



The Healing Power of Sound

A sound bath turns on the relaxation response and may help combat chronic stress.

BY SHEILA MULROONEY ELDRED

When the singing bowl rings for the first time, the chatter in the room falls silent. Ten of us are gathered on sleeping pads and yoga mats in Frank DiCristina's Minneapolis studio. As DiCristina taps away at a large collection of antique singing bowls, eyes close and at least one person starts snoring. It's December 2019, a few short months before masks, social distancing, and other pandemic protections become the norm. We're here for an evening of sound healing.

The concept of sound healing, also known as sound bathing or sound meditation, has roots in a variety of ancient cultures and traditions. Yet it has gained new traction in recent years as people seek new methods to relieve stress and anxiety. In any major city, you're likely to find sessions in yoga studios, open-air markets, and alternative-healing centers. Early research suggests the practice may offer benefits beyond stress and anxiety relief, including pain management and memory improvement.

Listening to a variety of sounds at different frequencies seems to clear the mind, explains Deep Deoja, who has been conducting sound healings in San Diego for more than a decade. Unlike listening to music when your mind follows a melody, in sound healing "you have a variety of sounds, so the mind gives up and people go deeper."

Playing bowls in this way sounds nothing like music. Even though Deoja and I discussed that, I was surprised to discover that the tones DiCristina's bowls produced are not necessarily in harmony or rhythm, and there's certainly no melody. The people who "play" the bowls identify more as practitioners than as musicians.

Tuning In

Practitioners like to point out that sound-healing sessions vary greatly: Some may use singing bowls or standing bells; others use tuning forks, gongs, bells, crystal bowls, or a combination of these instruments.

And people attending the same session report vastly different experiences.

The Rainbow Singing Bowl Edition of the Full Moon Sonic Meditation I attended was held in DiCristina's tiny studio just hours before December 12, a day when the full moon would rise at 12:12 a.m. It was a class that seemed unlikely to be repeated in exactly the same way.

In January, he teamed up with another sound healer to play gongs in a much larger space because he wanted to create a ping-pong effect from one corner of the room to the other. In the summer, DiCristina offers outdoor sessions.

He also leads private sessions, which tend to produce the best results, because they can be personalized. If someone seeks relief from mind chatter, for example, DiCristina may focus on higher-frequency sounds near the head; someone suffering from physical pain may respond better to low frequencies. "The session is tailored to their needs rather than a broader approach in a group setting," he explains.

Some people seem instantly drawn to sound healing. University of California–San Diego research psychologist Tamara Goldsby, PhD, for example, was hooked in 2018 when she heard Deoja tap a singing bowl at an outdoor market in Southern California.

"Anecdotally, everyone around me looked so relaxed, comfortable, and blissed out," Goldsby recalls. The experience intrigued her not only on a personal level, but as a researcher.

After discovering the case of a military veteran suffering from fairly severe psychiatric issues who was able to wean himself from his medication through sound healing, she decided to study it more thoroughly.

She was happy — but not surprised — when her research validated those anecdotal effects, showing reductions in tension and anxiety levels, fewer symptoms of depression, an increase in spiritual well-being, and even a drop in physical pain. Next, she says, her team hopes to replicate the findings using physiological measures, such

as blood pressure, heart rate, EEG (to measure a change in brainwaves), and other biomarkers of stress compared with a control group.

"It seems clear it elicits the relaxation response," she says, referring to the way in which blood pressure and heart rate lowers and muscles relax. "So many of us are living in chronic stress. Our bodies are keyed up for 'fight or flight,' and it's very unhealthy."

Good Vibes

Beyond the relaxation response, the research gets pretty theoretical, Goldsby admits. Some speculate that the body enters a deep-brain-wave state. Others suggest the vibrations that sound waves produce affect the body's energy field.

Another theory focuses on binaural beats, or the difference in frequency your brain processes when it hears two different tones. Or it could potentially be some combination of these theories.

Music therapist Heidi Ahonen, PhD, studies this concept in her lab at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada. She's found that some frequencies

may help resynchronize the brain waves of people suffering from certain neurological disorders. For example, one woman who had been struggling with memory loss recognized her husband after listening to frequencies at 40 hertz for a couple of minutes, and the couple proceeded to converse at a level they hadn't enjoyed in years.

Much more research is needed to explain this transformation. Perhaps, Ahonen says, people appear to respond to certain low frequencies so well because we are first aware of low-frequency sounds in the womb.

While scientists unravel this and other mysteries of sound healing, Ahonen notes, the practice remains available to those willing to see what it can offer. "I don't think you can harm yourself with this," she says. "You may have some good results. It may not always be the one you go looking for, but you may feel relaxed or energized."

I left my sound-healing session feeling like I'd enjoyed a deep nap. ♡

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SOUND SUGGESTIONS

You don't need any experience to reap benefits from sound healing, says research psychologist Tamara Goldsby, PhD, who notes that people new to sound healing report the most pronounced reduction in tension. And all cultures seem to respond to the practice, adds music therapist Heidi Ahonen, PhD. If you're thinking of exploring sound therapy, consider these tips.

SEARCH for the terms "sound healing," "sound meditation," and "sound bath" in your area. Also, contact local yoga studios or alternative-medicine centers.

TRY more than one session.

SEEK OUT a one-on-one session.

BRING your own mat or sleeping pad, blanket or sleeping bag, pillow, neck pillow, eye mask.

BE PREPARED for falling asleep

or other noises (a cleaning crew started vacuuming the adjoining room during the session I attended).

LISTEN to music if you can't find sound healing in your area or don't want to attend a session in person. You're bound to hear some of the low-frequency sounds Ahonen studies if you listen long enough.

