



relax, de-stress & energize

Combat stress with an unlikely weapon—music.

By Erin Brereton

There is a reason your dentist's office has music playing, and it's not so you can sing along during your root canal. Chances are those piped-in tunes are to help you relax, which means your dentist is a very clever caregiver.

A 2001 study done by the State University of New York at Buffalo found that listening to music before surgery significantly lowered the blood pressure levels of patients whose normal blood pressure had spiked the morning of their surgery. It took just five minutes of headphone time to reduce the patients' blood pressure; the control group, who listened to no music at all, had elevated blood pressure levels during their entire surgery. Whether you're undergoing a transplant, some major mouth work or just bidding adieu to some pesky tartar, music helps make the experience a lot less traumatic.

In today's society, of course, stress is hardly confined to the dentist's office. From gridlocked traffic to jam-packed workdays to cell

phones, pagers, e-mail and the increase of accessibility (that accompanies the total loss of uninterrupted time), modern society is more frenzied than ever.

Eighty-nine percent of adults participating in a recent Weber State University study reported experiencing high stress levels. The study also revealed that 75 percent to 90 percent of adult primary care physician visits are the result of stress-related problems. In a recent "Attitudes in the American Workplace" survey, taken annually by The Marlin Company, 76 percent of respondents had experienced stress in the workplace.

Somebody put on some Sting! If music can help patients relax before going under the knife, it's astounding that the rest of America isn't using it to battle road rage, job anxiety and a number of other sticky situations.

Find Your Inner Drummer

When guests at the New Age Health Spa in Neversink, N.Y., come to

psychotherapist Robert Lawrence Friedman's anti-stress drumming workshop, they're often skeptical.

"I would say 60 percent are coming in with a very low expectation," says Friedman, who has been teaching the monthly workshop since 1986. "The concept sounds so unusual, but 99.9 percent leave really happy."

Friedman, a professional drummer who started taking lessons at age 10, teaches percussion relaxation workshops across the world. He appeared as the stress expert on the Discovery Channel's year-long look at baby boomers health, "Class of '75." And he wrote "The Healing Power of the Drum." He stumbled upon the chilling-out music and drum combo when, on a whim, he taught his first workshop at the New Age Health Spa.

"I had found that drumming gave me lots of different health benefits, ranging from anger management to stress management, and so I decided to do an experiment to see if the drum gave the same benefits to non-drummers," Friedman says. "I purchased about 100 hand drums and put them in a circle at the spa and ran thru a number of simple drum exercises. [The reaction] was delight, excitement, euphoria—people said to me that they felt more relaxed after my session than they had in years."

Floored, Friedman started offering the workshop to corporations and continued to experience the healing aspect of music.

"I did a workshop at a *Fortune* 500 company in 1990, and one of the VPs—in his mid '60s—jumped out of his chair and started dancing across the boardroom," Friedman says. "Everyone else ignored him because they were



Photograph courtesy of Remo

into their own beats. At the end of workshop, [the VP] was really impressed [because] he had a chronic back problem that had disappeared.

"About six months later I called for a follow-up and he said the pain had never returned."

Friedman's take on percussive psychotherapy is surprisingly simple—yet effective.

"I say to patients, 'I want you to think about your sadness, and I want you to put that emotion into the drum,' and what I've found is you're not saying a word but by thinking about emotion, people were able to release these emotions," he says. "I like to use the term 'inner drummer.' It's the inner rhythms going on all

the time—the heart muscle, breathing, muscles [contracting and relaxing]. Learning to express that rhythm is what drumming is all about."

Get Out of Your Head

Understanding your inner rhythm is one of the key principles of yoga, but despite the exercise method's emphasis on flow and harmony, music isn't used often in yoga classes. However, yoga instructor Rainbeau Mars, who stretched and toned celebrities like Rick Rubin, Flea of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Woody Harrelson, David Duchovny and Owen Wilson, has made music a part of 90 percent

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of her classes. She also uses music in her “Sacred Yoga Practice” video series.

If the teacher is not in the mood, then students won’t be in the mood, she says. In that case, music lets everyone go with the rhythm. “You allow the rhythm of the music to take them into their bodies and to flow along with it,” Mars says. Although some teachers think music distracts people, Mars disagrees. “I think it brings people more in themselves.”

Her students have no complaints.

“You’d watch people go into tears with certain songs,” says Mars, who once got misty when in position during an Enya tune. “When I play music, I notice people [are] always affected. You get out of your head and just allow the music to take you.”

A Sense of Calm

Barbara Crowe, professor of Music Therapy at the Herberger College School of Fine Arts at Arizona State University, has spent years studying the correlation between music and the mind. According to Crowe, music can

help provide some relief for persons with Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and autism.

“Alzheimer’s patients’ neurons are being destroyed by the disorder, so they are losing their ability to organize and initiate behavior. It also affects their memory,” she says. “We use familiar music [that] helps them focus their attention and stay in an activity instead of wandering. We see some maintaining of their normal personalities, the ability to respond and to interact with family. [You see] PET scans of peoples’ brains responding to music and they just light up like Christmas trees with it.”

No other activity—not art, reading, crafts, games—has the same effect. That’s because “Music impacts so much of the brain,” Crowe says. “The auditory nerve affects the brain more than any other singular sensory input.”

Which is why music is so relaxing: There’s a sense of calm in the predictability of most songs, Crowe says.

“There’s some evidence certain kinds of music can echo alpha waves, which are the

quieter brain waves [we experience] when falling asleep,” she says. “We relax to music that’s familiar—we kind of know how the chords are going to progress, we know how the cadence is going to come: No big surprises, so we can let go. This is true across cultures [with] lullabies, which have similar attributes of underlying swinging melodies, gentle beat, [being] quiet.”

Stress can come on fast—but music can strip away its effects almost as rapidly. So whether your next quickie relaxation attempt involves playing a drum, doing pop-infused Pilates or popping in a CD, Crowe suggests taking some time to enjoy the effective quick solution to tension overload. Even she’s been known to listen to a song or two to relax.

“We might not always [try to reduce stress], but people realize being under stress decreases immune function, leads to heart attacks and strokes,” Crowe says. “If I wanted to do something just myself that doesn’t involve a lot of money, music is right up there with a hot bath.” *

Is Stress Making You Sick?

Please circle:

- 0- If you never experience this
- 1- If you sometimes experience this
- 2- If you often experience this
- 3- If you experience this very often

- 1 Are you feeling increasingly tired?
0 1 2 3
- 2 Is there a change in your eating patterns?
0 1 2 3
- 3 Are you more impatient, irritable and angry?
0 1 2 3
- 4 Do you have trouble sleeping?
0 1 2 3

- 5 Have your thoughts been racing and are they becoming distracting?
0 1 2 3
- 6 Do you have difficulty concentrating throughout the day?
0 1 2 3
- 7 Is your heartbeat rapid and do you experience palpitations?
0 1 2 3
- 8 Are you getting headaches more often?
0 1 2 3

Key: If you circled three for the majority of your answers, you may want to see a health professional. “If you are stressed, then the symptoms tend to spill over into all these areas, and you should get help,” author Allen Elkin recommends. — Payal Uttam

Source: “Stress to Dizziness,” author Allen Elkin, Ph.D.