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SOUND, STRESS and HEALING

by Steven Halpern

I remember very clearly the first time I 'became' the music-no longer a 'me' playing the music, only 'music being played.' Skiers and dancers know the feeling-when you're so in tune with the energy of the moment that you lose yourself totally in the experience.

My breakthrough came early in my career, during the first day on campus at the University of Buffalo. I always carried my trumpet with me in those days, since I was passionate about jazz. A jam session was going on in the Student Union building, with the hottest faculty and professional musicians cooking up a storm in the John Coltrane high-energy dimensions. I was invited to sit in.

Ten years of studying fancy scales and fast fingering gave me a way to get started. Then, suddenly it seemed as if the trumpet began playing itself, the silver horn was an extension of my nervous system and a wind blew through me that carried notes higher and faster and clearer than I had ever played before.

When it was over, I felt as if I was levitating. People were congratulating me on my great 'solo'-but I had little recall of what I had played or how I did it. All I knew was that it felt great and I wanted to learn how to get into that state again.

Thus began my period of study with the master teacher who appeared on piano and as an English professor teaching about William Blake, which included studying spiritual traditions of the East, the work of Gurdjiaff, nutrition, yoga and meditation. It ultimately led to my being ready to be opened as a channel for the meditative healing music that would flow through me when I played piano which has formed the foundation for my recording career and my sound contributions to the holistic growth movement.

The Healing Powers of Music

Although no one fully understands yet the mechanisms through which the healing powers of music operate, there is no question that certain kinds of music can assist the body in amplifying its own self-healing energies.

Traditional music therapy focuses on physiological or emotional response to music. Obviously, if you have favorite pieces of music that make you happy, this will tend to enhance the production of endorphins, which contribute to feelings of wellness.

The body produces its own natural mood enhancers, called neurotransmitters. Those that help us relax are called endorphins. Beta-endorphins are those specific secretions that Dr. Irving Oyle calls 'joy juice:' they help us feel good and are associated with 'runner's high' one gets in listening to pleasurable music. Although there hasn't been a great deal of research as yet, studies have already demonstrated the music/ endorphin connection. In the near future, music will be recognized for its ability to provide a drug-free 'natural high' and used accordingly.

The Power of Relaxation

Beyond one's personal taste in music, the body seems to have a wisdom of its own. This is allowed to manifest most effectively in a state of deep relaxation. In the past several years relaxation has really come into its own in terms of public awareness. In fact, a recent study by Dr. David Eisenber, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, reports that over 60 million people are involved in some sort of alternative health care that delivers relaxation.

When it comes to relaxation, there are few therapies more enjoyable than listening to music. But only certain kinds of music are effective in evoking your relaxation response.

The reason is simple: Most music is designed as entertainment, and is too fast for the body to get into a relaxed state. It literally

makes the nervous system more nervous. This is true of most pop and rock music and even most classical music.

Lyrics and structure also tend to direct your attention toward the music, rather than *inside* towards *your healing process*.

In a state of deep relaxation, two significant processes occur that I believe are highly relevant to anyone involved in a healing process. Firstly, the brain waves shift from everyday *beta* patterning to the *alpha* and *theta* frequencies, in which healing is known to occur.

Secondly, electromagnetic energy fields and subtle energy centers (chakras) come into alignment as a tuned oscillation system. This allows for the most efficient distribution of energy, thus making more energy available for the healing process.

Sound and Stress at Home

Sound is a two-edged sword. While certain sounds can help us heal, many other sounds tend to create disharmony, and stress. It is now well established that stress is a contributing factor in many diseases. Thus decreasing one's stress in general is an important part of a healing program.

Identifying factors related to sound and noise is a simple, yet important step. For instance, noise pollution from one's refrigerator often extends through the house or apartment. Pay attention and you can feel the relief from tension in your chest when the machine shuts off for awhile.

You might also write down an inventory of sounds you can hear in your living spaces. Notice whether you find them pleasant or unpleasant. Note also whether you had ever even noticed them before.

You can place sound-absorbent material under refrigerators, so the sound and vibration doesn't go directly into the floor. You can choose quieter-running models of this and other appliances.

To further quiet-down the intrusion of outside noise into your own space, consider adding double pane windows. Building insulation into walls helps a lot too.

You can 'sound condition' your space with either environmental sounds. Like running water, river or lake sounds (though this activates a bladder response for many people.) Or you can choose certain music which 'takes the edge off' the discordant sounds of the outside world. There is a fine line, I find, between using music as background and having it fill up the spaces so you can concentrate on what you want to focus on, and between music that grabs your attention itself. Experiment. My own search helped me compose the recordings in my *Inner Peace* series.

Recent research demonstrates the positive effect of this music on brain-wave activity, as well as on the actual mobility of white blood cells, an indication of a healthy immune system functioning.

What type of music reduces stress the best? I believe the answer is music that works with the body's own desire to be in balance. Music that has no sharp edges or jagged rhythms. Music without words or familiar themes, allowing you to come into a relaxed alpha brain-wave state.

Harnessing the Power of Your Subconscious Mind

In addition to the benefits that occur in the state of deep relaxation, we can further amplify the healing process by harnessing the power of your subconscious mind. In deep relaxation, you are most receptive and responsive to positive, life-enhancing affirmations. By encoding these spoken affirmations subliminally (below the threshold of conscious awareness) the healing benefits of the music alone can be enhanced. Many people keep the music going 24 hours a day in times of crisis. You may wish to create your own tape with your own specific affirmations. I would encourage you to record these affirmations in an audible manner, so you could hear your own voice.

The more you surround yourself with vibrations of harmony, the more you will be supporting your own body's recuperative process and enhancing your own healing.

Take a few moments for yourself

Your body is a self-balancing and self-harmonizing organism, if we give it a chance. Focusing on your internal state, rather than outside distraction, is a good first step. Simply choose to take a few moments for yourself. Close your eyes, take a deep breath. . . and listen deeply. . . to the spaces between the notes. When I listen to music that allows my breath to deepen and slow down, a shift occurs that I can literally feel in my body, mind and spirit. It happens quickly, which is great for Type A people like

myself.

I recommend that you collect your own personal set of musical selections that always evoke your 'relaxation response.' Most music does not. . . and was not designed to do so. Monitor your heart beat and you will see what I mean: fast or sped-up heartbeat might be *exciting*, but it is definitely not relaxing.

The more you pay attention, the clearer this distinction will be. As a great teacher said: "Be still and know." In the stillness, great blessings and healings can occur. They are just waiting for us to resonate to the brain wave frequencies of transcendence.

When practiced regularly, relaxation can help prevent many of today's stress related diseases and help support a strong immune system and the body's self-healing mechanisms.

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