

SINGING IN THE KEY OF APHASIA

It is a curious thing, is it not, that survivors who cannot speak because of [aphasia](#) can often sing clearly and sonorously despite their strokes? “This is because the brain processes language and music differently,” said Nidhi Mahendra, associate professor of speech language pathology in the Department of Communicative Sciences and Disorders at California State University-East Bay in Hayward, California. “While language is principally processed in the left side of the brain; fully processing complex language and music engages both left and right hemispheres of the brain,” she said. Neuro-imaging research is showing that music and language share many overlapping areas in the brain.

“People with aphasia often have limited access to participating in community activities due to the language barriers created by aphasia,” said Ellen Bernstein-Ellis, director of the Aphasia Treatment Program (ATP) at CSU-East Bay. “I observed that our ATP members always responded well to music-themed activities and were inspired by a music group at the Aphasia Institute in Toronto,” she said. She started the Aphasia Tones choir in 2009 based on a [Life Participation Approach to Aphasia](#), which emphasizes involvement in real-life, meaningful activities as opposed to speaking drills. “We had 12 brave members, but after our first performance or two, the other members could see that we were having a lot of fun and the choir kept growing.”

Mahendra says there are several factors at play that make singing easier than speaking for people with aphasia. “You’re thinking about the music and the melody rather than the specific words and that actually carries the words, allowing them to flow better,” she said. Music also makes



The Aphasia Tones enjoy rehearsals as much as performing.

an emotional connection with our thoughts and memories; it also reduces stress, improves mood and positively influences verbal and nonverbal communication.

The choir, which has about 25 members, is directed by graduate students in speech pathology, who combine their musical talents with their expertise in adapting rehearsals to be aphasia-friendly. Over the past seven years, the choir has performed three to six concerts a year to audiences ranging from 25 to over 250 people. Each concert allows the members to be ambassadors in raising awareness of aphasia. The choir members join the graduate students in providing materials about stroke prevention and aphasia at the concerts.

Many of the singers say rehearsals are their favorite part of the week. Some note they have more confidence while others feel that it has improved their communication skills. Their performances are a chance to show what they are capable of.

The Aphasia Tones members like singing well-known favorites by the Beatles, Elvis or Frank Sinatra, but they take great pride in learning and performing new and challenging songs such as “Fix You” by Cold Play, “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey or “Fight Song” by Rachel Platten. Bernstein-Ellis noted that the singers are proud to wear their Aphasia Tones polo shirts in the Cal State East Bay colors — it gives them an identity beyond being an individual limited by aphasia. They are empowered members of a community choir that can raise both spirits and aphasia awareness with their music. “Aphasia choirs are a shining example of Victor Hugo’s comment that ‘music expresses that which cannot be put into words, and that which cannot remain silent,’” she said.

The Aphasia Tones are determined to get their message out. One of their signature songs is a re-write of “This Land Is My Land” that incorporates a message about aphasia:



*It takes a while when we are speaking,
To find the words that we are seeking
It's called aphasia, but we keep going
This land was made for you and me*

*Now with aphasia, we may speak differently
Don't let it phase ya, we're smart and funny
We are supported, we stand united
This land's still great for you and me*

The choir looks forward to a yearly June concert to promote National Aphasia Awareness month. “They take particular pride in knowing that they have been a model for other aphasia choirs emerging across the country and world,” Bernstein-Ellis said.

Mahendra appreciates the way the choir has multiple beneficiaries. “The creation of the choir and its student clinician co-directors symbolizes the incredible work that is possible at a university training program where we get to straddle innovation, instruction, clinical service delivery and scholarship all at once,” she said. “Working with the Aphasia Tones as clinicians teaches our students every day that being a speech-language pathologist is a tremendously rewarding career that changes peoples’ lives.”

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“It gives the choir members both a sense of joy that comes from making music together as well as a sense of personal accomplishment,” said Bernstein-Ellis. “As one member said, ‘It was hard work, but it paid off.’”

▶ See the Aphasia Tones rendition of *This Land is Your Land*, (aphasia awareness lyrics at 2:10), courtesy of California State University-East Bay.