



Better living through song

March 2023

Many of us will have experienced the camaraderie of singing in a group of people, whether at a sporting event, a rock concert, or with friends. Research now indicates that singing also has significant health benefits for humans.

People have been singing for millenia, with music and dance being used to unify social group identity, enhance spiritual practices, and build affiliations with neighbouring groups. It does the same thing today. Group singing has been shown to be effective in creating social bonds and allows people who do not know each other to develop positive regard through shared effort.

It is estimated that there are at least 1000 choirs in Australia, and probably many more. This doesn't include the many casual gatherings of friends who meet to make music and sing together. Choir singing is popular all around the world across cultural, language and age groups (you can see videos of a few of the world's choirs here).

Increasingly it is evident that singing has positive benefits for the individual as well as the group. It turns out that the ability to sing is wired deeply in our brains. Singing to infants assists with language and emotional development. One British study concluded that singing provides the same physical benefits as moderately-brisk walking, while another found that choir singing can reduce the intensity of pain in people with long-term health conditions. A randomised controlled trial of people living with long Covid found that a programme of singing reduced breathlessness and other symptoms.

A US survey found that singing fosters relationships and reduces social isolation, with singers reporting greater levels of social engagement and stronger relationships compared to the general population. According to this survey's data, singers of any age are more optimistic, more likely to volunteer, and more resilient than the general population; in addition, older singers over 65 report greater health and wellbeing than the general population.

Better living through song

March 2023



A systematic review found that group singing helps people with mental health conditions, with participants reporting increased wellbeing and emotional states, improved social connections, and symptom reduction. According to Danish researchers, singing with others provides two major mental health benefits: 1) helping people to get in touch with and experience their own emotions and 2) helping to form social and emotional connections with others.

Many choirs have been established with the specific aim of fostering health and wellbeing among older people. Research from a Norwegian program of "Singing Nursing Homes" suggests that having the nursing staff sing for and with residents has improved mood and energy, and reduced medication use. In this program, singing brought psychosocial benefits to staff as well as residents. Finnish research has shown that by stimulating cognitive function singing can potentially assist people with aphasia (a common condition for older people with stroke, Parkinson's or dementia) who find it difficult to communicate.

The British arts organisation, Opera North, has neatly summarised all of this in their "10 reasons why singing is good for you", reasons which include stress reduction, improved lung capacity, increased community connection, and pain reduction.

It seems we were designed to sing. Go ahead, then. Sing in the shower or in the car. Even better, join a choir or gather your friends and sing karaoke. However you do it, open your mouth and let a song come out. It will make your day and may even help you live longer.



Linda