

## THE SINGING-GROUP: A NEW THERAPIC REHABILITATION FOR MOOD DESORDERS

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### SUMMARY

Psychosocial rehabilitation, and choral singing in particular, allow the recovery of lost or compromised ability of patients with mental illness and they facilitate the reintegration of the user in his family and into his social context. The choral singing, used as an operational tool for psychosocial rehabilitation, allowed users of the Day Centre of the Unit of Mental Health Torre del Greco ASL NA 3 South to achieve concrete goals of rehabilitation: improvement of self-care and self-esteem, the management of emotions, the growing of their interests, the integration and socialization overcoming the isolation of their mental suffering. In particular patients with mood disorders have been significantly benefited from the rehabilitation activity. They improved their mood and all the related diseases and the quality of their life with the result of a positive therapeutic implication. The singing group and for some individuals, also psychotherapy and drug therapy, have allowed users to improve their lives and give them a concrete integration into the society. Working in a group with patients, caregivers, family members, volunteers, social workers allowed a consolidated rehabilitation with the passing of time. Using the chorus group "Sing that you go" as an operational tool for psychosocial rehabilitation and therapeutic element we promote the psychological well-being and the enhancement of mood.

**Key words:** choral singing - mood disorders - psychosocial rehabilitation - therapeutic rehabilitation - depression therapy

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### INTRODUCTION

The following work is the result of a project of psychosocial rehabilitation, the chorus group "Sing that You Go", which began in 2008 at the Day Centre of the 'Mental Health Unit Torre del Greco (NA) DSM ASL NA 3 South (at the time ASL NA 5) and is still going on. This project was born from the joint work between ASL and social cooperatives of Campania, and it aimed at the "Strengthening of Day Centres" in our territory for the activities of psychosocial rehabilitation. In this project doctors, nurses, psychologists from the Department of Mental Health and social operators, such as rehabilitation technicians, social animators and community leaders, educators, psychologists support the work of the staff of the Department of Mental Health, strengthening activities within the Day Centre.

### METHODS

During the first phase of the project there were some meetings with the Head of the Day Centre, the specialists treating patients, and operators of cooperatives and nurses of the Department. The result of these was the design of a rehabilitation program using choral singing as a therapeutic and rehabilitative tool for users of the Day Centre. Its aim was to achieve the following goals:

- Recovery of the psycho-social capital lost and the skills compromised by mental illness;
- Development of Strengths and Potential of psychiatric patients;
- Improvement of the quality of life, enhancing the

care for depression and mood disorders in general, beyond the sphere of schizophrenic disorders, in combination with traditional therapies;

- Rehabilitation of users in the family and into their social context, increasing and improving the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

Starting from these premises, and using the departmental guidelines of the Day Centres, the strengths and the weaknesses of the users were assessed, their psychological problems and their impaired abilities to recover. Based on their residual potential and on their expressive abilities, it was decided to place our users in the chorus group "Sing that You Go", sharing and participating to the rehabilitation project.

The selection of patients was made with the following modes of operation, observing the guidelines of the Day Centres:

- the treating psychiatrist sends his patients of the Operating Units of Mental Health to the Day Centre;
- the evaluation of psychological difficulties, of strengths, of aspirations and of motivations of the users through initial interviews and the administration of the VADO, a test of psycho-social rehabilitation in order to assess the limits and the potential of patients, on the basis of which, doctors and their collaborators try to develop a personalized rehabilitative programme;
- team meetings among the Head of the Day Centre, the specialists treating patients and operators in order to evaluate the results of the tests and interviews;
- the access of the patient into the choir group;

- the registration of rehabilitation with a daily attendance sheet and transcription in the activity log of the Day Centre;
- the Evaluation of the results.

The inclusion of patients, who loved music and song, into the choir was performed on the basis of their motivations and their individual therapeutic goals of rehabilitation and formulated with the evaluation of the results of the administration of VADO (Morosini 1998). The therapeutic-rehabilitative choir group has not got a diagnostics selection for mood disorders, although it is widely present, but it is an open group which also included patients with schizophrenic psychotic disorders, neurotic disorders, family members, employees and volunteers. All people share the passion for choral singing. They sing well as soloists but singing in the choir is a whole other experience as a force of well-being (Clift 2011) and mutual aid. We tune in one voice, the heart's rhythm of the singers is on the same frequency (Vickhoff 2013) as well as the breath and the pauses of the song. The spirit of the group and choral singing in a voice enhances a sense of belonging, fighting loneliness and depression: they are a practical viable experience of psychological well-being (Grape 2003). It enhances the immune system and cortisol (Beck 2000), enhances the pace and cardio-respiratory capacity (Marti 2012). It has got a therapeutic effect in neurological diseases (Wan 2009) such as Parkinson's and others. Especially the choral group promotes psychological well-being (Houston 1998) and it has got an effective impact on 'mood (Dianna 2004), and mood disorders, on stress, mental stress, immunity in the short-term, health and well-being in general (Gik 2011).

