



Hitting The High Notes

The Benefits of Music for Mental Health

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We have all experienced the feeling of euphoria that music gives us. In the right setting and in the right context, music can create a powerful feeling of well-being. In fact, listening to and playing music is one of the few activities that has been scientifically proven, time and time again, to lift our mood.

Something else which has been scientifically proven to enhance our mood is being outside. Often going for a walk outside, even for just five minutes can make you feel calmer and more relaxed. Long ago Percussion Play realised the positive impact that creating music and being outside has on our mental well-being and has created a range of beautiful outdoor musical instruments that not only allow you to create gorgeous harmonies but to do this in an outdoor setting. The outdoor musical instruments that Percussion Play create provide a unique and pleasurable way to facilitate an improved mind set. Numerous studies have shown that music is an activity which enriches us throughout our lives and creating music, especially when doing so outdoors has some surprising benefits for mental health no matter what your age.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety defines mental health as a '*state of well-being in which an individual can cope with the normal stresses of life, can recognise his/her own abilities and can work productively and contribute effectively to their community*'¹. Mental illness in contrast is defined as being a medically recognised and diagnosable condition that results in the '*significant impairment of an individual's cognitive and rational abilities*'². Mental disorders can stem from biological, developmental and psychosocial factors and can in many cases be managed by using prevention techniques, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation.

There are acknowledged to be over 200 classified forms of mental illness that we are aware of today³. These range from clinical depression and bipolar disorder to dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety. Unfortunately, these illnesses are becoming more and more prevalent in society today, and this worldwide trend is sadly on the increase. Although many of these illnesses rely on prescription medicine for their management- there are more holistic and natural ways to alleviate some of the suffering. One proven way is through music and music therapy.

Because symptoms of mental ill health may include changes in mood and personality and can lead to social withdrawal, any activity which allows the person experiencing poor mental health to engage, to create and to reconnect with the world will have a positive impact of the brain's chemistry. It may enable them to overcome some of the symptoms of their illness both in the short term and in the long term.

The benefits of music for mental health

Music can positively affect people's mental health, increase feelings of peace and provide a healthy diversion from the stresses of everyday life. In 1992 Bednarz & Nikkel⁴ studied the effect of music therapy on mental illness and found improvement in the quality of life among clients who were exposed to music therapy.

The study concluded that music therapy is particularly beneficial to both the prevention of poor mental health and to the rehabilitation of someone already living with mental illness. One possible reason for this is that music can really affect an individual's ability to regulate their emotions⁵. The ability to regulate emotions is an essential component to mental health and poor emotion regulation is associated with psychiatric mood disorders such as depression. Clinical music therapists recognise the power that music can have over emotions and are able to harness the power of music to help their clients to achieve better mood states, and even to help relieve the symptoms of some psychiatric mood disorders⁶.

Researchers have also found that music can affect mood. For example, in a small study conducted by Choi, Soo Lee, & Lim (2008), 26 patients with mental illness (including mood disorders) were assigned to either a music intervention group or to a routine care

¹ The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety website

² *Ibid.*

³ Workplace Mental Health Promotion (published by CMHA)

⁴ Bednarz and Nikkel '[The Role of Music Therapy in the Treatment of Young Adults Diagnosed with Mental Illness and Substance Abuse](#)' 1992

⁵ Medical News Today '[How music listening habits affect mental health](#)' 2015

⁶ *ibid*

group. The study found that after 15 weekly sessions, those in the music intervention group showed signs of significant improvement with their depression, anxiety, and relationships when compared to the control group⁷.

The fact that music has been proven to enhance mood, increase feel-good feelings and improve emotion regulation are all powerful indicators that music and music therapy may provide the best, and certainly the most accessible, holistic approach to improving mental health available to us today. That is why outdoor musical instruments such as those produced by Percussion Play can have such a beneficial influence. Playing these types of instruments is an easy and enjoyable way to create a quick burst of all of those feel good endorphins and even a short music session can go a long way to improving mental health.

