

Counselor's Toolbox

The Benefits of Singing

 by KARL B. HOOD

In 2022, a few strands about the benefits of singing came together for me simultaneously. I had just commenced doctoral research on the Psalms and trauma, so my mind was more focused on how the Lord blesses us through his songbook. I spent five weeks alone overseas to begin my research, and one day I took a break to walk through a nearby arboretum. Normally I would have enjoyed myself, but despite the beauty of my surroundings, I felt a persistent weight of anxiety. So—right there, in the arboretum—I decided to sing out loud. I sang the 19th-century hymn, “How Can I Keep from Singing,” and it calmed my body and soul.

A few weeks later, while staying at a friend’s house in Sydney, I found myself awake around 3:00 a.m., thinking through what I would say about Biblical Counselling Australia at our first live, post-COVID public meeting.¹ So for the first time in years, I sang Psalm 34 in the

1. For well over a decade, Biblical Counselling Australia (BCA) has sought to further biblical counseling in every part of the church. Its members are involved in biblical counseling in pastoral and church leadership roles, professional counseling, and counseling training at local church and university levels.

Karl Hood (MAR, MBBS [Hons], FRACGP, DipRGA) is the executive director of Biblical Counselling Australia and teaches at the PTC National Centre for Biblical Counselling in Melbourne. He is also a licensed medical doctor and is working on a DPhil in the Psalms and trauma at the University of Oxford.

middle of the night.² I was deeply calmed by the words, the melody, and the many sensations of singing. My pulse returned to normal, and I soon found myself ready to fall back asleep. I was not bored or distracted, but at peace and soothed by the Lord, entrusting him with the day ahead.

A month or so later, instead of ruminating over a minor hotel booking issue, I decided that since there was nothing more to be done about

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it that evening, I should instead sing to the Lord. Within minutes, I found my negative frame of mind had passed. I felt calm and had things in perspective cognitively and emotionally. That may not sound remarkable, but it would typically

have taken me a few hours, or even a night's sleep, to move on—usually by distraction or forgetting. But through singing the Word, my problem was completely reframed with biblical wisdom, and I felt closer to the Lord. No doubt the physiological process of singing also helped.³

Intrigued by these experiences, I asked other people, including some of my counselees, if this was true for them too. None of my counselees were singing often, but others who did had stories of significant benefit.⁴ For example, a young school counselor told me he sings along to music while washing the dishes because it calms him when he is stressed or anxious. He finds that Christian songs are even more effective for finding relief. He reflected that as a child he would sing while shooting baskets and feel emotionally better for doing it.⁵ And my daughter Miriam, who teaches voice and piano, sings constantly. She has playlists for a range of situations and moods. She calls one of these “songs for peace,” and it has

2. Psalm 34 (Version A) sung to the tune of “Finlandia” in Rowland Ward, *The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing* (Melbourne, Victoria: Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, 1991).

3. As discussed later, slow breathing can be calming, and occupying the brain and body with the many activities associated with singing can interrupt rumination.

4. All the personal stories used in this article are used with permission.

5. I'm wondering if there could possibly be something EMDR-like about this that may be beneficial. Singing while engaged in the bilateral body and eye movements required for activities such as dancing, washing dishes, or playing outside was normal human behavior in a pre-sedentary, preelectronic age. This is an area where more research might be helpful.

five songs that she sings along with when anxious. I asked her how long it takes to “work,” and her answer was “Immediately.”

Another strand contributing to this idea is my observation that there has been a significant reduction in personal singing over recent generations. In the early 20th century, when recorded music was rare, people sang and played instruments for their own benefit. Now, a century later, people primarily *listen* to music. Have we lost sight of God’s gift to us in this? If so, what should we do?

My hope in writing this article is to increase the use of singing in biblical counseling and encourage further thought on how we can best use singing in this and other areas of life. To do so, I will provide a biblical and practical foundation for understanding the God-given benefits of singing, consider its underutilization, and then suggest ways of incorporating regular singing into counseling practice. Much of this may seem obvious, but it had been hiding in plain sight for me—both personally and in my counseling work.

God Made Us to Sing

Simply, yet profoundly, God sings. Zephaniah writes, “He will rejoice over you with loud singing” (3:17). We, unique among all earthly creatures, are made in the image of God, and thus we imitate him as we sing. The complexity and variety in our singing is astounding, and our capacity to recall any number of songs from hearing just a tiny snippet points toward this truth as well. We were made to sing, so when we do, we are blessed.⁶ It benefits both the body and the soul. We know this from personal experience, and we know this from God’s Word.

From personal experience. Singing psalms and spiritual songs provides a whole-person, body-and-soul experience. When we sing, it involves all of our being. The body is active as we tunefully hit specific notes, listen to ourselves, regulate our breathing, and rhythmically move our bodies—swaying, tapping our feet, or dancing—with many parts

6. A recent study concludes that part of our brain responds to singing but not instrumental music or speech, which suggests that part of us is dedicated to singing. See Sam V. Norman-Haignere, et al., “A Neural Population Selective for Song in Human Auditory Cortex,” *Current Biology* 32, no. 7 (April 2022): 1470–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2022.01.069>.

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