

[Login](#) | [Register](#)

Search

▼ SITE

Sponsor



93.9 fm
am 820

September 07, 2010 clear sky | 82.0°f

SUPPORT WNYC & PLEDGE TODAY!

- NEWS
- CULTURE
- MUSIC
- SHOWS
- THE GREENE SPACE

Music Therapy Helps Vets Control Symptoms of PTSD

Saturday, September 04, 2010

By [Abbie Fentress Swanson](#): WNYC/WQXR Culture Producer



Dr. Mary Rorro (Abbie Fentress Swanson)

The khaki colored [Veterans Affairs](#) (VA) clinic in southern New Jersey doesn't look extraordinary from the outside. The parking lot's too small and the building isn't impressive either—just a simple one-story structure with a utilitarian blue awning to keep veterans out of the elements as they enter and exit the James J. Howard Outpatient Clinic. But inside, there's some groundbreaking healing going on, specifically in the psychiatry ward. This morning, 15 Vietnam War veterans are in the group therapy room. They all have their eyes on a woman in a deep red skirt suit and pumps known around the clinic as “The Violin Doc.”

The lady in red is Dr. Mary Rorro and to be accurate, the 41-year-old's getting ready to play her viola, not a violin. The viola is deeper in tone than the violin but higher in pitch than the cello. Charles Browne is one of the group's participants awaiting his doctor's performance. She's a staff psychiatrist, but today she's playing music to him and his fellow vets so they can relax and talk openly for the next hour about how they're doing with their [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD](#).

“People talk about their Vietnam experiences and a lot of times people talk about, you know, reacting to loud noises and stuff,” says Browne, a 62-year-old retired Army infantry platoon leader and company commander. Browne served in Vietnam from 1969 to '70. “I never had those issues. But for 20 years or so I slept like one hour a night. And I would say, you know, that's the only residue I have from Vietnam...that I just don't sleep.”

Getting veterans like Browne back on their feet once they've returned from the war zone is becoming an increasingly urgent goal for the VA and for President Barack Obama. In his remarks to the nation this week on the final American combat troops returning from Iraq, the president promised more money would be allocated to the VA for medication and psychotherapy to treat the country's vets with PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

PTSD has been around for centuries, and in the past was called [Soldier's Heart](#), [Battle Fatigue](#), [Shell Shock](#), and [Vietnam Syndrome](#). It was not until the '80s that the medical community officially recognized the disease and began to hammer out a treatment plan. There's still no known cure, but treatment has progressed. Medication, conversation, and therapy can help veterans manage the disorder. But in recent years, the VA has acknowledged that the number of vets with the disorder has become a serious problem. In its last fiscal year, the VA diagnosed around 400,000 vets with PTSD, almost twice as many as it counted five years ago. Another surprising trend is the large number of Vietnam veterans just coming forward now with previously undiagnosed and untreated PTSD.

“They have been averse to treatment because of shame or stigma,” Dr. Rorro says. “They're not able to access services until they're at a turning point in their lives.”

One key way the VA is helping these veterans to control their PTSD—and other conditions, including substance abuse, Parkinson's Disease and head trauma injuries—is through music therapy. In the last five years, the VA has more than doubled the number of music therapists at its clinics. And with more PTSD cases on the way from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, Dr. Mary Rorro and others have their work cut out for them. The Violin Doc knows the symptoms of PTSD all too well.

Video by WNYC's [Richard Yeh](#)

“They suffer from recurrent intrusive memories,” Dr. Rorro says. “Nightmares that can be very vivid, and very real, and startle them and awaken them at night producing some night sweats. Some of them even now feel like they could be back in Vietnam even though they know that they're back in safe country.”

There's no consensus yet in the medical community about whether or not music therapy works. Opponents of the treatment argue that music's healing power has no scientific backing, and that there's no clear link between music and the brain's chemistry and activity. But recent findings from McGill University's Neuropsychology department suggest that specific parts of the brain are activated when patients listen to music which they like. And when the nucleus accumbens and the caudate nucleus, which are part of the reward, motivation and emotion systems, get jazzed up, a person starts feeling better. These same circuits release powerful chemicals when someone falls in love, eats good food, does drugs or has sex.

“So if you can think about a song that you absolutely love,” says Dr. Connie Tomaino, who has run a music therapy clinic in the Bronx for over 30 years, “you'll be able to think about times when you've heard that piece of music. And, at the opening notes of that piece, you immediately, immediately without even thinking about it, have that association, those deep feelings, the connection to that person, you might have visual images of that person. That's how well connected that music is to who we are and those past experiences.”

Scientists say certain pieces of music can arouse forgotten memories the same way smelling warm chocolate chip cookies can take you back to your grandmother's kitchen. Similarly, or maybe conversely, music therapists try to use pleasurable sounds to make it easier for PTSD patients to talk about unpleasant and painful memories. When patients hear music they like, there's also research that shows that it can inhibit activity in the brain's amygdala, which regulates the negative emotion system. That could mean that music clears a path to talk about trauma because it produces a sense of contentment or happiness and brings down fear and anxiety.

“At times, music can serve as a springboard during discussion,” Dr. Rorro says. “You can feel the weight of some of the emotional state of the group.”

Dr. Rorro is not a certified music therapist. Veterans who need more focused treatment are admitted to VA hospitals where they can work with therapists in depth, playing music themselves or listening to their therapists play. Good therapists can link music to a veteran's psycho-emotional state by using a song with which the patient connects. The patient can then begin to cope with traumatic triggers and other PTSD symptoms.

Not everyone responds to the same kind of music. Although Dr. Rorro gets a request for “anything by The Dead” in today's session, music with spoken words or lyrics often causes agitation when it's played to PTSD patients. Sounds played on lower-pitched instruments, like Dr. Rorro's viola, tend to be more soothing than higher-pitched flutes and drums. Live music with a slower, steady beat is also preferable to recorded music. Individual choice of song is important for one-on-one treatment,

NEWS

- Politics
- Business
- Education
- Health Care
- Transportation

CULTURE

- Books
- Food
- Theater
- Visual Arts

SHOWS

- All Things Considered
- Brian Lehrer
- Fishko Files
- Fresh Air
- Leonard Lopate
- Morning Edition
- New Sounds
- On The Media
- Radiolab
- Radio Rookies
- Selected Shorts
- Soundcheck
- Spinning on Air
- Studio 360
- The Takeaway
- This American Life
- Specials

MUSIC

- No Cover: WNYC's Concert Series
- Gig Alerts
- Soundcheck
- Q2

THE GREENE SPACE

- Events calendar
- Book an Event
- Directions

MORE

- Giveaways
- Schedule
- Video

OUR SITES

- WQXR
- The Takeaway
- Radiolab
- Studio 360
- On The Media
- Transportation Nation
- Radio Rookies

