

Singing helps stroke victims to speak again

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A Christchurch stroke victim, who had lost the ability to speak, has rediscovered his voice in a choir.

Neville Tiller, 74, is one of about 30 people with a neurological condition who have joined a 10-week pilot music therapy programme to try to get his voice back.

Tiller had a stroke three years ago.

"I couldn't speak at all for about a year," he said.

Words were slowly coming back with therapy, which included singing in the choir run by Music Therapy Professionals at the Mary Potter Community Centre.

Tiller never imagined he would join a choir. "It's good confidence building and it's

nice to meet other people."

Andrew Young, 75, said Parkinson's disease had affected his speech and the choir was helping him project his voice.

"Normally people with Parkinson's tend to speak softly and this is helping us project. They measured us all at the beginning – how long we could hold a note and how loud we could get, and they will do it again at the end of the 10 weeks to see if we are any better."

Meeting other people with neurological conditions had been a good spinoff, he said.

"It's been really great. Normally, I only meet people with Parkinson's at things but there [are] people who have had strokes, head injuries ... and all are singing in the same choir."

Therapy Professionals general manager Shonagh O'Hagan said the programme, funded by Music Therapy New Zealand, improved and maintained vocal function in people with neurological conditions.

Research showed singing could help rewire the brain after neurological injury and restore verbal communication skills through improved breath control, perception and timing of speech, she said.

"Songs and music are processed in a different area of the brain than speech and while many people living with the effects of a stroke can't speak, they may be able to sing."

Singing could help them improve concentration, speech, organisation of

thoughts, and formation of coherent sentences, she said.

"Shallow breathing is a common experience for people living with Parkinson's disease, usually resulting in diminished vocal strength, weaker speech muscles, and loss of co-ordination of the muscles involved in speech production."

"Singing helps co-ordinate these muscles, strengthening the voice and improving the sound that's produced. It also provides an expressive outlet for feelings of anger and frustration."

Rewiring the brain: Music therapist Kimberley Jones takes a singing class for people with neurological disorders.

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