The benefits of music for depression and bipolar disorder

The Association for Natural Psychology characterizes bipolar disorder (also known as manic-depression or manic-depressive disorder) as *'a mental disorder that presents itself through alternating periods of elation (or mania) and depression (highs and lows)'*⁸. These shifts in mood and energy level are known to severely impact the important areas of functioning and the social interactions of an affected individual. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 2.6 per cent of adults in the US and 1 in every 100 adults in the UK have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder⁹. However, the actual number of sufferers worldwide could potentially be even higher as it is not unusual for symptoms to present themselves in the late teens, in fact 50% of diagnosed bipolar cases started before the age of 25¹⁰.

The reason why playing musical instruments is beneficial for those with bi-polar disorder and other serious mental illnesses is because human beings function in cooperation with a series of both physiological and psychological rhythms. When these rhythms are out of sync, as in the case of those with bi-polar disorder, we can experience problems ranging from moodiness to full blown pathologies. Our internal 24 hour clock (or circadian rhythm) is also really important for our health and well-being and if our circadian rhythm is off beat due to lack of sleep for example, our internal systems can become maladjusted, often resulting in disruptive pathologies and disorders like bipolarity¹¹.

Playing music can help to re-establish and re-balance our circadian, physiological and psychological internal rhythms because a sense of rhythm is *'so fundamental to humans that we recognise patterns in music without paying any attention or receiving any training'*¹². This means that when we play musical instruments, even if only beating out a simple rhythm on a drum, our brains are subconsciously responding to the patterns in the sounds trying to predict the music. This encourages our internal rhythms to begin to re-establish themselves and harmonise with the rhythm of the music. Playing music also works as a social facilitator within groups of individuals and creating even basic rhythms enables us to make music with others. This unforced and organic social interaction can really help those with bipolar disorder to reconnect with those around them.

Outdoor musical instruments such as those designed and produced by Percussion Play therefore have a really important place in the therapy for people living with bipolar disorder as even playing with the instruments for a short period can have a long-lasting impact on both the individual's mood and on their brain function. Indeed, the fact that music has been proven to help with emotion regulation also suggests that people living with bipolar disorder may be a group that experience the most benefit from this type of therapy.

The benefits of music for schizophrenia and schizophrenia-like illnesses

The NHS defines Schizophrenia as a *'long-term mental health condition....and a type of psychosis'*¹³ which means that a person with schizophrenia may not always be able to distinguish their own thoughts and ideas from reality. Some symptoms of schizophrenia include:

- **hallucinations**- seeing or hearing things that don't exist
- **delusions** – unusual beliefs not based on reality
- **muddled thoughts** based on hallucinations or delusions
- **changes in behavior**

⁷ Association for Natural Psychology website '[Bipolar Disorder and Music](#)'

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance website

¹⁰ Kessler, et al, [Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication 2005](#)

¹¹ Lincoln, M [Bi-polar Disorder and the Healing Power of Music](#) 2016

¹² Science Daily Website

¹³ NHS Choices [Schizophrenia](#) website

Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder with considerable impact on individuals and their families. It may take a life-long course, although full recovery is also observed in a proportion of cases. Symptoms of schizophrenia are usually classified as 'positive' (where something is added, such as hallucinations or paranoid ideation) and 'negative' (where something is missing, such as the ability to express oneself emotionally or to form satisfying relationships with others). In 2009 research by Professor Christian Gold,¹⁴ the principal researcher at the Grieg Academy Music Therapy Research Centre in Norway, found that music therapy was particularly beneficial to the aspects of schizophrenia that are linked to losing and regaining creativity, emotional expressiveness, social relationships and motivation. A more recent 2017 study into the effect of music therapy on people with schizophrenia concluded that:

*'music therapy as an addition to standard care helps people with schizophrenia to improve their global state and may also improve mental state and functioning if a sufficient number of music therapy sessions are provided'*¹⁵.

