

# Music can release memories—not just randomly, but as part of a coherent picture.

I have witnessed musical miracles at Beth Abraham Hospital, where familiar songs are played to stroke and Parkinson's patients, resulting in remarkable fluency of movement and gait. And I have seen music engender other awakenings. A movement from a Mozart piano concerto, a phrase from a Schubert lied, a chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, and a Cole Porter love ballad have all brought about total lucidity and humanness, if only for a moment.

With music, those whose true selves have been locked away can feel whole again, regain the self, and recall a world inhabited by loved ones, filled with passion and longing, and ordered by knowledge and learning—a world that resonates with meaning. To patients with deranged memory, music can be a Proustian mnemonic. Faces, words, and names seem like loose pieces of timber, scattered, meaningless, floating aimlessly down the river of time. No matter how much patients try with medication, physical therapy, and reading, they cannot hold these pieces of wood together again. Music can be the key that releases a flood of memories—not just randomly, but as part of a coherent picture.

Music does not lead us by the hand, but initiates our walk in the right direction, builds bridges to carry us across devastated landscapes, and sustains us in our inner search when we fatigue from repeated effort. Because music bypasses the usual circuits of word retrieval, facial recognition, list recollection, and mathematical calculation, a beam of light shines directly onto our emotional core. Raw, uncut,

and unstoppable, music burns a seal into our hearts, wrenches our guts, makes us shudder with fear or sing with joy.

We can stop listening, but we cannot stop *hearing*. Ever since we were in the womb, we have heard the primordial, incessant drumming of our mother's heartbeat, a rhythm that is embla-



**DIFFERENT DRUMMERS:** Percussion instruments can be modified to match each patient's ability. Here, drums are used to increase range of motion and muscle strength in a patient recovering from a stroke.

zoned into our neuronal circuits, pulsating daily within our core. This internal music has never left us and is the key to unlocking primitive memories and reconstructing our internal order.

If music can be used to recover memories in Alzheimer's patients, why not in the surfacing and treatment of post-traumatic stress, rape,

child abuse, and amnesia? If music can uplift the depressed, why not also the aged, the restrained, the immobile, the spiritually disaffected? If music can bypass language to reach the emotional core of those in the throes of disease and devastation, why not also the emotional core of those maintaining their well-being?

Down the hall from my music group of neurological patients at Beth Abraham Hospital, Connie Tamaino, the director of music therapy, is playing accordion for Edward, a life-loving black gentleman who suffered a severe stroke. His left hand is contracted and stiff, his left leg lifeless and heavy on his wheelchair pedal. His speech is halting at best; at worst, he cannot get anything out, and his eyes glare with effort. He can see the words as if on a page, but he cannot release them into fluent speech. And yet, when he sings, lyrics come effortlessly. Even when he stops singing, if he simply *thinks* about singing, his words arrive more easily.

"It's gotta be you!" he sings, as he gesticulates with his right hand, almost conducting, with delirious freedom. When the music stops, he wrings his hands and sighs. "I ccc-can't, ccc-can't ggg-get...Ach!" He is stuck again. But when he starts to sing his sentences, his fluidity returns. He has come a long way since his stroke. With music, he has regained fluency, dignity, and meaning in his compromised life. ■

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