The monitoring of the work of the chorus group has been done through:

- regular clinical interviews, psychiatric outpatient control recorded in medical registers and individual psychotherapy for some users;
- the Administration of the test VADO at regular intervals (6 months) to assess the progress of the rehabilitation of each patient;
- the Evaluation of the frequency of participation in the choir, with record of attendance, compliance to treatment and the level of satisfaction of the user through his self-assessment;
- team meetings (responsible for day center, treating psychiatrists, practitioners and nurses) for monitoring the work in progress and for assessing the improvement of their patients.

## **CHOIR-GROUP "SING THAT YOU GO"**

### **Birth and description of the group**

The choir group "Sing that You Go" was founded in November 2008 around a patient with Bipolar I Disorder, who suffered marked depressive phases. She was briefly compliant to therapy but, for her graduation

in piano and choral singing at the Conservatory of Naples, she was elected as director of the Choir of the Day Centre. She spent most of the day in bed, listless, apathetic, asthenic with deeply depressed mood and ideas of guilt, of failure and of suicide. When the idea of forming a choir group was proposed to her, her eyes lit up and, even though she was depressed, she joined the project with engagement, diligence and satisfaction, providing the group with her musical skills and recovering her abilities. The group is composed by 25 members: the director of the choir, the doctor in charge of the DC, two nurses who sing, organize meetings, accompany patients and carry out rehabilitation activities, two operators of the psychosocial cooperative ("Saint Lucia" of Castellammare, "The Lighthouse" of Herculaneum), some relatives of patients, musicians and volunteers. The patients suffer from mood disorders with depression, bipolar disorders, neurotic depression, paranoid schizophrenia, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, mild mental retardation and multiple sclerosis. They are on drug therapy with antidepressants, anxiolytics and also with other mood stabilizers and typical and atypical neuroleptics. Five of them are also in individual psychotherapy.

### **Access Mode**

Users of the Mental Health Centre are sent to there by their referring psychiatrists and they are evaluated by the group for rehabilitation. There is an initial interview made by operators for administering the test VADO to their patients. Then doctors examine the strengths to consolidate, the weaknesses to face, the motivations and artistic inclinations of their patients. Finally specialists evaluate the availability of the patient to share the choir project.

### **Operating Modes**

The group works with the following "Test Procedure":

- Selecting the user with a passion for singing and specific rehabilitative indications;
- Initial, mid-term (1 year) and final (2- 3 years) evaluation;
- Assessment of the degree of user satisfaction and social recognition achieved by the chorus group.

### **Description of activity**

Since 2008 the group meets every Wednesday afternoon and Thursday, from 5:00 p. m to 7:00 p. m, at the headquarters of the DC UOSM in Torre del Greco (Naples, Italy). Here users learn the basic techniques of singing and music with the help of operators, volunteers, and the Director of the choir. The repertoire consists of classical Neapolitan songs which, with their considerable emotional charge, involve the singers and the audience. This audience is composed by, not just occasional listeners but also lovers of all great events,

like theater performances, street festivals and national competitions such as "PulciNellaMente" in the city of Sant'Arpino in Caserta (where the Choir Group was also awarded with the medal of the President of the Italian Republic in 2009). In addition to singing performances, during intervals socialization is very important too. During intervals you have got the opportunity to socialize and to have a good time eating sweets and drinking soft beverages to celebrate some patients' birthdays with their family members. We work in a team and in harmony with the common passion for music and singing: working and fun is our objective. The professionalism, with which the choir director conducts expressive activities, allows a constant growth of the participants in the same musical education. The choral improvement of the singers reinforces feelings of self-esteem in their director. Her obsessive doubts and repetitive behaviors in comorbidity with bipolar disorder are mitigated by the strength of the group and they are valued and supported by positive feelings with an antidepressant effect.

### **Therapeutic goals**

The Choir Group has got specific rehabilitation activities aimed at the recovery of mental and physical abilities with the learning of choral singing. Singing together, in addition to the learning of the basic and fundamentals techniques of music, allows the improvement of sensory-perceptual skills, the control of breathing in the rhythm of singing with the use of the diaphragm and also facilitates the integration and coordination of artistic expression in the group. Patients, for singing all together as if they were one voice, must not only educate their voices but also feel good together. The motivation that drives the song has to be the coordination and the cooperation in achieving the final result. Learning to sing not only gives the feeling of strength and psychological well-being, induced by the effect of the cathartic song, but it also has a specific function on the improvement of mood and affectivity in general. It is not a coincidence that our group is called in this way: "Sing that you go." Choral singing allows the achievement of the following therapeutic goals:

- Having a powerful and effective cathartic action;
- Stimulating the energetic resources of the individual;
- Improving mood;
- Increasing the artistic and expressive capacity;
- Increasing self-esteem;
- Inducing the care of oneself and one's body, educating its voice to the right melody;
- Overcoming inhibitions and social phobias.
- Learning the singing technique improves the relationship with your body.

