels: it cuts across cultural differences to uplift and even unify people; it is processed by both sides of the brain, providing a window into minds damaged by illness or injury; and almost all persons with the ability to hear have a reservoir of songs and instrumental selections that form their earliest and deepest memories.

At ASU, the Center for Community Music and Wellness coordinates music therapy interventions directed toward those afflicted with Alzheimer's, dementia, autism, and developmental disabilities, as well as persons who have experienced traumatic brain injuries. Opened in 2010, the center – affiliated with the music therapy department within ASU's School of Music – works in conjunction with community partners such as AZ Rhythm Connection, Higher Octave Healing and Ear Candy Charity to help their clients achieve numerous therapeutic goals, including improved communication, a stable positive mood, and much more. The center includes a clinic setting where students can interact with members of the community by facilitating therapeutic music experiences under the guidance and supervision of experienced therapists.

FROM SONGS BACK TO SPEECH

Many Americans were introduced to the power of music therapy during a 2011 television interview with former U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. Videos taken during her recovery process documented the process by which she used singing to relearn how to speak.

According to Robin Rio, associate professor of music therapy and director of the center, Giffords received Melodic Intonation Therapy, which focuses on stimulating the right side of the brain – the hemisphere responsible for processing music and understanding language – by having patients tap out rhythms and repeat simple melodies.

“By singing the words to a known melody, the person can communicate using language,” she said. “With practice, the music is no longer needed as much and is faded out.”

This treatment is also effective for those who have language problems due to a stroke or Alzheimer’s disease, said Rio, who is the author of “Connecting Through Music With People With Dementia.” Joyful songs such as “You Are My Sunshine” as well as instrumental holiday classics such as Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker Suite” can help individuals experiencing cognitive and communication problems recall happy memories.

“In addition to being very well-known, this music is not highly technical and incorporates steady rhythms,” explains Rio.

CALMING THE WAVES

Another way in which ASU-trained specialists use music therapeutically is to minimize agitation, mainly by providing soothing stimulation that can reduce feelings of fear.

Kristen Fray, a 2004 graduate of the music therapy program, employed this tool frequently in her job as therapeutic programs manager at the Phoenix VA Health Care System’s hospital.

“One of our Alzheimer’s patients imagined that he was back in the war, with bombs going off around him,” she said. “By initiating singing songs (with him), he became engaged in the moment and the fearful mood vanished.”

Another alumna who uses the soothing power of music to help bring a sense of peace to her clients is Maribeth Gallagher ’99 B.S.N., ’04 M.S., ’11 D.N.P., who holds three degrees from ASU’s College of Nursing and Health Innovation and is the director of the dementia program at Hospice of the Valley. Known informally as “the singing nurse-practitioner,” Gallagher – who toured for three decades

Kristin Fray, a 2004 graduate, uses the skills she learned in the music therapy program to calm confused, agitated patients.





Photo: Jeff Noble

Maribeth Gallagher, known informally as "the singing nurse-practitioner," says music can help orient patients during routine caregiving tasks.

as a professional vocalist – has recorded a popular CD of songs for use with dementia patients. She said that staff at the hospice often use music to help orient patients during routine tasks, such as bathing.

"We use music during caregiving tasks that may evoke fear or anxiety ... in order to provide a pleasurable distraction that helps the person remain calm," Gallagher said.

THEY'VE GOT THE BEAT

It's not only familiar classics and songs with lyrics that can improve the well being of music therapy clients. Instrumental music also can be very helpful. Young people afflicted with autism and other developmental issues are often very attracted to percussion instruments. Adults and seniors also find relief in this form of music therapy. In her book, Rio describes a woman whose speech had been silenced by a severe form of dementia. However, instead of being frozen in a silent state, this patient found she could communicate by tapping a drum.

Rio said a drum circle specialist at ASU teaches hand drumming to music therapy students and working practitioners through continuing education classes. It's an effective way to spread the benefits of music-based therapies beyond the realm of the specialists that the program trains, Rio stressed.

"Drumming is something that almost anyone can do, and social workers, teachers and others in similar professions could find it very helpful," she said.

For more information on the music therapy initiatives at ASU, visit <http://music.asu.edu/musictherapy/>.

By Oriana Parker, a Scottsdale-based freelance arts writer.