

Creative Medicine

Complementing mainstream treatments with alternative therapies

Twenty years ago, when I was a young neurologist-in-training, I described an elderly man to my “boss,” the attending neurologist on our hospital ward. The patient had suffered a devastating stroke that left him paralyzed on his right side and unable to speak without difficulty. He was frustrated by his inability to communicate, although he could get out some words. After I presented the patient’s story, my attending asked me to take him to the man’s room. My attending introduced himself, and then did something that astonished me.

“Now, sir,” he told the man, “we are going to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ and I want you to join us.” My attending looked at me, raised his eyebrows, and began to sing. As soon as I could get over my shock, I hesitantly joined him, and then the patient began to sing, too. The three of us sang the song several times and, in the end, the man appeared considerably brighter and less frustrated.

When we left the man’s room, my boss asked me what I had learned. Quite honestly, at the time I wasn’t entirely sure. Now I know that music, art, and other innovative therapies can help patients with Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and other types of brain damage function more normally.

In the last issue of *Neurology Now*, we introduced a new series on innovative therapies, which are increasingly being used to augment standard medical treatments, with a story on music therapy. That article showed us how music can help reactivate a part of the brain called Broca’s area, which is critical for speech. This, in fact, is the area that had been damaged by the stroke my patient had experienced 20 years ago.

We chose to introduce our series with music therapy because it has the most extensive research to back it up. In this issue, we’re continuing the series with art therapy because of its power to evoke memory and movement through images. Unlike music’s effect on brain function, the power of art has yet to be scientifically explained. But there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence, as our special report on art therapy shows.

It wasn’t too long ago that physicians and researchers discounted the potential benefits of music, art, and other “alternative” therapies. Of course, from personal experience, patients and families (not to mention young neurologists-in-training) could see them working. And then, Oliver Sacks, M.D., himself a neurologist, showed how music and art therapy could work wonders in helping to treat patients with neurological conditions. He described these successes in several best-selling books, most notably *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

At the time, these were only anecdotal reports of Dr. Sacks’s own patients. Over the past decade, however, research studies have been published that show at least how music therapy works. Now clinical training is being offered to teach specialists how to use music and many of the other alternative therapies. And these days some of them are even covered under health insurance policies.

It never ceases to amaze me how much potential there is in the brain for learning and for recovery. In part, this is because the brain is a very large and complicated network with the potential for rewiring. And if the connections to one area are damaged due to neurological diseases, then other connections can be coaxed into play—sometimes in pretty creative ways!

I invite you to look for future installments in our regular series on innovative therapies. We are planning stories about pet therapy, relaxation therapy, dance therapy, and related topics, along with the science behind them. And remember, all of these activities can have beneficial effects on the healthy brain, too!



Our series shows
how music and
art therapies
work for all.

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