

A Dose of Singing Does Stroke Patients Good

Clinical trial looks at how music therapy can help patients get better



ENLARGE

A choir of stroke patients and their caregivers perform, led by Joanne Loewy of Mount Sinai Beth Israel. Photo: Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal

Corinne Ramey

Dec. 23, 2015 6:23 p.m. ET

1 COMMENTS

In a hospital atrium at Mount Sinai Beth Israel this week, a choir gave its first public

performance. Wearing light-up necklaces and accompanied by drums and guitar, the performers rang bells and sang such holiday classics as “Silver Bells” and “Joy to the World,” occasionally breaking out in harmony.

While every member of the choir sings, some are united by a less common bond: They have lost much of their ability to speak.

The group, Singing Together Measure by Measure, is made up of those who have had strokes and those who care for them, both family members and health-care professionals. It is part of a clinical trial,^[1] led by Joanne Loewy, director of the hospital’s Louis Armstrong Center for Music and Medicine, creating therapy around a phenomenon that has been noted for centuries: that some people who can’t speak can still sing.

Technically, the study is focused on a condition called aphasia, a brain disorder that causes difficulties speaking and communicating^[2] but doesn’t necessarily affect intelligence. It is common among stroke patients, occurring in about one-third of the 750,000 people in the U.S. who have strokes each year, according to the National Aphasia Association, an advocacy group.

Having a stroke often destroys certain neural pathways in the brain, including those used for speech. Music, which uses a more complex set of pathways, can help restore lost brain function, Dr. Loewy said.

“It’s a perfect population to study, because you can actually connect the preserved pathways and reactivate them through music,” she added.



For the trial, which is ongoing, 40 stroke patients are randomly divided into two groups. All the patients receive standard post-stroke care but one of the groups is also assigned music therapy.

Before and after a six-month period, a research team measures the patients' changes in mood, neurological function and language ability. Dr. Loewy and her collaborators, music therapists Andrew Rossetti and Naoko Mizutani, aim to see if participating in the weekly choir sessions makes a measurable difference on stroke survivors' recovery.

They are also interested in whether the singing affects their caregivers, since so-called compassion fatigue is common among family members and other people caring for stroke patients.



ENLARGE

The choir during a performance. Photo: Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal

Stroke patients and singing have been the subject of similar research, although hers is different because it includes caregivers, Dr. Loewy said. A study at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston used what is called Melodic Intonation Therapy, in which stroke patients sing particular words as a precursor to speech. Similar choirs that combine music-therapy techniques with group singing exist in Australia and Canada, she said.

The researchers' weekly rehearsals aren't always easy.

We Want to Hear From You

Have something to say about an article in Greater New York? Email us, along with your contact information, at gnyltrs@wsj.com^[3]. Letters will be edited for brevity and clarity. Please include your city and state.

"Music has affiliated memories and past history," said Dr. Loewy. "Sometimes when they hear a song, tears come down their face."

Barbara Peters, 74 years old, said she had three strokes. A former ambulette dispatcher who lives in the Bronx, Ms. Peters sings and plays the drums. "I love it," she said.

Ms. Peters has participated in other music therapy such as songwriting, which helps with skills like memory and language.

Another member, Art Matarazzo, 66, began attending Monday-night music-therapy choir sessions with his wife, Becky Parker, about a year and a half ago. "It actually makes you feel really good," said Ms. Parker, 62, who works in fashion. "We really look forward to going."

Mr. Matarazzo, a former firefighter who had a stroke in 2011, has aphasia and is working on regaining the use of his right side. While his speech is limited, he can sing, and he has a particular affinity for Beatles tunes.





ENLARGE

Barbara Peters on the drums. Photo: Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal

Asked his favorite song of the concert, Mr. Matarazzo flipped through photocopied pages, breezing past classics like “Silent Night” and “Feliz Navidad.” He pointed to “Jingle Bell Rock” and gave the tune an approving grin.

Then his finger reached the final song, “What a Wonderful World.” The group sings the song every session, and had finished the concert with it.

“We’re going to end with our anthem,” Dr. Loewy had told the audience. She gestured to Mr. Matarazzo, wearing a green Christmas-tree hat, and Ms. Parker, in a red-and-green jester cap.

“It was the wedding song of two of our members,” Dr. Loewy said.

After the performance, Mr. Matarazzo pointed to the song’s lyrics.

“Wow,” Mr. Matarazzo said, his eyes widening and his face breaking into a smile.
“Wow.”

Write to Corinne Ramey at Corinne.Ramey@wsj.com^[4]

1. <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT02328573>
2. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323368704578593631733648200>
3. <mailto:gnyltrs@wsj.com>
4. <mailto:Corinne.Ramey@wsj.com>