

**CAPA NSW PDE: 25/10/14**

**C.R.E.A.T.E: Rewiring the depressed brain with music and creativity  
(Cognition, Relaxation, Effort, Awareness, Talk, Energy flow)**

by Dr Kirstin Robertson-Gillam

The presentation focussed on depression and how using music and vocal therapy can be used in a session in a creative way. In terms of neuroscience, Kirstin explained the connection of frontal lobe and other parts of the brain. There is evidence that music can stimulate several brain lobes, as it has been recorded on MRI images. Further, it is being continually evidenced that repetitive stimulation actually changes neurological “wiring” of the brain. Hence, musical stimulation of the brain of persons with depression, dementia, Parkinsons’ or other problems can assist in either reversing the problem or making noticeable qualitative changes in a client’s life.

Neuroscientists Blood and Zatorre (2001) found that some persons experienced musical chill (goose-bumps) when listening to some kinds of music, particularly classical instrumental music or the type that is culturally familiar to them. These researchers found evidence that such musical chills increase levels of dopamine and posited that depressed person’s left hemisphere is overactive (ruminative self-talk) and the right hemisphere is underactive (low emotional presence) and their hemispheres are out of balance. Further, some persons who may be humming constantly (anxiety/depression or ADHD), when they start to sing and practise mindfulness, the humming activity stops. Likewise, persons who are having problems with speech (dementia, stroke, depression) can recommence speaking through regular singing sessions.

Kirstin supported the above findings by talking about and showing videos of two case studies. The first was a male who had Parkinsons and had lost his speech. Through regular singing sessions (following the therapist’s voice), to a large degree he regained his speech. The second case study was a female client who had severe depression and became mute and non-responsive. She was a patient in a nursing home with little hope for any improvement. However, after five years of regular therapy she was helped to return to live in the community on her own, undertake necessary studies, and her personal experience assisted her to understand persons with similar issues as she was going through. She then became an age care worker.

Kirstin showed us another example of healing powers of music by composing and singing the lyrics written especially for the purpose. For example, Eric Clapton (1992) expressed his own pain after losing his young son by writing a song “Tears in Heaven”. We all would agree that musical tunes can trigger memories of significant events and related emotions. At one time during the presentation we were all invited to join Kirstin and her supervisee to sing a lullaby in the language of Zimbabwe. We were lucky that there was a piano in the room and another person was able to play. Although we did not understand any words, those musical sounds evoked some specific emotions for many of us. Kirstin uses music to help people to get “unstuck” by inviting them to give their pain a physical shape and talk about it. During that

process Kirstin would become “a surrogate parent” for a short time until clients are able to become their own parent and to learn self-soothing.

I have a personal experience that supports the above comments –when I listened to Geoffrey Gurrumul’s CD and heard him singing on stage in his indigenous language unknown to me, the tones coming from his throat did not need any translation to bring tears to my eyes and some of my friends, too. The music coming through his voice has triggered some unconscious material that was probably more powerful without any words, using just the sounds (like the Zimbabwean lullaby). Therefore, using this phenomenon in therapy and asking a client to name a piece of music that describes his/her emotions or experience can open a creative approach to the healing process.

Overall, Kirstin’s presentation invited us to be more reflective and mindful and at the same time offered us a direct experience of the effects that music can bring to the therapeutic process. Therefore, choice of music is also important as some “heavy” music (heavy metal or some rap) can have strong negative effect on persons’ mental wellbeing through suggestive ideas or words absorbed by the brain, bypassing rationality. Some readers may remember a wave of youth suicide after listening to a “suggestive” music and words.

### **About the presenter**

Dr. Kirstin Robertson-Gillam is a Psychotherapist/Counsellor and Educator, lecturing at the University of Western Sydney for the past 13 years, and she also held casual research positions. She is also a Registered Nurse, Registered Music Therapist with many years of work with people in aged care, mental health and disabilities. She also runs her private practice in North Western Sydney.