

Sing Two Songs and Call Me in the Morning

Photo Illustration: Eddie Guy

By Sari Harrar



Just after she was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer, Maria Logis was possessed by a quirky desire. "Every time I prayed, a voice inside urged me to sing," says Logis, a former human resources executive at Con Edison, New York City's electric company. "I had never sung before. It was baffling."

Encouraged by her sister, Logis went looking for a singing teacher but ended up with a music therapist. Instead of asking her to study scales and belt out show tunes, the therapist encouraged her to improvise—and give voice to her deepest feelings. "I sang about being afraid of the doctors and of treatment," she says. "Lyrics about the despair, sadness, and silence of my life poured out of me. Music made it possible for me to face my fear and anguish."

Until recently, most music therapists have worked almost exclusively with special groups—kids with disabilities, for example, or the elderly. Early research suggests the practice may ease depression and help control blood pressure. Now a tiny, but growing, group is offering vocal therapy to all adults.

"Nothing accesses the inner world of feelings, sensations, memories, and associations as directly as music does," says Diane Austin, adjunct associate professor of music therapy at New York University and executive director of the Music Psychotherapy Center in New York. "The voice is like a bridge from your heart to your head. Singing freely releases what's locked up in your body." A pilot study published in the *British Journal of Nursing* found that singing therapy could greatly reduce the anxiety and depression patients can experience following a major surgery. The effect was strong enough that the authors suggested doctors prescribe therapy before trying antidepressants.

In a session, Austin might start with deep, slow breathing and then suggest that you turn each exhalation into a wordless sound. Or that you improvise a melody while free-associating words. The exercises take surprising and revealing turns—playful, silly, angry. "Your voice doesn't lie," she says. "You can have all sorts of self-knowledge, but through deep breathing and using your voice, you can get closer to what's really going on for you."

Since most of us don't have a vocal psychotherapist in the neighborhood, Austin offers the following exercises.

- **Breathe out loud:** Lie on your back on the floor. Relax, breathe deeply, and as you exhale make a sound. "Just let any sound out that wants to come out," she says. "Play. Be imaginative like a child."
- **Tone:** While lying down, sing a long, sustained note on a vowel sound. Take a breath and continue, allowing the pitch to change as it wants. Keep it up for about ten minutes. "This is like meditation," Austin says. Recent research suggests she may be right. A two-year study of elderly people with dementia found that singing or playing instruments in a group once a week slowed the natural rise in blood pressure associated with aging.

As for Logis, her cancer went into remission right before she was scheduled for chemotherapy. But lifting her voice transformed other aspects of her life. A year after her diagnosis, she rented an upright piano and performed songs based on her experience for friends crammed into her apartment. Everyone wept and cheered, she says.