

# Teen spirit

**Along with close friendships music is one of the most important things in teenagers' lives as they progress through adolescence. For teens with serious mental health disorders, it can literally be a lifeline.**

The young people on ward 2A at Queensland's Logan Hospital are not always carefree teens. They are struggling with serious mental problems such as psychosis, eating disorders or trauma-related issues and more than half have a history of deliberate self-harm or difficulties in regulating their moods. As a consequence, they often can feel on the margins of mainstream society, trying to fit in.

Most stay on the ward for about seven days - though some are hospitalised for a few months if their illness is particularly severe - so the doctors and other health professionals of the adolescent mental health unit have to work quickly to assess their patients' problems and recommend solutions.

**"Healthier and more positive uses of music, give young people with mental health difficulties a glimpse of wellbeing - having fun, being happy and doing the things they love doing"**

Music often provides a quick way to get to the heart of the matter, according to Dr Michael Daubney, acting clinical director of child and adolescent psychiatry at Logan Hospital: "It can be a vehicle to help build a therapeutic relationship and help the patient express feelings, without words, safely. It is exciting to observe and experience this happening."



l-r: Michael Daubney, Carmen Cheong-Clinch and colleagues at Logan Hospital

As anyone who sings or plays a musical instrument will tell you, making music, especially with others, is great for the mind, body and soul. And the benefits flow whether you are an accomplished musician or an enthusiastic amateur. In music

therapy trained health professionals – registered music therapists – draw on the benefits of music to help people of all ages and abilities to attain and maintain good health and wellbeing. Music therapists work in a range of places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools and the community, delivering tailor-made programs to meet specific needs.

Music therapy can be very effective in the care of people with mental illness, helping minimise the trauma and disruption which hospitalisation brings. Sometimes music therapists work around songwriting, to help an individual process feelings which might be difficult to talk about. Music therapy may help people make healthier choices about music listening and may also help to reduce anxiety, fear, anger, agitation, distress and sadness. Some hospitals have extensive music libraries and can lend instruments or recorded music to patients and offer therapeutic music lessons.

The nature and duration of the music therapy sessions depend on the young person involved, says music therapist, Carmen Cheong-Clinch, and might involve listening to CDs or giving the patient opportunities to sing their favourite songs with a backing track, helping to turn their poetry into songs, or improvising with them on the piano or, most often for the boys, on drums and guitar.

The link between adolescents and music is a powerful and well-researched one, and, in Carmen's experience, often helps young people 'unlock' difficult emotions:

"I remember one young person who came to us with a history of risk-taking behaviours after the loss of a parent. She had already turned to poetry and was writing quite moving things about her experiences of grief and anger, so that gave us a starting point to work to put the words to music and help her write a song. It became a tangible expression of her feelings and was very cathartic for her."

Sometimes Carmen has to help young patients rethink their decisions about their listening choices. "Because it's so important to them, listening to music may be a possible and relevant coping strategy in the management of their mental health and wellbeing," she says. "But, as with anything,

there are positive and negative, healthy and unhealthy choices they can make.

“Healthy teens might be skilled at using music to help their mood or create the ‘right’ environment but teens with mental health issues are often less successful at that.

“One of our objectives on Ward 2A is to promote positive uses of music so that we can help young people learn to use their own music and music-making to recognise and manage their mental health. Making their own positive choices about something so fundamental in their lives is important as it helps give young people a real sense of autonomy,” says Carmen.

Their hospital admission often marks a long and difficult journey managing their mental health through adulthood. Carmen believes the benefits of music and music-making flow on to their lives after admission:

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“For some who experience psychosis, they have told me that ‘music keeps me from being crazy’. In the case of one young person with psychosis, I improvised with him on the piano which helped him to discover and express his musical identity during an acute phase of his illness. Music played an important part in his ongoing recovery because it demonstrated parts of him that were well and creative.”

The opportunity which music making and listening brings for young people with mental illness to “show off their wellness,” as Carmen puts it, has workplace benefits too.

“Ward 2A isn’t always an easy workplace for a lot of the staff with long shifts, and acute care. So music brings some counter to that, it gives everyone the opportunity to experience ‘wellness’ and the positive.

“At a broader community level, making or listening to music together can help break through social, cultural and health barriers.”



### what we know about...

## music and adolescent mental health

“Young people spend a significant amount of time engaging with music and vulnerable teenagers spend even more than their luckier peers. The fact that teens have particularly positive associations with music – sometimes using the same music to both relax and stimulate them, and other times having different playlists for different purposes – suggests that music can be a resource in grappling with their emerging mental health problems. Indeed the Australian Research Council has funded a recent study to look into this in more detail.

The ability of music to change our moods seems to be related to the production of different chemicals in the brain. Endorphins triggered by music listening and making provide a kind of natural pain relief, where dopamine leads to feelings of buoyancy, optimism, energy and power. This may explain the kinds of ‘flow’ and ‘peak experiences’ often described as being evoked by both music listening and more active musical participation.

Given the recent emphasis in mental health care on ‘coping with’ rather than ‘curing’ mental illness, strategies that help give teens a sense that the world is somewhat predictable, manageable, and meaningful may offer a shining light on a dark night. Music plays a key role here: young people often say ‘music makes me feel better’.”

Dr Katrina McFerran, University of Melbourne



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