

Wellness

Scientific Study Indicates That Music Making Makes The Elderly Healthier

- Significant Decreases in Anxiety, Depression, and Loneliness Resulted Following Keyboard Lessons-

A breakthrough study demonstrates that group keyboard lessons given to older Americans significantly improved anxiety, depression, and loneliness scores – three factors that are critical in coping with stress, stimulating the immune system, and improving health.

Frederick Tims, Ph.D., MT-BC, Chair of Music Therapy at Michigan State University, who was also principal investigator for a University of Miami Alzheimer's project on music therapy, led a highly respected team of researchers to conduct the study. He presented the findings during a two-day symposium called Music Medicine: Enhancing Health Through Music, the first symposium of a series examining integrative medicine and alternative therapies. The symposium was held at the Intercontinental Hotel in Miami, Florida.

Called the Music Making and Wellness project, the study is a joint effort of five universities in cooperation with the American Music Therapy Association and Fletcher Music Centers. The study followed various health measures in 130 people during 1998. The experimental group consisted of 61 retirees taking group keyboard lessons in Florida over a period of two 10-week semesters. The health measures were administered before the lessons and after each semester. The control group included 69 retirees in Michigan not receiving group keyboard lessons, with the health measures administered at the same times as the experimental group in Florida.

The Michigan control group was a good comparison group for the Florida group, since both were equivalent with respect to age, gender, and ethnicity. Forty-five men and 85 women participated in the study. Slightly more than one-half of the participants in each group were married.

In three separate areas, important quality of life measures showed a significant change from pre to post-test in the experimental group (keyboard group), with no change occurring in the control group. On the Mental Health Inventory (MHI) Anxiety scores, anxiety decreased in the keyboard group but not in the control group. This decrease in anxiety was evident early on and appeared after only 10 weeks of lessons, remaining after 20 weeks of lessons. Decreased anxiety is related to improvement in cognitive performance, as well as enhancing learning, decision-making, and feelings of well-being.

On the Profile of Mood States (POMS) Depression/Dejection scores, depression scores decreased in the keyboard group but not in the control group. These measures accounted for differences in life events and social support. Depression is a major problem in the aging population. With decreased depression scores, people report a brighter mood.

On the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the loneliness scores of the keyboard group decreased across the span of the lessons, while the control group scores stayed the same. These measures accounted for differences in life events. This indicates that the keyboard students changed their perception of loneliness, or sense of being alone. Interestingly, the Lubben Social Support scores did not change. This indicates again the positive effects of the keyboard lessons since the Social Support scores measure external support, such as family and significant other support, whereas the Loneliness scale measures internal perception of support. In other words, it was from the lessons that this feeling most likely derived. Loneliness is a major problem with older people, and has major effects on health and feelings of well-being.

Dr. Tims assembled a highly respected multi-disciplinary team of researchers to conduct the project. Joining in the project were specialists from the Aging Institute at the University of South Florida; the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Miami School of Medicine; Karolinska Medical Institute, Stockholm, Sweden; University of Miami; and Western Michigan University. Speaking for the research team, Dr. Tims said, "We feel very strongly that the work we are doing here suggests that abundant health benefits can be achieved by older people learning to play music in a supportive, socially enjoyable setting."

The project grew out of a decade of research conducted by the Music Therapy Program at the University of Miami on the effects of music therapy on health and well-being. This research, in addition to research around the country and the world, demonstrates that music therapy is valuable in pain reduction, coping with stress, and in stimulating the immune system.

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