

# TAKING UP THE HARP AS AN ADULT SWEETENS LIFE, STUDY SHOWS

by Edie Eileen Elkan, CMBH, BA and Diana V. Nolan, MA

A study conducted by Bedside Harp during 2002 and 2003 among its students at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at Hamilton in Hamilton, New Jersey (RWJUH-Hamilton) and Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania, (BCCC) investigated whether taking up and playing the harp has an effect on the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of adult students. At both locations, students studied the basics of harp and music theory in small classes of 4 to 6. All of the students in the two locations took up the lever harp for the first time in their lives, most for personal enjoyment. Some hoped to find some self-healing or to “create their own joy.” Still others hoped, at some point, to be able to use their harp to reach out to others in healing and nurturing settings. We suspected that taking up the harp as an adult would have a positive impact on students’ physical, emotional and spiritual health, and our results, even if preliminary, indicate that that is, in fact, the case.

Ranging in age from 33 to 79 years old, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire twice a week before and then after a practicing and/or playing session. Students’ average total session time was 40 minutes, playing, on an average, for 22 minutes and/or practicing, on an average, for 26 minutes. The questionnaire was distributed to 31 students: 15 at RWJUH-Hamilton (all women) and 16 at BCCC (2 men and 14 women). A total of 25 sets of questionnaires were returned.

Seven measures were used to determine physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. On a scale of 1 to 10, students were asked to evaluate their level of physical pain, and on a scale of 1 to 5, they were asked to rate the following measures: mood, emotional state, sense of connectedness, sense of well-being, sense of purpose in life, and to what extent they viewed life as a gift.

The results showed improvements for all the students on every measure after they played the harp (see Figure 1). The greatest improvements occurred in their feelings of connectedness, their sense of peace, and their general feelings of well-being. Differences before and after practicing and/or playing with regard to physical pain, feelings of happiness, and the idea of life as a gift were smaller, but still positive. One student commented that she enjoyed the “camaraderie of group playing” and another wrote that she has “discovered [her] passion in life.”

Our findings on connectedness are worthy of further comment, especially in light of Dr. Edward M. Hallowell’s<sup>1</sup> view of the role that factor plays in one’s life:

What is connectedness? It is a sense of being a part of something larger than oneself. It is a sense of belonging, or a sense of accompaniment. It is that feeling in your bones that you are not alone. It is a sense that, no matter how scary things may become, there is a hand for you in the dark. While ambition drives us to achieve, connectedness is my word for the force that urges us to ally, to affiliate, to enter into mutual relationships, to take strength and to grow through cooperative behavior.

Further, Jay C. Wade and Chris Brittan-Powell reported<sup>2</sup> that “individuals with a high sense of social connectedness possess a high level of interpersonal trust and are able readily to identify and participate with other people in social situations.” They quote Lee and Robbins (1998) who found also that “having a sense of social connectedness was associated with collective self-

esteem, having a social support network, satisfaction with the social support received and being less prone to anxiety in daily life. With regard to psycho-social functioning then, having a sense of belongingness should be associated with better psychological well-being and social adjustment.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed our study serves to quantify what we at Bedside Harp have witnessed in all of the Instructional Harp classes we have conducted since our first in June 2002. Each semester and in every class we have been privileged to hear students’ compelling testimony on what taking up the harp has meant to them. In December 2003 two students who began taking classes less than six months ago wrote out their thoughts on their journeys:

I have been blessed throughout my life with many, many advantages, much love and more luck than I deserve. Middle age, however, has been a difficult time, as it must be for most people, everyone stretched in so many directions. Life has swirled around me, drawing me in to a greater or lesser degree to those people close to me, and dealing with, of course, my own issues and challenges.

About 15 years ago, after [my daughter’s] birth, my family began experiencing quite a few ‘life events’ which I have been privileged to take part in, and have had to cope with the emotional burden of.

In that time, with a small child to care for, I was involved with all three of my sisters who each went through difficult divorces (all involving children), my mother-in-law became ill and needed daily care and assistance (eventually passing away after 8 years of moving her seven times, numerous hospitalizations and eventually daily dialysis), my dear sister-in-law was diagnosed with pre-menopausal breast cancer, I watched my identity disappear in the eyes of my much, much loved grandmother who eventually, after much suffering, passed away and my father suffered terribly for 2 ½ years with metastatic prostate cancer, passing away at home as was his wish (unfortunately, we were unable to get hospice care for him and somehow, managed to muddle through on our own, surrounding and holding him as he took his last breath). Personally, I struggled with an emotionally devastating infertility issue, intense, emotionally draining treatment and an eventual heartbreaking miscarriage.

