



# ‘I’m part of something larger’

## MAKING MUSIC TOGETHER CAN HELP WITH MENTAL HEALTH, ESPECIALLY FOR OLDER ADULTS

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Special to the USA TODAY NETWORK

**W**hen Steven Swanger, 76, from Sudbury, Massachusetts, was approaching retirement, he worried his life would be empty. He lived for work, and his kids would soon leave the nest.

So, when he turned 60, he picked up the clarinet – an instrument he had never played before – and joined the Sudbury Valley New Horizons Music band, which provides music-making opportunities for all adults, targeted at the 50 and older population.

It was a return to the music-making he enjoyed as a child, but it became more than a fun diversion. Music is now a central part of Swanger’s life in retirement, providing social opportunities, mental stimulation and a space to escape the world’s woes. He currently plays in several ensembles, from bands to chamber music, in the region where he lives.

“It has always been a salve, a balm, something that is soothing,” he said. “No matter how lousy a day I’ve had, if I’ve played the clarinet, particularly with other people, I get carried away in it. I’m part of something larger.”

For adults older than 50, picking up a musical instrument or singing might be just what the doctor ordered.

### How does music help?

Older adults are increasingly susceptible to mental health challenges due to factors such as physical decline, cognitive changes, social isolation and grief. But according to recent research studies, music may be preventative. Music not only promotes well-being but also enhances brain health, said Suzanne Hanser, former president of the International Association of Music and Medicine and a professor in Berklee College of Music’s music therapy program.

“That means when we create music, when we play music, when we learn music, when we’re actively engaged with music, we’re establishing new pathways and exercising the brain in a really positive way,” Hanser said.

Those assertions are supported by a report released in 2024 by the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging that found nearly all older adults derive some mental health-related benefit from music, from stress relief to improvements in mood, attitude, motivation and energy. These findings build upon an earlier report from the Global Council on Brain Health, which included music in its recommendations for promoting brain health in aging adults.

However, the role of genetics has yet to be fully accounted for in current music studies, said Daniel Gustavson, a research professor in behavioral genetics at the University of Colorado Boulder. Also, sample sizes tend to be small.

### How to begin with music activity in retirement?

For adults with newfound time after retirement, such programs as New Horizons offer an opportunity to engage in a creative activity that can support their cognitive function and overall mental well-being as they age. Founded in 1991 with a group of 30 members, New Horizons is now an international organization supporting nearly 200 bands, orchestras and choirs internationally, with 120 programs across the U.S.

“In so many cases, people come to us as total beginners, saying, ‘I always wanted to play,’ or ‘I saw how much fun my kid had in band or orchestra,’ or, ‘I played a million years ago and I’d like to get back to it, but I don’t know if I can,’” said Diane Muffitt, founder of Sudbury Valley New Horizons Music.

Designed to accommodate beginners or those starting over on an instrument, some New Horizon programs offer multiple ensembles that cater to varied interests – including band and orchestra concert music, choral music, jazz and folk music. Importantly, it provides an antidote to the isolation that is so common among aging adults.

“I would dare say that there’s probably a large portion of us, if we did not participate in New Horizons would probably be sitting at home, not enjoying it, stuck watching TV,” said Paula Sousa, secretary of the New Horizons International Music Association and a New Horizons flutist in Rochester, New York. “Especially for older single people who don’t have a partner, it is a huge asset.”

### It’s her ‘anti-Alzheimer’s’ exercise

For Judith Blaustein, 81, music has kept her going through several medical procedures, including a knee replacement and a bowel blockage. Playing music, said the New Horizons flutist from Pittsford, New York, “really brings me out of any disappointment in how my health is going. It just removes me from focusing on the pain or the discomfort.”

French horn player Joanne Berry, 77, a Sudbury Valley New Horizons member, calls it her anti-Alzheimer’s exercise.

The extent to which music has enhanced his life only became clear after an eye surgery recently left Swanger blind in one eye and unable to play clarinet. “I realize now that my life has been terribly empty since I haven’t been able to play,” he says. “I found in retirement, if you have one thing that you’ve scheduled in a day, you can build a whole day around that and feel constructive. If your day has nothing at all, life can become very depressing.”

*Editor’s note: Swanger’s eye is slowly healing and he resumed playing at the end of August, commenting “my life has improved by 2,000 percent.”*

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To this popular drawback, BetterHelp says it’s working on expanding insurance coverage in the future to help with cost.

### Effective for some needs, not for all

According to the company, nearly three-quarters of clients report symptom reduction within 12 weeks, and 82% say they’d recommend their therapist to others.

Though Martin reflects positively on their experience so far and finds online therapy suitable for tackling such issues as anxiety or exploring their attachment style, they’d hesitate to rec-

“There’s concern about applied effectiveness.”

**Mark Olfson**

Columbia University psychiatry professor

ommend it for processing deeper trauma.

“I would definitely say that for working on some of my anxiety, just discussing my styles of attachment, things like that, it’s golden,” Martin said. “I would probably not recommend it to people who are maybe struggling with much darker areas of their mental health ... I would say maybe online is not the best option for that just because there’s the layer of impersonalness, from talking to a screen, it’s hard to convey, I think.”

The experiences that Patricia and Martin had look different, but both show how online therapy can open doors where few exist, while reminding users that whom you get matched with, what you can afford and what you’re trying to heal all shape whether those avenues work.