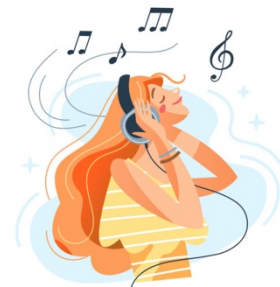


## The power of music: 'A secret in plain sight' that helps bring breakthroughs

For many, music is a central part of life, whether it's to help get you motivated to work up a sweat at the gym, focus on your studies, or even remember a loved one - and sometimes we'll do this without noticing the therapeutic benefits of listening to music.

It can help people at all stages of their lives and in many circumstances, physiologically and psychologically too, says Daphne Rickson, an adjunct professor at the New Zealand School of Music - Te Koki, where music therapists train.

"We all use music in our lives for various reasons, but there are a lot of people who are unable or find difficulty, have challenges, who need the support of the therapist. So the therapist, the therapeutic process in music therapy, is just as important as the music," Rickson told *Saturday Morning*.



"I think we would really like for music therapy to be a choice for people, a mainstream choice, for people who are experiencing physical, social, and emotional or spiritual challenges in their lives - that there are ways for them to easily access music therapy."

She recalls how a boy with autism struggled to communicate, until she found him humming the notes of a prominent car advertisement and replicated that to get him to sing along.

"It was an incredible breakthrough moment, his mum was there and she was very moved by his expression, and I think it's a lovely example ... because I think it's a beautiful way to demonstrate how connected young people can be to music and how they can excel and do things that they're not able to do in other contexts."

Chris O'Connor, drummer for The Phoenix Foundation, has found a new career in music therapy, which has also helped transform his way of thinking too.

"I feel like I'm just a bit less angsty," O'Connor tells *Music 101*. "Although that could just be because I'm a bit older now, but I think music therapy has also helped sort of burnish off some angsty edges that are quite persistent."

"Music is high stakes for me. It's high stakes of if I don't feel a gig has gone well, I'm devastated, you know, it's high stakes, and music therapy has just helped me find my way into a zone, where I can keep the stakes high but actually be not undermining it by being too angsty about it."

"So I'm actually able to go a bit more 'you know what? I've got this music therapy job during the day, now I'm at this gig, I'm not here to mess about, I'm going to actually play beautifully, it's going to be wonderful and I'm gonna love, and let's go!'"

Being able to help people connect with their emotions or trigger a memory for people with dementia, for example, has been hugely rewarding, he says.

"It's an incredibly humbling to be able to facilitate a real sparking moment, when you see that light in someone's eyes, and that's real excitement, it's palpable.



"I mean that's the thing with musical experiences, it's like a secret in plain sight, you know, like having an enjoyable musical experience is only something that you can know through having one, and that's a part of what I'm hoping to facilitate in music therapy sessions."

He also loves seeing the profession grow culturally.

"I think music therapy has really benefitted from more and more non-Western practitioners, more languages, more cultures."

### **'To be with other people who understand them'**

A musician herself, Rickson was worried about how her daughter, who was born profoundly deaf, would be able to engage with music. After seeing how her pre-school programme used music to improve listening and speech, she decided to become a music therapist.

"It was just so obvious how music was engaging the little children, it was non-threatening compared with speech, and that's something goes right through music therapy work; where if somebody asks you a question, you have a feeling that you have to answer and it has to be the right answer, but if you are just invited to sing, then you know there's no right or wrong way to do that, so it felt very non-threatening."

Her research into children at a Christchurch school, which used singing each morning for wellbeing after the 2011 earthquakes, found the students reported feeling more settled and able to learn after their sessions.

"Singing together, chanting together is a very connecting activity to do.

"One of the important messages to bring in here is that not all music does all things. So music therapists are very careful in terms of what music they might choose for what purpose ... something that might be calming and helpful for one person might actually remind somebody else that's not so calming.



"For example ... if there's a piece of music on the radio at the time the earthquake struck, regardless of what that music may have meant to somebody before that moment, it may strike terror again when they hear it next time."

Several neurological choirs in New Zealand are also supporting people in communication and wellbeing, she says.

"They could go there to sing, and through the singing to improve speech but also to be with other people who understand them, to really get support from the music therapist who knows how to choose songs, adapt songs, compose songs, that are appropriate for the group."

With huge demand for music therapy, Chris O'Connor hopes to see more people join the profession.

"So many musician friends of mine would make such great music therapists, some of them have already been cornered by me."

Reference: RNZ

[www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/527406/the-power-of-music-a-secret-in-plain-sight-that-helps-bring-breakthroughs](http://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/527406/the-power-of-music-a-secret-in-plain-sight-that-helps-bring-breakthroughs)