

# SING YOUR WAY TO HAPPINESS

Singing in harmony with others not only nurtures emotional wellbeing, it can also boost your brain power. Louise Atkinson finds out more



**W**hen it came to singing at school, I always hid at the back – and our house had to be completely empty before I felt brave enough to belt out a few bars of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in the shower. So I wasn't sure how I found myself accepting an invitation to be part of an impromptu parents' choir at my children's secondary school.

Within minutes, we were working our way through *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem* – at first falteringly, then, with more confidence, obeying the conductor's demands for 'more!'

to 'smile'. By the end of the session, I was hooked. It turns out nothing can quite match that wave of euphoria you feel as other voices weave above and below yours in harmony, like multiple layers of puff pastry.

More than 2 million people in the UK now regularly sing with choirs, and that wonderful 'feel-good factor' fast eclipses any performance anxiety or fear of looking foolish. And it's not just the buzz you get from making music that makes you feel good. Choirs encourage fast social bonding with other members, which means you quickly feel a great sense of community and belonging. In fact, there are now so many well-researched benefits to singing in a group that joining a choir could soon be added to your GP's 'social prescribing' list.

## QUICK RESULTS

Singing has the power to instantly boost your mood, as it releases the happy hormones serotonin and dopamine. In fact, a study by researchers at the University of Nottingham has found that 30 minutes of group singing significantly improved positive mood and emotions, boosting blood levels of chemicals called endocannabinoids by 42% – enough to give a wonderful 'runner's high'.

Then there's the impact on stress – research at University College London (UCL) suggests that a single session of singing is enough to measurably lower stress levels. According to Dr Daisy Fancourt, professor of psychobiology and epidemiology at UCL, it also reduces inflammation and supports immunity.

'We are seeing a multi-pronged biological response when we sing,' she says. 'It lowers blood pressure and muscle tension, decreases heart rate, and activates reward pathways in the brain.' In fact, the controlled breathing techniques that singers learn can be so effective at increasing lung capacity and introducing more oxygen into the blood that singing qualifies as an aerobic activity, like running or cycling.

The intense focus required to hold a tune also has

powerful protective benefits for the brain. Singing, though completely natural, is a complex task, which experts believe is why it appears to offer some protection against dementia. MRI scans conducted by neuropsychologists at the University of Melbourne have shown that large parts of the brain – both left and right hemispheres – 'light up' when you sing, indicating activity in areas that control language, emotion, movement, sounds and articulation. Your mouth is forming words, your ears are listening for the sounds, your eyes watching the conductor or the music, and parts of your brain are processing the images and memories evoked by the music, all at the same time.

And it's this brain activity that's been shown to help improve mental alertness, memory and concentration. Singing is fast becoming a feature of dementia care in the UK; the BBC One series *Our Dementia Choir* has spawned singing groups around the country, and the charity [forgetmenotchorus.com](http://forgetmenotchorus.com) aims to

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## HOW TO GET SINGING

- Head to the library or search your local council's leisure pages for lists of various community groups in your area – including choirs and singing groups.
- Check local newspapers for community groups and organisations in their 'Whats On' section.
- Go online. Try searching Facebook or [nextdoor.co.uk](http://nextdoor.co.uk) for a group near you; visit [makingmusic.org.uk](http://makingmusic.org.uk) and search for local groups; or try [choirs.org.uk](http://choirs.org.uk) for alphabetical and geographical listings.
- Prefer to sing contemporary music? Search [rockchoir.com](http://rockchoir.com) to find a group near you; [gleeclubuk.com](http://gleeclubuk.com) also runs adult community choirs in the south; [got2sing.co.uk](http://got2sing.co.uk) are fun and friendly contemporary choirs across the Midlands; and [popchoir.com](http://popchoir.com) has choirs across London.

bring the joy of singing to people living with dementia.

## A BONDING EXPERIENCE

While many of the health benefits apply to singing alone as well as in a choir, research suggests there is something special about getting together with others to sing. Professor Graham Welch, who is chair of music education at the UCL Institute of Education, cites 'cohesiveness' as a significant factor.

'Singing in a group during a choir rehearsal has stronger stimulation effects of the secretion of oxytocin [the 'bonding' hormone] than chatting in the same group,' he says, noting that oxytocin also helps dampen anxiety and pain. 'Different kinds of choirs, such as gospel choirs, rehabilitation choirs, choirs for the elderly, or beginners choirs may work in very different ways, but there are always social and psychosocial gains to be had,' he says, explaining that singing in a collective works to improve your sense of belonging and engender a positive sense of community.

Those benefits can extend right across the lifespan, from before you are born (studies show unborn babies' heart rates slow down when exposed to soft music) to later life, he adds. 'Singing can bring a stronger and more positive sense of identity at a time when many people start to feel a sense of loss of control due to the challenges of ageing.'

Thanks partly to TV choirmaster Gareth Malone, we've come a long way from the days when most choral societies were the lofty and rather exclusive domain of people who could read music, hold a tune (preferably in Latin) and pass an audition. Today, community choirs are throwing open their doors to people of all ages with no previous experience and no (as yet!) known ability. So, there really is nothing stopping you from giving it a try – particularly at Christmas! Just think of the emotional uplift of the music and the camaraderie of singing carols with others with a common purpose – there's so much to sing about! ■