Though the list now seems long to me, I doubt that I am any exception to the rule and that most of us, by this time in our lives, have lived and coped with as many emotions and events.

Through all this time, I had a sense of losing myself, of coping with the emotional crises around me, being there for and truly appreciating the amazing child we produced, but having nothing left over for the deeper side of myself, the expression of (and you put it best) who I knew I could be.

At this point, as life has settled for those I love, as my daughter is approaching her journey into adulthood with college looming, the harp, and your sensitive and caring guidance are slowly, slowly bringing back that part of myself that had to be suppressed for so long.

I find myself drawn to my harp in a way that my meditation has called to me. My practice brings me peace, focus and expression. When I sit down to play, when I anticipate coming to class, when I think about going to harp circle, my heart smiles, settles and takes a long, slow, deep breath. My harp has become, as I have discovered, a way of coming back to myself. My eagerness to join the certification program is tempered by my certain, internal knowledge that I must heal myself first from the events of the past years that all touched my soul. But I look forward, with much, much anticipation, to moving onto that part of this process when I am strong enough to reach out with my own quiet heart to others who are struggling.

The second is written by a student who is the Director of Nursing at a 200+ bed nursing home:

I started playing the harp this past summer and it has changed my life. I had a love affair from a distance with this instrument all my life, but when I sat down to run my hand across the strings, I was hooked!

Cleaning, eating, reading and all the other things I need to do can all wait - the harp sits in a corner of my room and calls to me. Two hours practicing flies by in the blink of an eye and I want to do more. I get up earlier than I need to in the morning, and get ready for work faster so that I can play for a few minutes before I leave for work. It starts the day with a lighter, brighter note.

I am a church organist on weekends and still feel occasional pangs of stage fright when I sit down to play. When I sat down with the harp circle after only a few rehearsals and limited free time to practice, I didn't even feel a twinge. I made mistakes that make me cringe at the organ - on the harp I just smile and determine to do better - even mistakes don't sound as bad. Sometimes after a church service, I feel drained. After playing the harp, I feel like I could go another round! At the same time, I feel so peaceful and relaxed that there's no need to keep playing till the next time - my message was sent.

Both the instrument and the classes have given me permission to do something for myself as well as offer my music as a gift to others. In my current work life, I give to other people all day - my employees, my residents, their families, my boss. It gives me a sense of fulfillment, but drains me at the same time. I can see myself giving to people with the harp in the future, but never feeling drained by it because it gives back so much to me. Having read some of the information about vibrational medicine as well as having Reiki training, I believe I'm self-medicating when I play! I feel addicted at times, but what a wonderful, healthy addiction it is, and one that I hope lasts forever!

Would the same results occur were we to study the effects on adults taking up instruments other than the harp? We would predict they would not, for a number of reasons. First there is the instrument itself. One of the earliest instruments made and played by humans, the harp at once evokes thoughts of days of old, the bible, angels, bliss, even heaven. This being the case, the beholder is usually enchanted by its very sight. There is then the positioning of the harp in relation to the body of the player. The small lever harp, and most especially the 23 string Westover lever harp (played, as we most often do, with a strap), rests right upon the student's chest. Indeed to play it, the student very nearly must embrace it. The intimacy of the fingers plucking each string to produce a tone, and the pleasant physical sensation of the resulting vibration felt immediately by the player must also be figured into the mix. We must factor into all of this too the soothing, gentle tones for which the instrument is so well loved. Because the beginner lever harp student plays everything in the keys of either C or A minor, once the harp has been brought into tune, the sounds are pleasing right from the start. Having taught the piano for over 35 years to children and adults, Edie attests to the fact that it takes far longer for the adult piano student to feel satisfied with the sounds they are able to make on that instrument than it does adult students with the sounds they are able to make on the lever harp.

Over 80 adults have learned to play the lever harp since Bedside Harp's first classes of Instructional Harp convened at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at Hamilton just 1½ years ago. In addition to our classes at RWJ-Hamilton and BCCC, we are presently teaching instructional harp at two other hospitals as well: Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at Rahway and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick. We intend to continue our study through 2004 with the hope of expanding it to include more students and to refine our measures to determine what other effects taking up the harp might have on the adult student. In the meantime, we are greatly encouraged by these findings which affirm what a real difference we are making in so many people's lives by teaching them to play this truly magical instrument!

<sup>1</sup> Hallowell, Edward M., *Finding the Heart of the Child*, Association of Independent Schools in New England, Inc., 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Wade, Jay C. and Brittan-Powell, Chris. "Male Reference Group Identity Dependence: Support for Construct Validity," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, September 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Wade, et al.

Figure 1.

