

The health benefits of singing and community choirs: a brief literature review

Methodology

A literature search using a combination of keywords and phrases - e.g. “singing” and “choir” combined with “health benefits” – and appropriate subject headings, was undertaken on NHS Evidence, the Cochrane Library, Medline, CINAHL, and HMIC. An internet search was also undertaken to identify grey literature.

The database search identified three systematic reviews of the literature and five published research articles. An evidence review and one primary research study were identified in the search for grey literature.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Although the evidence base is still limited there is emerging research on the positive impact of singing and participation in a choir on mental health and wellbeing.

A 2011 review (Clark & Harding, 2011) examined the effectiveness of active singing as an intervention to improve psychosocial measures for people in therapeutic programmes. Of the 11 quantitative studies identified, 3 showed significant improvements following active singing with another 3 studies showing significant effects for both the active singing intervention and a comparison intervention. These results led the authors to conclude that the findings were inconclusive and that active singing was one of a variety of interventions which improved psychosocial outcomes.

Choral singing can be used to promote better mental health and wellbeing (Clift & Morrison, 2011; Livesey, Morrison, Clift, & Camic, 2012). In a qualitative study of 169 amateur choir members reporting high and low levels of emotional wellbeing, Livesey et al (2012) report perceived benefits in social, emotional, physical, and cognitive functioning. Furthermore the study suggests that these benefits may be experienced similarly irrespective of age, gender, nationality or wellbeing status.

An evaluation of a community singing initiative in East Kent (Clift & Morrison, 2011) fully evaluated 42 participants at baseline and at eight month follow-up and found clinically significant improvements in levels of mental distress. A further 95 participants were evaluated during the process between September 2009 and June 2010. The authors concluded that group singing can offer a wide range of emotional and social benefits for mental health service users.

There is also emerging evidence for the therapeutic effects of music and singing as a nursing intervention, particularly for older people and people with dementia (Hammar, Emami, Gotell, & Engstrom, 2011; Skingley & Vella-Burrows, 2010).

Indeed, much of the existing research has a focus on older people. Westminster Adult Education Centre was one of three sites involved in a study (Hallam et al., 2011) exploring the ways in which participating in music making activities (including small and large group singing) can enhance the lives of older people, and to what extent this may impact on social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

Although there was no reporting specific to singing, the study found that those engaged in music making activities (compared to other activities) had a positive outlook on life; a sense of autonomy and control; and positive social relationships, competence and a sense of accomplishment.

The study reported on perceived benefits including *social benefits* (e.g. giving structure to daily life, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to socialise), *cognitive benefits* (e.g. keeping active and feeling young, enhanced concentration and memory, and sense of achievement), and *benefits for emotional health and wellbeing* (e.g. protection against depression and stress, confidence and empowerment, a sense of purpose, and support following bereavement).

These findings are also supported in a review of the impact of participatory arts on older people by the Mental Health Foundation (Mental Health Foundation, 2011). Benefits include increased confidence and self-esteem, coping with bereavement, and improved cognitive functioning.

Involvement in the arts also fosters a sense of community and social cohesion as well as reducing stigmatisation and transforming attitudes towards older people.

Impact on physical health and wellbeing

While there are perceived physical benefits to singing and community choirs, including improved breathing control and an increase in physical activity levels (Livesey et al., 2012; Mental Health Foundation, 2011) the majority of the research reports on benefits to mental health and wellbeing.

One recently published study (Yoon, Kuipers, & Petocz, 2013) found that singing had a positive impact on body function and activities among a small sample of hospitalised young people with cystic fibrosis (CF). An earlier systematic review (Irons, Kenny, & Chang, 2010b) had failed to identify any relevant trials and called for further research to evaluate singing therapy for people with CF.

Similarly, no trials were identified in a review of singing as an intervention for children and adults with bronchiectasis (Irons, Kenny, & Chang, 2010a) with the authors concluding that “in the absence of data, we cannot draw any conclusion to support or refute the adoption of singing as an intervention for people with bronchiectasis”.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the limited research available, the evidence does suggest that singing and involvement in community choirs has a positive impact on mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, cognitive function, and, to a lesser extent, physical health.

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