Groove Theory

To speed healing after a stroke, let the music play!

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If your loved one has recently suffered a stroke, a soulful therapy may be just a jazz riff away. A study has found that stroke patients recovered more quickly when they listened to their favorite tunes every day for an hour—along with getting traditional medical care. They experienced less confusion and depression, and had better memory and speech, than the patients who got only the standard rehabilitative care. African Americans are twice as likely as white people to suffer a stroke and, studies show, slower to recover.

CATCHING THE BEAT: One way to experience music's benefits post-stroke is through music therapy, a medical specialty that uses beats found in music to stimulate a person's brainwaves and enhance mental functions. Different music evokes different mind/body reactions: Faster can sharpen concentration and slower can be calming. A strong beat can help a person learn to walk to the rhythm.

Also, certain tunes, such as wedding songs or a favorite oldie, can stir positive emotions and memories, which can encourage stroke patients' rehab. "We are stimulating hormones that make us feel good," says Concetta M. Tomaino, cofounder of the Institute for Music and Neurological Function. "Music therapy integrates the physical and the emotional."

Often offered in hospitals, nursing homes and stroke-rehabilitation facilities, sessions can range from listening to music and singing along to playing traditional or homemade instruments. Some insurance plans, even Medicaid, may cover it.

EXTENDED PLAY: Music can also treat chemotherapy nausea, arthritis pain, depression, autism and speech problems, and reduce high blood pressure and lower stress. The Institute for Music and Neurological Function suggests trying the following activities on your own at home:

TUNE IN: Dial in to any music you like—it's all about the familiarity and how it makes your loved one feel.

SING BACKUP: Singing can improve mood and lower stress—which, studies have shown, can help build the immune system.

PLAY ALONG: If you don’t have or play a musical instrument, make one! Make a drum out of a pot and pan.

GET MOVING: Dancing strengthens circulation, muscles and self-confidence. “Music grabs the attention,” Tomaino adds. “The longer that you hold someone’s attention, the more likely that they will recover.”

To find a therapist in your area, call the Certified Board for Musical Therapists (CBMT) at 800.765.2268 or log on to cbmt.org.

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