An Everyday Guide to Sound Healing: Benefits and Pathways to Improved Health

Photo by George Dagerotip on Unsplash

Sound healing is a therapeutic practice that uses sound's vibrational qualities to promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Humans have been using sound to calm their minds and heal their bodies for thousands of years. Sound sessions often involve singing bowls, tuning forks, gongs, drums, or flutes.

After learning how sound stimulates the vagus nerve, I began my own 15-year practice. It has reduced my daily stress, improved my sleep, and supported my standing meditation practice.

How Does Sound Healing Work?

Sound healing works through the vibrational qualities of sound waves on the body. Sound wave frequencies vibrate the eardrum and then enter the brain through the auditory nerve. Once sound waves enter the brain, the body integrates the vibrational qualities of the sound into a personalized therapeutic experience by stimulating the nerves, organs, muscles, and blood flow throughout your body.

The International Sound Therapy Association defines Sound Therapy as:

The application of audible sound to the full body or a specific part of the body, generated from electronic or musical sources, as therapeutic support by a credentialed Sound Therapy practitioner.

Sound therapists conduct their sessions in a serene environment, designed to promote relaxation and healing. Participants are encouraged to wear loose-fitting clothing and lie down in a comfortable position, allowing them to immerse themselves in the therapeutic experience fully.

The most frequently used instruments are singing bowls, crystal bowls, tuning forks, and gongs.

How Does Sound Activate Your Body?

The body integrates sound differently when received through instruments or music in an open room compared to when wearing headphones.

From Cells to Nerves: Four Ways Sound Waves Interact with the Body without Headphones

“Full body immersion in music or specific sound frequencies (distinct from listening with headphones) activates several beneficial biological mechanisms."

The article Sound Therapy and Music Medicine explains how sound waves activate the body:

1. The lining of the blood vessels produces nitric oxide (NO). It regulates the smooth muscle tone in blood vessel walls to maintain and enhance blood flow. The active and passive acoustic stimulation of the nasal cavities and lungs enhances NO production by specific sound frequencies and music.

2. Sound frequencies may also regulate and decrease pain by stimulating the body's larger nerve fibers in the area of pain.

3. Low-frequency sound pressure reduces the "pain-spasm-pain cycle" by increasing oxygen availability and enhancing tissue repair mechanisms in affected areas.

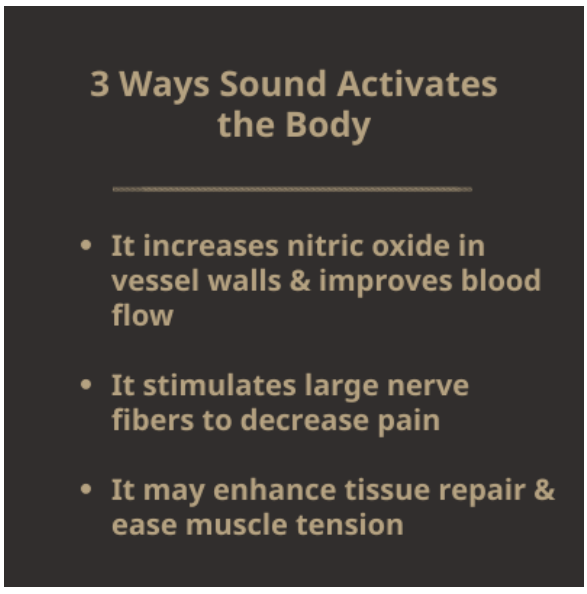
4. Sound waves vibrate the needles and activate the acupuncture channels, resulting in numerous health benefits, including pain reduction.

Sound Waves Activate These Three Pathways with Headphones

1. The brain-to-body pathway mediates pain through a descending inhibitory nerve sequence. Sound frequencies, such as music or white noise, can initiate such effects by activating the body's opioid reserves.

2. A decrease in cortisol levels (a stress hormone) increases dopamine levels.

3. Using headphones lets us hear the music or sound frequencies as binaural beats. Binaural beats are an auditory illusion that the brain creates when your ears interpret



two different frequencies played in each ear. The brain perceives the creation of a third tone, the binaural beat.

Growing research demonstrates that binaural beats decrease stress, improve focus, decrease pain, and elevate a person's mood.

They also regulate the vagus nerve, which improves digestion, reduces inflammation, and improves heart and breathing rate.

This study found that binaural beats effectively improve cognition, reduce anxiety, and reduce pain perception.

Sound waves can communicate with the body's cells and tissues, harmonizing the functioning of the nervous, muscular, immune, and circulatory systems. Now let's explore some of the benefits.

What are the Benefits?

Sound therapy sessions may enhance your health and well-being by:

- Decreasing your physical, mental, and emotional stress levels
- Decreasing anxiety
- Improving sleep
- Decreasing pain
- Improving daily mindfulness

These benefits may occur through Dr. Herbert Benson's well-known "Relaxation Response." This response is a state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress, decreasing the body's "fight-flight" response (sympathetic nervous system) and enhancing the activity of the body's "rest and digest" response (parasympathetic nervous system), encouraging deep relaxation.

Who Can Benefit?

While sound healing or therapy shows promising results for improving foundational health and well-being in adults and children, future randomized studies with experimental and control groups are necessary to help researchers clarify the mechanisms by which sound frequencies and music relax the body and support healing.

For example, this literature review of sound therapy showed positive results in improving various aspects for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including social communication, speech, behaviors, sleep quality, and education.

Sound therapy has the potential to provide therapeutic effects in ASD intervention, but further research is necessary to verify its positive effects due to inconsistent findings across studies.

How to Get Started

Once you begin using sound healing, whether through music or guided sessions with a sound therapist, you will start to experience what deep relaxation feels like for you.

Here are some music and educational resources to help you get started today!

Tonight, try listening to one of these resources for just 10 minutes before bed and notice how your body responds. You can check out two free music tracks here.

- **Listening to Smile**
- **Steven Halpern**
- **Scientific Sounds**

- **EOC Institute**

Further Reading

Binaural Beats | Psychology Today

International Sound Therapy Association

The Healing Power of Sound as Meditation | Psychology Today

Sound Healing: What It Is and How It Works

Sounds – Medicine for the New Millennium

References

Bartel L, Mosabbir A. Possible Mechanisms for the Effects of Sound Vibration on Human Health. *Healthcare*. 2021; 9(5):597. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9050597

Garcia-Argibay, M., Santed, M., & Reales, J. (2018). Efficacy of binaural auditory beats in cognition, anxiety, and pain perception: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Research*, 83, 357 - 372. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00426-018-1066-8.

Goldsby, T. L., & Goldsby, M. E. (2020). Eastern Integrative Medicine and Ancient Sound Healing Treatments for Stress: Recent Research Advances. *Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal*, *19*(6), 24. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7819493/

Shahrudin, F., Dzulkarnain, A., Hanafi, A., Jamal, F., Basri, N., Sidek, S., Yusof, H., & Khalid, M. (2022). Music and Sound-Based Intervention in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A

Scoping Review. *Psychiatry Investigation*, 19, 626 - 636. https://doi.org/10.30773/pi.2021.0382.