

The Power of Music

By Amy Krause

North Shore Senior Center
member Alice Kim

We all have those favorite songs, you know, the ones that have you tapping your toes, bobbing your head and humming or singing along. Certain songs take us back to a specific point in time—a happy moment from childhood, a road trip with friends, a first love, or a family celebration. For most people, music is an integral part of daily life. Some people use it to help them get through their exercise routine; some blast their favorite playlist in the shower; some rely on tunes during their commute to work; some have the stereo or radio on while engaging in hobbies or chores; and, others use music to lull them to sleep.

It comes as no surprise that music has neurological effects. Songs can make us feel happy, sad, nostalgic, energetic or relaxed. Thus, music can be a powerful intervention. By providing an effective way to cope with the stresses of aging, music can reduce depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation. At North Shore Senior Center's House of Welcome Adult Day Services day program, Briahna Walker, MT-BC, uses music therapy with people living with memory loss from Alzheimer's disease and other dementias as a way to support cognitive functioning, increase social interaction and enhance well-being. There are almost no limits to the power of music.

"Some people living with dementia have difficulty communicating verbally but can express themselves by clapping their hands, tapping their toes or humming along to a tune," she said.

Briahna starts each one-hour music therapy group with a song that welcomes participants by name and sets the tone for what's about to happen. To engage participants, she asks for help distributing instruments, and then participants may choose from a variety of hand-held instruments, including maracas, drums, tambourines and tone chimes. Participants play, sing, clap and hum to songs from the theme of the day—one day it might be Frank Sinatra or Beatles songs; the next television theme show songs or songs about love. Briahna says participants interact with each other, creating a group. "Music brings people together. Group music therapy can create cohesion and a sense of belonging. Even people who are more introverted may become more social and engaged."

Director of House of Welcome Adult Day Services Cynthia Phon, LCSW, said music is a useful tool in interacting with people who are living with dementia. "Music can facilitate connections with participants and help them make connections with each other."

North Shore Senior Center member Alice Kim has been using music to help her cope with the death of her husband of 44 years, who died suddenly last year. An accomplished pianist, Alice, whose loss was more than she could handle, eventually turned to the piano as a way to work through her intense grief.

"At first, I was paralyzed with sadness. My life was turned upside down . . . I was in a deep hell," she said. "A few months after Kwang's death, I joined a grief support group, and the people I met there suggested I join a senior center as a way to get out of the house and socialize."

In January of this year, Alice made the brave decision to move forward, and she joined the Center. Even though she didn't know how to crochet or knit, she was immediately embraced by the philanthropic Stitchers, Knitters and Share the Warmth groups. "They were so kind and welcoming, and the club gave me a new purpose," she said. "Learning to crochet has added color to what had become my colorless life."

At first, Alice, who has played piano at her church for 25 years and taught piano for 40 years, couldn't find the courage to play at home. It was too painful, and she found it difficult to concentrate. One morning, on her way to Stitchers, she stopped in Cohn Auditorium and played for a bit. She found that playing piano did, indeed, make her feel good.

"Playing my music has helped me heal emotionally and inspires me to feel hopeful and positive. Music keeps me present in my life and has changed the way I think about my husband's death. Today, I am grateful for what I have and had, instead of looking for something that's not here. Now, when my fingers are moving up and down the keys, I can feel my husband smiling."

Music affects the brain in many positive ways. The next time you need a pick-me-up or need to be pumped up or calmed down, reach for the radio dial or put on a favorite CD. And then let the music of Chopin, Etta James, the Beatles or Tony Bennett work its magic. ■