

Editorial

Community singing: what does that have to do with health?

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Arts and health is an emerging multidisciplinary area of research, policy, and practice. It includes a variety of ways in which the arts contribute to health, well-being, and health care practice across a range of contexts (1). We believe that the time has arrived to conduct a project where art and health are aligned with concepts drawn from performing arts (music and singing, and singing performance festivals) and Aboriginal community cultural development as a practice to initiate change. Through an innovative arts-based “resilience-building” intervention approach derived from these ideas, our project will address how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can obtain support for their mental health issues. Furthermore, it will build on a substantial record in designing and implementing innovative interdisciplinary arts-based interventions to support people with mental health issues (2), drawing on existing international collaborations in similar settings (2, 3).

The value of the arts in addressing significant social issues (4) and improving the lives across the whole of the lifespan (5) has been increasingly recognized, and particularly the value of live music and musical participation for people with mental illness (4). Singing is an activity that has been shown to carry benefits for health and well-being across the lifespan and with people of diverse social backgrounds and health status (6). Extant Australian and international research shows that participatory community singing is a powerful means to enhance participation, social engagement, and interpersonal interaction with others and brings a wide range of benefits to participants for social, emotional, mental, and spiritual involvement (7). Studies focused on the impact of participation on mental health can be placed in a broader context of a participatory model of health promotion, in which the focus is on the strategies and process of participation as well as the inter-relationships between participation in meaningful activity, emotional states, and mental health outcomes.

Community singing is part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and has long been associated with social gatherings, ceremonies, and festivals. These social activities have been found to help raise self-esteem and sense of social connectedness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (8).

A community-based participatory research approach in these communities can foster a sense of self-determination, creates greater commitment, can ultimately improve self-esteem, increase a sense of belonging, and protects against depression and anxiety (9). The process of participation, including collaboration with service providers and local

community members to create supportive environments and social support, codetermination of action plans, and collective actions, has been shown to increase resilience and mental health through development of positive attitudes, self-esteem and community pride (8), and access to community-controlled health services. This approach overcomes the shortcomings of most health promotion interventions that primarily rely upon educational and information-based strategies (10). Participatory community singing activities may impact on mental health through both enhancement of positive emotional states and via a sense of resilience development and social connectedness (11). Such activity also has been shown in our study to diminish loneliness, increase the sense of mastery and self-esteem, reduce the risk of depression, and decrease the number of doctor visits and medication use (11). It therefore has strong potential in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in managing mental health issues.

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