



The sound of healing

Known as the universal language, music and sound healing transcend time and cultures. Research indicates that it promotes more than just the pleasure of listening; music also boosts physical and mental health. That is why it increasingly is being utilized in the health care setting.

“Whether you’re listening to music or playing a musical instrument, your brain and your body typically experiences changes that are beneficial,” says Helen Lavretsky, MD, a geriatric psychiatrist and director of the UCLA Late-Life Mood, Stress and Wellness Program. The specialty of music therapy has arisen to provide that healing experience for patients. Dr. Lavretsky notes that UCLA hospital physicians can order music therapy for their patients in the same way that they might order physical or occupational therapy.

Music affects the body’s autonomic nervous system, which controls unconscious body functions such as heart rate, respiration and digestion. Listening to music can improve the breathing rate and boost oxygen distribution throughout the body, Dr. Lavretsky says. It also can decrease levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, and improve immune system functioning. More studies indicate a positive effect of music on the brain and cognition.

A review by Cochrane — an independent network that examines the results of many

different studies to support informed decision making by health care professionals — found that music can help to reduce the amount of pain medication that a patient requires. Music seems to activate sensory pathways that compete with pain pathways. In the face of the current opioid epidemic, “there’s quite a bit of interest in exploring nondrug options for pain reduction,” Dr. Lavretsky notes.

Another Cochrane review of studies with cancer patients found that listening to music positively affects not only pain but also anxiety, mood and quality of life. Music has been used to reduce anxiety before and during surgical procedures and during chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Music can improve cognitive and behavioral stimulation in older adults with comorbid mental and physical disorders; therefore, music therapy increasingly is being used in long-term care settings. This response comes at an emotional level, Dr. Lavretsky says, and can bypass any cognitive disabilities in the young and old. For example, children with behavioral difficulties such as autism seem to benefit from music therapy, and studies indicate that it improves skills such as social interaction and communication.

Active singing or chanting also can produce significant physiological benefits. Dr. Lavretsky has conducted studies with

stressed family caregivers of dementia patients and found that those caregivers who did eight weeks of daily meditation showed decreases in body responses related to inflammation. A byproduct of stress, inflammation contributes to diseases of aging such as cancer, heart disease, arthritis and Alzheimer’s. The caregivers who chanted also showed improvement in mood, cognition and improved levels in biomarkers of cell aging. Dr. Lavretsky now is conducting a study of chanting meditation with women 50 years and older who have cardiovascular risk factors and are experiencing memory decline.

“Sound is the easiest and most ancient way to evoke positive emotions, even for people who are very ill,” Dr. Lavretsky says. “It connects us to life.”



To view a video about music therapy, go to: uclahealth.org/videos/musictherapy



The UCLA Mindfulness Awareness Research Center offers guided meditations, some with sound: marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations



For information about Dr. Helen Lavretsky’s current chanting meditation study, go to: www.semel.ucla.edu/latelife/research/yoga-and-memory-training-women

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