



Facing the music

We all know that music, the 'food of love', can both relax and motivate us. Many experts now believe that it can bring about significant physical and psychological changes too, says Lucy Gooderidge

To say that music has helped me is an understatement. It has, quite literally, set me free. Anxiety and agoraphobia had me caged like a bird for three years, but now I am flying high. It is hard to pinpoint when exactly my anxiety became a problem, although I remember feeling on edge most of the time from a teenager. As soon as I turned 21, however, it started to dig its claws in even more by affecting my decision-making – this ranged from whether or not to go to university to which soap to buy. By the time I was around 26 I had had my first panic attack and things got gradually worse from there. I kept going for couple of years, telling myself I was ok, until one day I realised that to be terrified about leaving the flat wasn't normal. I would tremble, cry and could barely catch my breath if I thought of leaving the safety of my own home. I gradually became more and more of a recluse, petrified at the thought of even walking 50 yards to the supermarket. Panic attacks came out of nowhere. I was watching a completely innocuous TV show one evening when suddenly my heart started racing and I was sweating conkers. There was more than one occasion when I went hungry simply to avoid the terror of being in the open air. There was so much I wanted to be able to do but I simply couldn't face doing any of it. I have always loved travelling but whenever I so much as thought of an airport I felt the urge to throw up. I, quite literally, was unable to spread my wings. I kept telling myself that one day I would learn to drive, but that too scared me witless. I tried four different antidepressants but none of them touched it. Eventually I went for counselling and was coaxed gently into overcoming my negative thought patterns through cognitive behavioural therapy. Through this method my agoraphobia subsided enough for me to go to the supermarket,,,,,,,,,,,,, but in many other ways I was getting even worse. If anything even remotely upset my routine I could start climbing the walls. Luckily, salvation was just around the corner.

Subconscious healing

Back in December I came across GIM (guided imagery and music therapy) by sheer accident one day while surfing the net and what I experienced through this practice left me dumbfounded. GIM is a music-assisted process of self-discovery, which aims to work out unresolved life experiences that might be causing problems in your day-to-day life. This process begins with a trained facilitator (who is usually a psychotherapist) having a chat with you about any problems you are experiencing. You are then relaxed into an altered state of consciousness and different pieces of classical music are chosen by the facilitator to work on a particular problem. Each piece of music draws out a kind of sub-conscious message in the form of mental images that are connected to previously untapped issues. While listening to the music in the relaxed state the facilitator asks you what you are experiencing and to describe any images, sensations or feelings. At the close of the music you are brought back to normal consciousness and encouraged to express the experiences in either words or imagery.

Flying free

My first session was incredible. The emotion I felt was quite overwhelming. I seemed to draw me back to a place inside of me I had long forgotten. There were sights, sounds and smells within the session that were as clear as day. I have had two further sessions since, both of which were very different and tapped different emotions. It was just after the third session that I noticed a big change. One day, quite out of the blue, I found myself planning my overdue holiday to the States. Airports – what about them? My anxiety had disappeared out of the window. I don't quite know how it's worked but I don't care! I've also started driving lessons again. To those lucky individuals who have never suffered with anxiety, such activities might seem routine, but for someone who once literally had nightmares about shopping to even think of attempting these things is miraculous. GIM has given me hope.

How it all started

Music therapy was born shortly after the second world war but some 20 years later it was taken to the next level. The Bonny Method of Guided



Physical healing

The reason why humans respond so well to music is still in discussion among scholars, but they believe that there is something fundamentally 'musical' about the brain's structure. In 2002, a study at the Chelsea And Westminster Hospital, where live music was played to patients in various wards, proved that music can even improve a person's physical condition. "We found that the levels of blood pressure can be reduced in pregnant women," Dr Staricoff, who spearheaded the study, explains. "We also researched into the amount of drugs needed to induce sleep prior to anaesthesia. The patients exposed to cheerful music during pre-operative preparations needed significantly less drugs." Professor Paul Robinson, co founder of the prestigious Medici String Quartet, has first hand experience of playing to patients in hospitals and has developed some pretty strong views as a result. "Music is very potent in terms of providing relief for depression, anxiety and pain," he tells us. "Broadly speaking music seems to deliver a 30 per cent relief to all of those afflictions. If a drug company made a claim like that they would make a fortune." This is not a criticism of doctors, but all the signs are there to tell us that we should be doing so. There will come a point where we can legitimately say that a doctor would be negligent not to recommend music as a therapeutic tool."



Imagery And Music was developed by Dr Helen Bonny in the early 70s. While working at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center Dr Bonny discovered that combining relaxation techniques with music elicited life-altering experiences in patients. Perhaps the 'summer of love' period served as a catalyst for music's healing powers to come to the fore. In 1969, at the Beth Abraham Hospital in New York, Dr Oliver Sacks, of 'Awakenings' fame, made some astonishing findings of his own. "I first saw the immense therapeutic powers of music in 80 individuals who were victims of encephalitis lethargica, a viral sleeping sickness," he explained. "Most of them had been 'frozen' absolutely motionless for decades, yet these patients were able to sing loudly and clearly with a normal range of expressiveness and tone. One patient, Rosalie B, tended to remain transfixed for hours a day, completely motionless. We had only to say 'Opus 49', however, to see her whole body, posture and expression change. In contrast a current patient, Greg, has not been able to retain any new memories since the 1970s. But if we talk about or play his favourite Grateful Dead songs, his amnesia is bypassed."

Music and the NHS

Although GIM therapy is currently not available on the NHS, a more general form of music therapy is, and your GP can refer you for such a session. The sessions will probably take place in a local hospital by a professionally trained music therapist and can be on a one to one basis or in a group. Your therapist will simply encourage you to use an instrument to explore the world of sound in order to find your very own 'musical language'. The music you play will vary in style depending on your own individual need or taste and as such can be improvised. The overall aim, like GIM, will be to encourage positive changes in behaviour and enhance overall wellbeing. The therapist will also help you to develop an increased sense of self-awareness, which will enhance the overall quality of your life and outlook.

Case study: Kim Dicks, age 32

Having suffered with severe anxiety from a very young age Kim Dicks felt she had nothing to lose when a local charity suggested she try music therapy six months ago. She was at her lowest point when she was put in touch with Mind Balance in Cardiff – an independently run organisation that uses The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music. "I was amazed by what it did for me," says Kim, 32 from Cwmbran. "My anxiety had affected everything. I had to stop driving and working and at one point I couldn't even leave the house. Within two months of therapy, however, I noticed a difference. I started to remember who I was – as opposed to just 'an anxious person' – and was able to deal with things calmly and not go into a panic." Prior to this Kim had found conventional medicines simply were not doing the trick. "I had previously taken anti-depressants but found I achieved far more through the therapy than the medication as the therapy helped me work out issues as opposed to just covering them up as a drug sometimes does." Kim still remains in awe at the transformation she went through. "I am now on top of the world," she says. "I don't get panic attacks at all now and am even looking into a career change. If anyone was thinking of going in for music therapy I would say go for it. I would be amazed if it didn't work for anyone else."

Further Information

- For more info on GIM go to musicinhealth.com or for the official site for the Bonny Institute go to bonnyinstitute.org
- For more info on music therapy within the NHS speak to your GP or contact The Association of Professional Music Therapists on 020 8440 4153 or go to apmt.org. Alternatively contact The British Society For Music Therapy on 020 8441 6226 or go to bsmt.org
- To contact Cardiff's Mind Balance call 02920 912058 or go to mindbalance.org.uk