

# The Amazing Power of Music: A Course in Music, Spirituality, and Self-Esteem for Women in Recovery

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## INTRODUCTION

- “Amazing Power of Music” is a single-session, 60-minute course on the healing power of music. I developed it in 2009 for women at a suburban Minneapolis residential facility for treatment of addiction and mental illness.
- The course came from my wish to help people learn about the tremendous potential of music to help us feel better. I was in the process of creating it for general adult community education students when the nurse at this treatment facility, who is a close friend of mine, suggested it might be relevant and helpful to the clients. I described the course to the facility’s clinical director, who invited me to present it.
- I present the course every three months, as a volunteer in the facility’s spirituality program. Since clients are at the facility for 90 days, I meet a different group each time.
- The facility can accommodate up to 40 clients at a time, and all attend the course. Clients generally range in age from late teens through mid-50s. Most are at a low SES, and are diverse in ethnic/racial background, with approximately half being women of color (most African American, some American Indian, some Latina).



## PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

- The main purposes of “The Amazing Power of Music” are:
  - › to help clients at this facility reflect on and recognize the ways in which music has been important in their lives;
  - › to learn the basics of how the brain perceives and interprets music, and how that leads to its powerful effects; and
  - › to consider how they can use music to enhance spiritual growth and fulfillment as part of their recovery process.
- There are relatively few published studies about the use of music in addiction recovery programs, BUT quite a few studies indicate the powerful healing potential of music for people with depression, and many other illnesses and conditions (e.g., Siedlecki & Good, 2006; Sacks, 2007; Maratsos et al., 2008; Briggs, 2009; Applebaum, 2009).
- Most, if not all of the clients at this facility have mental and/or physical illnesses in addition to chemical dependency.

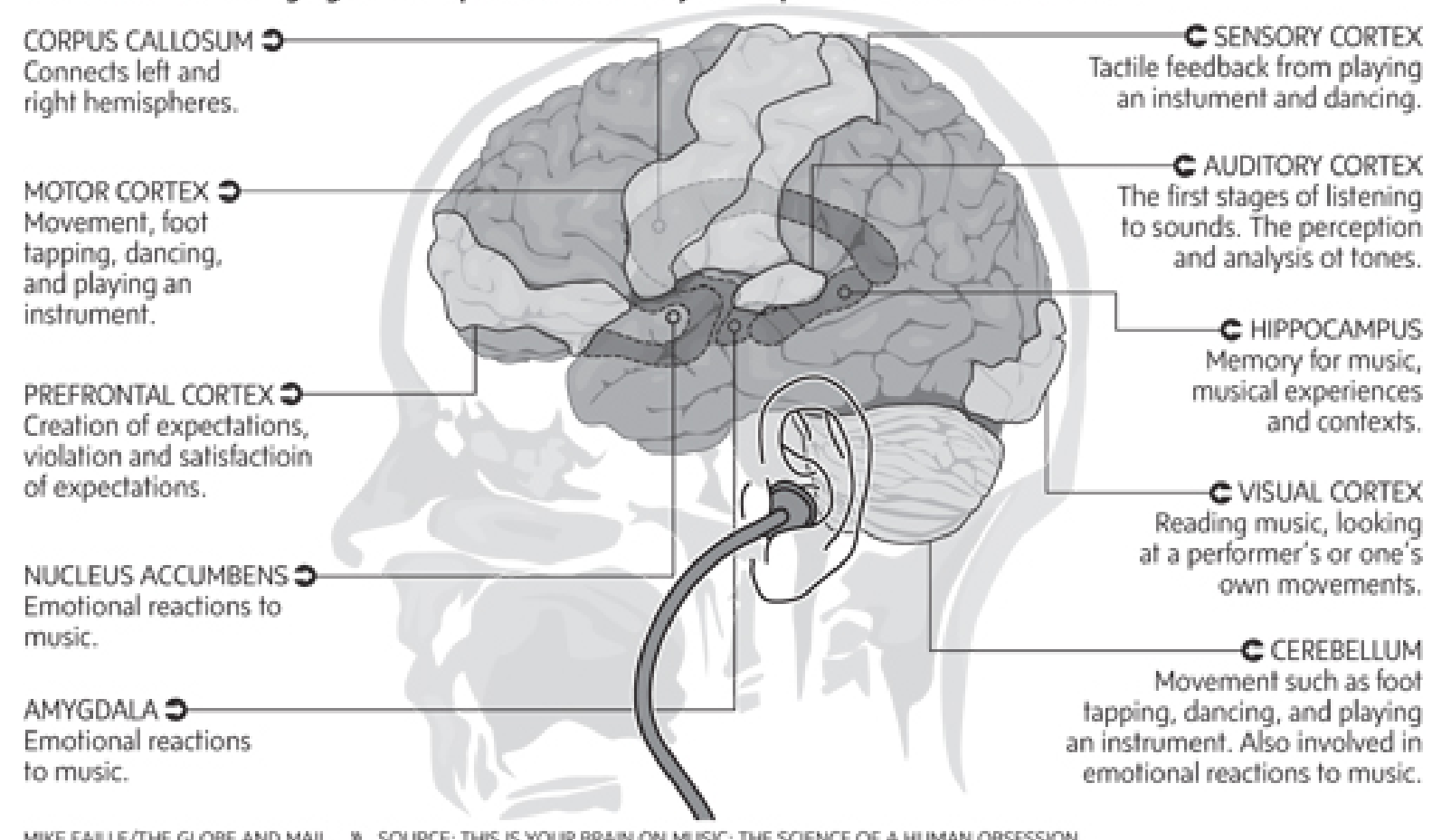
**HYPOTHESIS: Reflecting on their experiences with music, emphasizing its positive, healing properties; and its connections to a healthy sense of spirituality, can play a very helpful role in the recovery process for these women.**

