

The Health Benefits of Singing in a Choir

By Margrethe Ek, conductor, teacher and writer

Several choir singers claimed that they arrived at the rehearsal feeling tired and exhausted, but left feeling happy and full of new energy after two or three hours of singing. The choir rehearsal was seen as the highlight of the week.

Why are the choir and the singing so important for all the thousands of people who do this every day? How can singing in a choir provide such clear health benefits?

Every week and every day of the week, thousands of people find their way to their choir rehearsals. In Norway alone there are about 200.000 people who belong to many different choirs.

Helping to ease the pain of grief

Several years ago, a man called me. He had visited the website of the choir I conducted back then, and saw that we needed singers. On the website, we had written about the vibrant social atmosphere, the grand concerts we held, and how we took on smaller assignments too. Participating in choir contests and taking trips together were all part of this choir's yearly activities. The man who contacted me, let's call him Ivan, had never sung in a choir before, and he had just celebrated his 50th birthday. He told me that his motivation for singing in a choir was to gain a hobby. He had no friends or acquaintances amongst the members of this choir, nor had he ever heard the choir perform. Ivan had a meaningful job, a great family, and he had several other hobbies and spare time activities that he enjoyed.

Ivan joined the choir. He practiced. He attended every rehearsal, knew everything by heart, and was very eager and motivated. He was a sociable man and he attended all the activities the choir had scheduled; rehearsals, concerts and social get-togethers. After just about two years, the choir participated in a prestigious concert, followed by a party. Ivan and I had a conversation after the concert where he told me the reason for his motivation and why he had been looking for a new challenge two years earlier. Ivan had lost a daughter. Life itself was put on hold for his wife, their other children and himself. Life became overwhelming and hard to handle. His family was changing, and Ivan knew he had to find a hobby that could give him the feelings of belonging and responsibility. He was looking for a sanctuary that did not remind him of the pain that he had gone through. He searched the Internet, and stumbled upon kor.no (a Norwegian website for choirs). Ivan read more about choirs, and found that there was a whole world of choirs to choose from. Ivan said what triggered him to contact this particular choir, was the stories about the choirs great social atmosphere and their musical qualities.

Providing a sense of accomplishment

Ivan told me that that the choir and the singing was the best thing to have happened to him in his difficult times. He gained friends and he got in touch with his own breathing and diaphragm, which help to ease physical tensions. Singing gave him emotional ease and led to a reduction in stress. He felt happy and gained a positive view, which led to him interacting better with his own family. He felt his energy levels increasing and experienced gaining more control over his own psyche. Singing in the choir gave him a feeling of increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. He experienced learning and growth, not only regarding his musical abilities, but also in areas such as memory, focus and ability to learn.

Belonging to a fellowship

Singing gave Ivan a sense of togetherness through a coordinated activity that follows the same beat. He gained friends and developed a new network, and he felt that he contributed to a greater fellowship through concerts and shows. And last, but not least, he felt he had a sanctuary where no one knew his story. He could blossom and gain a sense of mastery without being reminded of the tragic incidents of the past, and without other people taking the loss of his daughter into account whenever they were around him. Ivan gained a lot of energy through the choir and singing; energy he was able to channel into being a father, a husband and a colleague. Recently Ivan called me and told me that now, after all these years, he was going to tell the rest of the members of the choir the real reason for him joining. He was going to tell them about his daughter, about the choir being his sanctuary and all of the health benefits singing alongside them had brought him.

Releasing a love hormone

Singing can in itself be quite exhausting because it is a physical action. You often stand for long periods of time and you need to be extremely focused on the task. Often you need to sing in several different languages, and you are challenged regarding both rhythms and tone-color. Professor of psychosocial medicine and researcher into stress levels, Töres Theorell, has done a great deal of research examining the link between singing and health and how we are influenced by song and music. The research showed that the levels of the hormone oxytocin increased in singers, which helped relieve pain. The singers became calmer and more relaxed because the body had released the hormone oxytocin, also known as the love hormone.

It is in this process that the opportunity for singing as a health-beneficial factor lies. Choir members could start the rehearsal with a tension-related headache and walk home with no pain due to the physical exercises connected with singing and breathing, and being sociable and having a good time with others. Singing in a choir increases the oxygen levels in your body, stimulate muscles, releases endorphins and dopamine, and the song can affect the body deep into each cell. This gives a feeling of increased well-being, desire, commitment and energy. This can help reduce stress and tension.

The health benefits of singing in a choir

Singing in a choir can result in experiences that strengthen the human being in everyday life, and give a sense of increased well-being. It has a significant role regarding quality of life, identity, self-esteem and the feeling of accomplishment, which results in a holistic effect regarding health.

Edited by Anna Shirley, UK