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The Healing Power of Art

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Stop, look and listen—even try it yourself. Enjoying music, visual arts, certain forms of architecture and other types of artistic expression can reduce pain and speed recovery.

We've long known that music can soothe the savage beast, but we now know that it also helps heal the ravaged body. When people who are ill are surrounded by the healing arts—such as music, painting, architecture and theater—they feel less pain and recover more quickly.

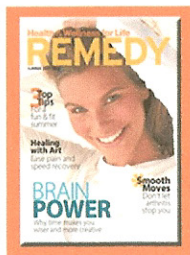
Anecdotal evidence from doctors and patients about these benefits is nothing new, but recently the palliative effects of exposure to art during recovery have been carefully studied. As a result, more and more medical schools and hospitals consider engagement with art to be an essential component of proper patient care. In fact, according to a survey by the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, more than 2,500 hospitals invest in arts programming. Of these, 95 percent use the arts to serve their patients, 79 percent use the arts to help create a healing environment, 79 percent employ arts coordinators, and 50 percent partner with community arts agencies.

"There's very good evidence that engaging patients in art and music is one way to make the burden of illness and periods of care more tolerable," says Harry Jacobson, M.D., a nephrologist and vice chancellor for health affairs at Nashville's Vanderbilt University Medical Center, which brings many forms of art to patients' bedsides.

Making Music

Neurologist Mark Jude Tramo, M.D., Ph.D., director of Harvard's Institute for Music and Brain Science in Boston and a faculty member of the university's Mind/Brain/Behavior Initiative, explains: "We believe music can cause neurochemical changes in specific parts of the brain that are related to the body's feel-good systems—for example, in pain-modulating neurotransmitters. In addition, music's auditory stimulation of the brain may cause cells to release endorphins, which suppress pain, and immunoglobulins, which help fight disease."

Researchers at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland report that patients with abdominal surgery experience greater pain relief when they are given a dose of music along with pain relievers. And Cleveland Clinic researchers write in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* that long-term pain sufferers (including people with osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis) experience significant pain relief from listening to music of their own choice one hour every day for a week. People in the music-listening groups also report 19 to 25 percent less depression compared to the control group. "Our results show that listening to music has a significant effect on reducing pain, depression and disability, and on increasing feelings of power," says lead researcher Sandra Siedlecki.



Case in Point

Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville leads the pack when it comes to integrating the healing arts into the patient-care environment. Donna Glassford, director of Cultural Enrichment there, brings the arts into the complex's four hospitals. She oversees the Musicians in Residence program and is working with Musicians on Call, a nonprofit organization that trains guides to take musicians through hospitals. Together they will expand the Vanderbilt program: "They are going to help us bring more and different types of music into the hospitals and help us to tap into Nashville's music-rich community," Glassford says.

She currently employs harpist Betty Ashton Andrews, who performs in the lobby of the adult hospital three days a week. "It brings a calm to any environment," says Glassford. "For example, she plays in the cancer center lobby, where people wait for chemo. This allays some of the tension. In the neonatal ward, the music soothes infants and lowers their blood pressure. There's also a program called Room Service," she adds. "We provide bedside concerts in a variety of styles for patients who want them."

Visual Beauty

Positive visual stimulation has also been found to make a difference in the healing process. Hong Kong Polytechnic University researchers report in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* that what a person is looking at can change how they experience pain. "The findings," write the researchers, "have implications for health-care professionals to use visual stimuli as positive adjuncts to other methods of pain relief."

Vanderbilt Medical Center also focuses a lot of attention on integrating art into the design of the hospital facilities. "Certain architectural elements have long been known to have a calming influence," Glassford says. "We were very lucky. In the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt, the healing effects of visual art were part of the original design concept. Outside, there are four gardens; and inside, each floor has a theme that was selected to be unique and playful." In addition, the main lobby is quite large and has wagons, bicycles, playhouses and a full-scale model railroad. "The idea is that this creative environment encourages kids to move around, and playing makes them feel better and may help them heal," she says.

A prime concern to Glassford is the art that hangs on the walls of the complex. She is in charge of it, and while she does buy art, she also finds ways to get the community to participate. Take the case of the new Eskind Diabetes Clinic. "We needed to find art for those walls, so we sent out packets of materials to children with diabetes and had them make quilt squares. Many of them also did self-portraits out of fabric. Then we asked students in a local elementary school to help. The pieces were assembled into a huge quilt that is on the wall in the clinic. It looks amazing."

Theater and entertainment are other important artistic activities that Glassford has brought to the hospitals. "At our children's hospital, we have a stage for all kinds of performances. The theater is equipped with 'med gasses' so kids can plug into oxygen. And if a child can't make it down to the performance area, there's closed-circuit TV so they can watch it from their rooms," she says.

The latest program started by Glassford's department takes community involvement one step further: "It was the idea of one of the fathers, Doug Hale, whose daughter Caroline had cancer. He started a Clowning Dads troupe. We put Doug and some other dads together with a professional magician so they could learn tricks. They perform in the public areas—in colorful clown suits, and using minimal makeup so that they don't scare the kids. Everyone loves it."

Creating Art

Doctors and hospital administrators are also realizing that allowing patients the chance to create art can help improve their quality of life. The Art for Life Foundation started the Art While You Wait emergency room program in 2001 at Children's Hospital in Oakland. Now in hospitals in five states, Art While You Wait helps kids and teens cope with the stress of being in an ER by giving them the supplies and space to do a variety of arts and crafts. For the youngest artists, parents are encouraged to help. "When children are in the hospital, they're defined by illness. When we let them enter a place in the hospital where art is created, they become part of a group that is defined by imagination," says Art for Life founder Anthony Knutson.