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

- Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” is playing as clients come to class. After a quick introduction of myself and the course, I ask them:
  - › “Did you recognize the song playing a few minutes ago? How did it make you feel?”
  - › Typical answers: “I know and LIKE that song!” “I feel empowered by that song!” (or “powerful” or “affirmed”)
- **Pair/Group Discussion:** The women answer these questions with a partner; then we discuss their responses together:
  - › How has music had an impact on your life?
  - › What is your favorite music? Why? What special events and/or people do you associate with that music?
  - › Talk about a time when music made you feel very strongly. What was happening in your life then? Do you think those circumstances caused your strong feelings about the music, was it the music itself, or both?
- **Why does music affect us so powerfully?**
  - › Hearing or making music stimulates or “turns on” most major areas of the brain: the areas for language, emotion (including the “reward centers” and neurotransmitters associated with pleasure, such as dopamine), memory, and movement and coordination.
  - › Important, especially for these clients: Listening to music can be one safe and healthy alternative to drugs and alcohol – the high still happens, but it’s good for us!
  - › To illustrate how the brain reacts to music:
    - Map of the brain, with highlighting of parts that music stimulates

### Music on the mind

When we listen to music, it’s processed in many different areas of our brain. The extent of the brain’s involvement was scarcely imagined until the early nineties, when functional brain imaging became possible. The major computational centres include:



- › Clip from the PBS Nova special, “Musical Minds,” in which Dr. Oliver Sacks has an MRI taken of his brain as he listens to his favorite music.
- Short group discussion: “What is the connection between music and spirituality?”
  - › Most common answer: “Music can help us feel closer to God/Higher Power.”

