

The Piano Heals the Spirit and Soothes the Soul

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For the past few years, pianos have had a presence at the yearly American Psychiatric Conference. Does Yanni entertain during intermission? Not exactly. The pianos are for the therapists themselves, explains Al Bumanis, communications director for the American Music Therapy Association. "A number of booths at the conference are equipped with pianos so therapists can take a break and relax by playing the piano or listening to piano music," he says.

"The idea," says Bumanis, "is that the psychiatrist can come by the booth to de-stress." Psychiatrists using the piano to de-stress? Not a bad endorsement for the instrument's effectiveness at soothing the troubled spirit.

"Playing the piano has always added joy to people's lives, but we're just beginning to understand the full range of its benefits," says Brenda Dillon of the National Piano Foundation. "When I play the piano, I am able to get away from the daily challenges. It's like taking a mini vacation. By the time I walk away from the piano, I am truly relaxed."

That's no accident, says Alicia Ann Clair, Ph.D., music therapist, board-certified professor and director of music therapy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. "When it comes to making music, the piano demands an attention and focus that does not allow interfering thoughts that might be distracting or distressful, and in that way relieves the pressures and the stresses of the day," she says. "At the same time that we can use it as a way to provide relief, we have added bonuses. When you play and it's successful, it's extremely exciting and fulfilling. Relief, joy or fulfillment--all of those things add to well-being, which contributes to life quality which contributes to good health."

Just ask veterinarian Bill Porter. "When I was a kid, I played percussion. Then I dropped all that, and became a doctor. But when I was 44, I started taking piano lessons. I just love playing piano. It is a de-stressor for me in a big way, and for me, it fulfilled a creative side that I can't express at work."

In fact, the piano is being used across the world as an effective therapeutic tool. At New York's Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy, the piano is instrumental in helping children and adults overcome their emotional and physical problems. The clinic boasts centers in England, the U.S., Australia, Japan, Scotland and South Africa.

"In this approach, the therapist is usually at the piano," explains music therapist and New York clinic co-director Alan Turry. "The therapist and patient actually create music in a mutual fashion."

Therapists in the program, all of whom are trained extensively on the piano, work with autistic children, hospital patients, the developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed, "as well as self-referred adults who want an alternative to verbal therapy,"

says Turry. In fact, he says, these adults make up about 10 percent of the clinic's client roster. "What happens often with self-referred adults is that they are aware of issues they're working on, but they're looking for a new way to grow, exchange, explore themselves," he explains. The idea is "setting up a situation that's not about skills, but expression--allowing someone to freely express themselves through music."

The clinic offers patients a chance to use a number of instruments, including voice, though "about 40 to 50 percent" of them use the piano, says Turry. Some adult patients have gone on to study the piano after their therapy. "I've had several clients that got very interested in music after being at the clinic," Turry notes. "Some bought pianos, some took lessons. Often, a byproduct of music therapy can be someone becoming more interested and involved in music."

With the piano celebrating its 300th birthday this year and the 10th annual National Piano Month marked this past September, the instrument is getting more attention than usual. The second look is well deserved. Besides its incredible beauty and sound, the piano offers many gifts to the human spirit, through enhancing creativity, healing or relaxation.