The reason why engaging with music and playing musical instruments can be so beneficial to people with schizophrenia and schizophrenia-type illnesses is because often people with serious mental disorders are too disturbed to use verbal language effectively or to engage with others in an appropriate way. Clinical reports suggest that music therapy for people with serious psychiatric disorders often relies on a mixture of active and receptive techniques because musical improvisation and verbalisation of the musical interaction are often central. Providing opportunities for those with serious psychiatric disorders to play musical instruments as part of their day to day activities is therefore becoming increasingly common in institutions and rehabilitation centres across the globe, with overwhelmingly positive results.

The reason why playing musical instruments, like those produced by Percussion Play, is so effective is because often those with serious mental disorders find playing instruments allows them the opportunity to communicate meaningfully with those around them for the first time. It has been noted by psychologists such as Rolvsjord in 2001 and Solli in 2008 that music therapy can have *'unique motivating, relationship building and emotionally expressive qualities that may help even those who do not benefit from verbal therapy'*¹⁶. There is evidence that musical interaction also increases the quality of life of people living with mental illness¹⁷.

The benefits of music for relieving anxiety

The benefits of music for those experiencing feelings of anxiety are also well documented. One study in particular concluded that the use of music in a single therapy session decreased anxiety and promoted relaxation, *'indicated by decreases in heart rate and respiratory rate'*¹⁸. A second study found that there was a significant improvement in mood among subjects in the 'music intervention' group and there were significant main effects over time for heart rate and systolic and diastolic blood pressure, which indicated a generalized physiologic relaxation response¹⁹.

The benefits of music for relieving stress

Music has been proven to have a unique link to our emotions and playing music can be an extremely effective stress management tool. Listening to music can make us feel more relaxed and has a physiological effect in that it slows the pulse and the heart rate, lowers blood pressure and decreases the levels of stress hormones. Singing along can also be a great release of tension and helps to alleviate feelings of stress. Because music absorbs our attention, it acts as a distraction at the same time as it helps to explore emotions, this means it can be a great aid to meditation, helping to prevent the mind from wandering.

Because music influences us both psychologically and physiologically, playing musical instruments can reduce tension and facilitate the relaxation response. Producing music in an improvisational way can also help us become more aware of our emotional reactions and share them constructively with others. Percussion Play recognise this and create outdoor musical instruments which are designed to be played in a number of different ways and which encourage improvisation and collaboration.

¹⁴ Gold et al 'Dose response relationship in music therapy for people with serious mental disorders: Systematic review and meta-analysis' 2009

¹⁵ Geretsegger, Mössler et al 'Music therapy for people with schizophrenia and schizophrenia-like disorders' 2017

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Chlan L, Effectiveness of a music therapy intervention on relaxation and anxiety for patients receiving ventilatory assistance 1998

¹⁹ *ibid*

The benefits of being outdoors

In 2013 the mental health charity Mind released '*Feel Better Outside, Feel Better Inside*'²⁰, a report that included new findings from the University of Essex which showed the many benefits of Ecotherapy for mental well-being. Ecotherapy is the name given to a wide range of treatment programmes which aim to improve mental health and physical well-being through participating in outdoor activities in nature. Ecotherapy has been proven to improve mental health, boost self esteem, help people with mental health problems return to work, improve physical health, and reduce social isolation.

The benefits of being outdoors for mental and physical well-being are clear and combining music making with being outdoors increases the benefits of both activities. Indeed, the sounds of the outdoors like birdsong, water or rustling tree branches are often incorporated into meditation or soothing CDs which are designed to aid relaxation. Having musical instruments in an outdoor setting can therefore be even more beneficial for relieving feelings of stress than having instruments in an inside space.

The power of Percussion Play

The outdoor musical instruments created by Percussion Play are diverse and accessible to everyone and make perfect additions to any setting, particularly gardens and social spaces in schools, care homes, nursing homes, hospices and hospitals, where they can be used and enjoyed by all who encounter them. Anyone and everyone can access the mental health benefits that playing these wonderful instruments provides and Percussion Play instruments are currently being installed in a variety of settings all over the world.

²⁰ Mind '*Feel Better Outside, Feel Better Inside*' report

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