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

continued

- Experiencing the healing power of music:

### Energize and Affirm with Music

Approximately 10 minutes

- Continue deep breathing from relaxation exercise
  - Start visualizing positive energy flowing through your body. Feel free to dance or move to the music if you want!
  - Sample Affirmations:
    - › I have the strength to handle whatever I need to
    - › I can and will take my life in a positive direction
    - › I am successful
    - › I have already achieved a lot and come very far in my recovery, and I can keep up that progress forward!
  - Music:
    - › “We Have Come a Mighty Long Way” – traditional
    - › “Down By the Riverside” – traditional
    - › “When the Saints Go Marching In” – traditional
- All of above selections recorded by Mahalia Jackson*

### Relax and Affirm with Music

Approximately 10 minutes

- Deep breathing throughout exercise
- Progressive relaxation: focus on each part of body in turn and consciously release all tension, breathe in calmness
- Sample Affirmations:
  - › I am calm and in control
  - › I am a very strong person
  - › I deserve to feel good
  - › The Serenity Prayer
- Music:
  - › “Gymnopedies #1, 2, 3” – Erik Satie
  - › “Morning Mood” from the Peer Gynt Suite – Edvard Grieg

- Closing discussions:
  - How do they feel after the above exercises?
  - How will they use music to enhance their sense of spirituality and well-being from now on – what is one specific way?
  - What was helpful about this session? Not helpful?

## RESULTS

- Most clients have:
  - › Engaged easily in the pair and whole-group discussions, with a lot to say about the role that music has played in their lives
  - › History of significant involvement with music throughout their lives: singing or playing handbells in church or school choirs; piano, voice, or other music lessons; parents or grandparents who sang to/with them
  - › Basic awareness of the powerful effects of music on them. Some report associating certain music with drug or alcohol use, and/or traumatic life experiences, but more clients discuss positive experiences: feeling calmed or empowered when listening to certain music, and deliberately seeking out this music to feel better
  - › Thought about the connection between music and spirituality immediately. Comments such as “I feel closer to God when I listen to (certain favorite music),” or “For me, singing or listening to (my favorite music) is like praying” are very common
  - › A diverse range of favorite musical styles, but consistent across sessions: religious/sacred (particularly gospel); classical; jazz; hip-hop or rap; hard rock or heavy metal; pop are most commonly named favorites
  - › Relax and Energize Exercises: Clients willingly participate and report finding both very helpful and therapeutic.

### Specific examples:

- One client particularly highlighted the helpfulness of repeating affirmations silently to herself while they listened to instrumental classical selections. She reported that other speakers and counselors had led clients through relaxation exercises using calming music before, but without use of client affirmations as I asked them to do. Client’s own words: “This was awesome and VERY helpful!”
- Another client appreciated my choice of gospel selections with affirming lyrics for the “Energize and Affirm with Music” exercise (especially Mahalia Jackson’s “We Have Come a Mighty Long Way”): “It’s helpful to think of affirmations, but even more so to have a singer repeat them for you.”
- One client noted she had not realized the piano’s versatility in making both energizing and relaxing music. She was used to associating it with energetic, up-tempo pop or gospel music, but hearing it used for calm, serene-sounding music (Satie’s “Gymnopédie #1”) highlighted the contrast for her.
- At the session’s conclusion, many clients report planning to listen to favorite music more often, as part of their spiritual self-care and overall wellness and recovery.



## CONCLUSIONS

- Evidence presented here is anecdotal, and comes from a relatively small sample (about 75 women). However, “The Amazing Power of Music” appears to be at least somewhat helpful and valuable to clients in this recovery program.
- Based on clients’ reports, and my observations, they seem relaxed, energized, and in a positive frame of mind overall throughout the session, and especially by the end.
- Through the exercises in the session, most clients appear to recognize that music has been very significant in their lives, and that they could use it again to promote their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being, and their continuing recovery.
- Facility staff also report hearing clients say that they enjoy the session greatly and find it helpful.
- Follow-up with clients would be very valuable to determine whether they continue to use music for self-healing and recovery over time, and whether there is any possible correlation between such continued use of music and lower relapse rate.

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