

Music as Medicine

For a Brief, Magical Interlude, Illness Gives Way to Joy

With her right hand, the girl in the pink T-shirt bangs on a red drum. With her left, she grips an IV pole, sliding it back and forth on its wheels in rhythm with the music. “Baby, baby, baby,” she sings, joining three other six-year-olds in the chorus of a popular Justin Bieber tune in the playroom of NYU Langone Medical Center’s Stephen D. Hassenfeld Children’s Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders. Just a little while ago, the youngsters were surrounded by reminders of their illness—doctors and nurses, needles and thermometers. But now, despite the drip, drip, drip of chemotherapy and its unpleasant side effects, they can lose themselves in lyrics, amuse themselves with melodies.

The maestro of this impromptu concert is music therapist Joseph Lee, who leads the group in “Old MacDonald” and “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” and lets the children improvise ditties as well. For a brief, magical interlude, they look and feel and act not like patients with life-threatening illnesses, but like rambunctious kids enjoying one of those precious, carefree afternoons of childhood.

“There’s a lot of loss and change kids experience when they’re diagnosed with cancer,” says the spiky-haired, guitar-playing Lee. “They’ve lost their hair oftentimes, they’re losing certain abilities, and their entire family dynamic is different.” Unable to attend school, they miss their friends and feel a loss of identity and control. Music therapy, he explains, helps these children regain lost abilities and acquire new talents. Plus, it’s fun.

Classically trained—he holds an associate’s diploma in piano performance from

Canada’s Royal Conservatory of Music—Lee splits his time between Hassenfeld and Tisch Hospital’s day surgery and inpatient units. He is one of three music therapists at NYU Langone. Ariel Weissberger works with adults who have heart or respiratory failure, limb loss, stroke, and other debilitating conditions at NYU Langone’s Rusk Rehabilitation, as well as with patients at the Comprehensive Epilepsy Center. Carter Thornton, a senior creative arts therapist, works with patients at NYU

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Langone’s Hospital for Joint Diseases. All are board certified in music therapy, a discipline that requires proficiency in two or more instruments, as well as training in group dynamics, ethics, and clinical techniques.

Music therapy is offered in group sessions and one-on-one. Lee, for example, may offer piano or guitar lessons to a child with a brain tumor, targeting a weakened hand or fingers.

Weissberger, who holds a master’s degree in music therapy, often helps patients write, record, or perform music related to their cultural or personal experiences. The therapists strive for both emotional gains, such as motivating a patient to leave their bed or start a conversation, and physical goals, often partnering with physical therapists to help patients regain their balance, coordination, and speech.

Singing, for example, can help a stroke patient improve breath control—a first step to regaining speech—or even temporarily ease the tremors of Parkinson’s. Heartbeat, walking, and breathing are all very rhythmic processes, music therapists explain, so when there’s a consistent rhythm, the body links into it, and you don’t even have to think about it.

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“I don’t know exactly how to deliberately change the heart or brain of a patient,” says Weissberger, “and I wouldn’t say that I’m doing that. But we see the overall progress people make. Music is one thing they’re excited about. In creating an original song or singing a familiar one, they’re expressing themselves and gaining more control of their environment. For a while, at least, their illness or disability takes a backseat.”



In the playroom of the Stephen D. Hassenfeld Children’s Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders, a young patient belts out a tune to the accompaniment of music therapist Joseph Lee on guitar.