

THE POWER TO HEAL

Music therapy programs help patients of all ages find comfort.

BY LAUREN SIEBEN
PHOTO BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

Sometimes, a certain melody or song lyric has the power to heal. In music therapy, patients of all ages, from toddlers to centenarians, can improve their quality of life. The only prerequisite for treatment is an appreciation of music — no band or choir experience necessary.

Music therapists are board-certified professionals with special training to help patients reach their therapeutic goals. Therapy sessions occur one-on-one or in a group setting, and no two sessions look exactly alike. A children's session might incorporate props and movement, while teenage and adult patients might create their own original music. Some patients reap therapeutic benefits through simply listening to a song or analyzing lyrics.

"Sometimes with an elderly or terminally ill patient, it's a more passive music experience," says Jessica Thering, director of music therapy services at Annette Meyer Studios. "They might be singing along to a lullaby from when they were a little girl or remembering the song from a march when they were in the military."

Music therapists help patients address a wide range of concerns, from attention deficit disorder and learning difficulty in children to anxiety and dementia in adults. Research also shows that music has unique neurological effects compared with other forms of therapy.

"Music has the ability to reach areas of the brain that are responsible for emotions that spoken language can't often reach," explains Erica Flores, a neurologic music therapist and the owner of Healing Harmonies.

Music can also be especially effective for patients who resist other types of treatment but find music enjoyable or motivating.

"Even on a bad day, my kids want to come see me," Thering says. "It's something that's fun and pleasurable, while still achieving therapeutic goals."

Interested in exploring music therapy for yourself or a loved one? Learn more about programs offered throughout southeastern Wisconsin here.



Licensed music therapist Melody Sylvester and Jake Pelikan perform the "hello song" at Annette Meyer Studios.

ANNETTE MEYER STUDIOS — GRAFTON, CEDARBURG, DOWNTOWN MILWAUKEE

At Annette Meyer Studios, music therapy is tailored to each patient, but the common thread among all patients is a shared love of music.

"One of the most wonderful aspects about music therapy is that music is nonthreatening. It's inviting," Thering says. "You don't have to be a professional musician to join."

A typical music therapy session starts with a "hello song," Thering says, followed by a focused musical activity and a farewell ritual. "We're all about structure and predictability, but then you have freedom within those set parameters," she adds.

One of the benefits of music therapy is that musical skills can easily transfer to everyday life, Thering notes. A teenage patient playing the piano, for example, is simultaneously sharpening his ability to visually track, sit down and focus, and ask for help independently — all valuable skills in any classroom or workplace.

HEALING HARMONIES — BROOKFIELD

Flores says her favorite part of being a music therapist is working directly with clients. "I love those 'aha' moments when you see something switching in them with the assistance of specific interventions," she says.

A patient's first session begins with an initial evaluation where the therapist evaluates the individual's motor functioning, cognitive

levels, emotional needs, and communication and social skills. Healing Harmonies serves patients as young as 15 months and as old as 103 years, providing services for children with developmental disabilities and for the elderly experiencing Alzheimer's disease, dementia or hospice care.

Healing Harmonies also offers adapted music lessons for individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities, where instruments are adapted to suit a student's specific needs.

LIVING MELODIES — SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

Living Melodies therapists travel to clients to offer music therapy sessions in homes, workplaces, adult daycare centers and other locations throughout southeastern Wisconsin. A typical session involves at least one of the four basic types of therapeutic experiences: active music-making, active listening, movement, or passive music experiences.

Music therapists can even work in tandem with a patient's psychologist or psychiatrist to provide a well-rounded, complementary method of treatment, according to Living Melodies owner Brenna Liebold. Music also helps address problems that don't always respond to modern medicine, like the management of acute or chronic pain, Liebold adds.

"I love that the work is equally challenging and rewarding," Liebold says. "I know by the end of a session if I was able to make the music do what the client needed." **MKE**