

## Play it for your health

### Research shows that playing an instrument provides health benefits

By **Melissa Martin**

for the Mail Tribune

February 19, 2008 6:00 AM

Fourteen-year-old Ryan Price loves to play guitar. When his studies and chores are done for the day, he pulls his Fender Stratocaster off its stand to strum chords or try a new picking pattern from his favorite band.

"Sometimes if I'm stressed out, I'll play my guitar because it is relaxing," the Applegate resident says. "I play for entertainment for myself and others and also to bring God glory."

Price has discovered the health benefits of making music, something recently documented by scientists in a Pennsylvania laboratory.

"Music and creativity in general helps people release a part of themselves that gets locked up in everyday work and the stress of life," says Donn Rochlin, a Portland piano consultant. "But music particularly has a relaxing quality that helps stimulate the immune system because it helps people feel better and lowers stress."

Rochlin cites a study about health and music published in the Medical Science Monitor in February 2005 by Barry Bittman, a Pennsylvania doctor, and researchers from the Loma Linda University School of Medicine. The study was funded by Applied Biosystems and Yamaha Corporation, a piano manufacturer.

In the study, 32 nonmusical volunteers tried to solve a frustrating puzzle for one hour. In the second hour, researchers divided volunteers into three groups, one that kept working the puzzle, one that read newspapers and magazines to relax and another group that learned to play chords on a keyboard.

Researchers drew blood samples to identify "genomic markers or molecular switches that literally turn on biological responses" closely associated with disease such as cancer, diabetes and heart attacks.

They identified 19 reversals of initial stress-induced gene expression among the keyboard students and six reversals among the newspaper and magazine readers.

"(T)his study introduces a dynamic genomic framework for ... understanding the ... potential health benefits of playing a musical instrument," wrote George Stefano, director of the Neuroscience Research Institute at State University of New York.

While it may be newly documented in a lab, the fact that music soothes the soul is not a new concept to Medford piano teacher David Sprunger.

"So many things in our lives involve trying to get something accomplished, but music is an end destination," says Sprunger, who holds a piano performance degree from Cal State Northridge. "You can just sit and chill out for a while. It's nice for me to have my piano playing where I am just immersed in the moment instead of thinking about what I have to do next week or one year from now."

Sprunger teaches a method of playing piano using chords and rhythmic patterns. He sells video

courses over the Internet to students across the globe, especially from South Africa and Russia. The son of a preacher and piano tuner, Sprunger also plays piano, sings and leads bands for Medford churches.

"I teach simple patterns and simple songs and it seems to hit a nerve for people," Sprunger says. "They can sit down at the piano and play a song right away."

The health benefits of music are especially useful for families with teenagers, says Central Point mother Susan Scottow. She and husband, Dave, have two sons, Jeremy, 15, who plays piano, and, Daniel, 13, who plays guitar.

"Daniel enjoys playing his guitar and singing and he feels free to do that behind closed doors," Scottow says. "But he also plays for chapel services at school with his friend who writes music."

Music is healthy for the mind, Scottow says. Recently at a leadership retreat, she heard a recording by Richard Swenson, a medical doctor and author of the book "Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives."

"He identified three free things that help you create margins in your life and help you deal with stress: nature, music and laughter," Scottow says. "When you find yourself being under stress, you can allow yourself to enjoy these things. Music provides a mental break and the ability to enjoy life."

Music is not limited to strings and keyboards. Drumming is another way to relieve stress, says Rochlin, who offers music seminars through Ashland Parks and Recreation and Remo Drum Company.

"I get accountants, doctors, lawyers who come to my drumming circles and they are so bottled up in their work and all they want to do is hit something," Rochlin says. "The act of beating on a drum for 30 minutes has a calming effect. There is a lot of documentation that shows beating on a drum releases endorphins, lowers stress and boosts immune systems."

The genetic research about music's health benefits confirms what Teena Anderson has learned in nearly 40 years of teaching piano in her Medford home: Music helps people relax.

"For some people, there is a draw to the piano they can't ignore," says Anderson, whose favorite piece to relax with is "Romance" by Sibelius. "That's the way it is for me. I always have to have a piano at hand. Music speaks to your soul."

Music has its tense moments too, such as when a guitarist works hard on a tough assignment, says Price, the 14-year-old from Applegate.

"But once I can play it and once I have it memorized, then it is relaxing and it's rewarding to play more complicated music. And even when I'm practicing something difficult, it still gets my mind off of other stuff."

Melissa Martin is a freelance writer living in Medford. E-mail her at [stiles@mindnet.com](mailto:stiles@mindnet.com).

## Just for Fun

Donn Rochlin will be presenting "Just For Fun Piano" at The Grove, 195 E. Main, Ashland, Saturday, March 1st, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. This class is for anyone who wants to learn to play their favorite songs at the piano for fun without years of lessons. Rochlin emphasizes the health benefits of recreational music making. The class follows the guidelines for a healthy approach to learning piano

that gives people an outlet for stress and leaves them feeling inspired and more creative. Class is designed for both beginners and seasoned players who would like to express more creativity and relax more at the piano. Cost \$55. For further details and registration, call: Ashland Parks and Recreation at 541-488-5340 or visit Rochlin's Web site at [www.justforfunpiano.com](http://www.justforfunpiano.com).