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Naomi Watts

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The benefits of singing and choirs

In her second of a series of articles music specialist, Dominique Levack presents an alternative way to help manage menopausal symptoms, through the power of your own voice.

“In the beginning was the voice. Voice is sounding breath, the audible sign of life.”

Jens Otto Harry Jespersen.

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It's thought that singing was early humans' first way to communicate, before language was melody.

Singing can play a significant role in our identity, and helps reflect the social and cultural identity of others. Our voice is unique and how we use it reflects who we are, how we show up and how we relate to others.

We can reframe ourselves through the conscious use of our voice, and singing is the most natural expression of ourselves that we have.

So, do you know how good singing is for you, particularly when it comes to managing those anxious feelings which can strike in perimenopause?

Our body produces oxytocin when we sing. Oxytocin is a natural stress relief hormone. How amazing is it that singing then helps you fight stress, depression and anxiety – all symptoms that many women experience, to a greater or lesser degree during their menopausal transition.

And that's not all:

- Singing improves cognition and helps support brain health.



- Singing lowers your blood pressure.
- Singing tones up your facial muscles and can improve your inter costal muscles.
- Singing can have a positive effect on your immune system.

According to neuro science, when engaging in singing and music more regions of the brain are stimulated than any other activity.

Is this why we have seen the rise of choirs across the UK in recent years, because the feel good factor now has the science to back it up?

Over the years I have run many choirs for all walks of life including The Alzheimer's Society, Sing to beat Parkinson's, specialist choirs for mental health, addictions and drug abuse and even a men's choir in a forensic setting. In my experience the feeling of joy during and after singing is undeniable. When searching for a name for my choir in Brighton in 2010 one of my friends suggested The Feel Good Choir, and that pretty much sums it up.

I've just completed a 4-day intense training to be a choir leader with Rock Choir, the UK's most successful contemporary choir. Founded in 2005 by Caroline Redman Lusher, it boasts over 20,000 members across the country, most of whom are women over 45. →



I can tell you this is a mighty singing army, who look very, very happy indeed. From Perth, Scotland to Helston in Cornwall rehearsals are taking place every week and these ladies are literally singing their way through the menopause like a Pac-man.

Training

Training included leading sessions with three separate choirs, and teaching them extracts from well-known pop songs in 4-part harmony. Every single choir had remarkably quick memory retention, where I would sing a phrase twice and the choir would repeat it perfectly.

Alongside me was a professional producer and conductor who was so impressed with the choirs' ability to remember phrases, he remarked they were better than most professional backing singers he'd worked with!

The majority of the members I spoke to had been with the choir for over five years. During the pandemic when rehearsals went online Rock Choir created online resources and rehearsals via zoom, which for some became a lifeline.

This kind of regular practice brings it unique benefits. My theory is quite simple. Thirty weeks a year of regular singing over 5 years or more = a highly toned and tuned brain function that has improved neural pathways and acts a natural therapy.

Sense of belonging

As well as the singing you also have to consider the sense of community a choir cultivates. During menopause many women can experience a sense of isolation, even in a busy life.

Regular rehearsals where you laugh, chat and sing together all provide a safe environment for women to let their hair down, and express themselves through singing well-known songs.

Can you imagine the vibrational effects of being amongst multiple harmonic voices? The sound is incredibly uplifting. Who doesn't love singing *Wake me up before you go go*, or *Valerie* with 30 to 50 others, at full volume? It's better than any karaoke and not just because you are sober!

“Thirty weeks a year of regular singing over 5 years or more = a highly toned and tuned brain function that has improved neural pathways and acts as a natural therapy.”

It's no surprise then that studies have shown that singers' heartbeats synchronize when singing in a choir. So, the physical, mental and spiritual effects are now very well documented.

Finding your choir

Even if singing isn't your strong suit, it doesn't really matter because it's the process not the product that counts. Certainly Rock Choir welcomes all with no audition, regardless of ability and a free taster session. If rocking to Fleetwood Mac or Earth Wind and Fire doesn't tickle your fancy most towns have various community choirs with a range of music styles where you don't need to read music, along with more traditional choral choirs if you do. →





Finding a choir to suit you could not be easier these days, with the help of Google and an open heart, it could be just the ticket to banish the winter blues and support your mental health.

Sing your way home

Many other cultures have also understood the deep spiritual effects of singing.

Songlines also known as dreaming tracks are ancient navigational paths and routes across land handed down from generations from the Indigenous people of Australia. They would sing while tracing the landscape,

and measure their journey in songs connecting people to their land.

A wise elder is able to navigate across the land by singing the words of the song, which describe the location in landmarks.

By singing the songs in the appropriate sequence, Aboriginal people could navigate vast distances, traveling through the deserts of Australia.

So, it seems this instinctive human trait has many benefits, and perhaps that's why as a human activity it has remained with us through the centuries, from cave to city.

Why not give it a go? What's to lose?



A musical time traveler she especially enjoys working with voices, mixing up genres from other centuries and cultures.

Moving her young family to Spain in 2000 she was one of the first female DJs in Southern Spain, performing under the name of DJ Aquarius, playing flamenco and world music.

Dominique has self-released 2 albums.

Released in 2021 *Improvisations* is a collection of contemporary piano chill out tracks with choirs and cinematic vibes.

Dominique studied Music Therapy at Nordoff Robbins, London in 2014 and practices as a music specialist across East & West Sussex.

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Dominique is a composer, songwriter, educator and music specialist.

Her first piece on *The magical powers of 432hz music* can be found in the Autumn 2022 issue of *Menopause Matters* if you missed it.