The choir allows the realization of the general and individual objectives of the project. The choir becomes like a big family and the impulses of relationships are channeled in it. Finally the success of the chorus is a

valid message of the positive reinforcement of behavior. The work rewards and satisfies all patients despite the absence of economic gratification.

### **RESULTS ACHIEVED**

Since 2008 the choir Group has demonstrated progressive and great satisfaction of the patients who have participated in the rehabilitation activities with dedication and enthusiasm. They have not only learned the basic techniques of singing and music, but they have also enhanced personal and social skills and learned to overcome their difficulties of expressing themselves in public. We have found that patients belonging to the group have achieved the following objectives:

#### ***The improvement of sensory-perceptual ability:***

Patients report better feelings after conducting the rehabilitation activities and having a sensation of mental well-being. This cathartic feeling was experienced by all other participants in the chorus group, both volunteers and operators. After a day of work, singing all together, enhances the spirit and reduces weariness and discontent.

#### ***Clinical improvement in mood:***

Patients feel the pleasant sensations of well-being, physical strength and enthusiasm and improve their concentration, memory and performance in mental activities. They have achieved a real clinical improvement of mood, also observed by the psychiatrist. They have got a greater therapeutic compliance, put greater effort into their daily activities and recover their habits of life. Most patients feel better, are happy to sing in the choir and to participate in the profit and rehabilitation activities. They also meet new friends and fight the loneliness of depression and psychotic closure. Patients with neurotic pathology are happy to feel taken care of by the group, working in activities of mutual help which they dedicate themselves to. Psychotic patients feel more secure, less fearful of their delusional thoughts and they accept treatment more willingly. In two patients, in their manic phase, the choir gave them the opportunity to express themselves with all their vigor so that they had a mood-elevating effect. They become despot, arrogant, assertive, edgy, seductive and they created havoc in the work of the choir. The choir group acted in a compact way, while accepted the disturbing behavior, and reacted without expressing feelings of expulsion for the exuberant patients. The understanding of the emotional difficulty and mood of the manic patient was a valid index of tolerance and acceptance in the chorus group. Patients were accepted in this manic phase as an integral part of the group. A patient in the manic phase left the group because he was unable to manage his emotions and to share rules. The benefit on mood of the choir group was assessed and expressed also by the operators: it has in fact a rejuvenating effect and it gave a greater mental and physical strength and an efficient cathartic effect on daily problems. Singing

in the choir, participating and controlling the emotionalism of the group has got a positive, catalytic effect that removes every negative thought and restores the spirit. References to religious songs and tribal dances are well documented. The shamans use them to increase their level of concentration and to obtain the hypnotic trance for their activities of divination and healing powers.

#### ***Taking care of oneself and one's own body:***

Patients have got a greater attention to the care of their person, they dress well, and manicure their appearance obtaining a positive reinforcement from the group. Some patients bring home the lyrics of the songs to prepare and to sing them better.

#### ***Increase self-esteem and their ability and artistic expression:***

After an initial difficulty associated with the learning of songs and of singing technique, in which the user may experience feelings of hopelessness, discouragement and increased sensitivity to frustration, he may develop also personal confidence. Encouraged and supported by the operators in the effort of learning, the patient reaches his first positive results in the choir with the relative enhancement of self-esteem. They understand how getting results (you have to "work on the piece," try and try again until you achieve goals) and how to fight against their fears comforted by the unifying force of the group. The choir sings well if it is acclaimed with satisfaction but if the performance is not so good it is not afraid of being judged by the audience.

#### ***Increase and improvement of interpersonal relationships within the group:***

Patients learned to enter into direct relationship with each other through the singing. They all respect the same rules, they work all together and they follow all the directions of the Director. Learning is a bidirectional activity, there are the operator and the patient together. Users are encouraged to engage, to make progress in the song and express the satisfaction of the directives and the disappointment if they are tired and unmotivated. These are signals that the director of the choir learned to read, even with the help of operators, accepting the best satisfaction and job sharing. Our job is not only the learning of the song but also the important communication with all other people and the recovery of all lost skills.

#### ***Overcoming the social stigma and openness to the territory:***

The choir Group, in recent years, in addition to working in harmony in the Day Centre exported the fruit of their efforts into the official events of the celebrations organized by the Department of Mental Health in the presence of people outside the group (other patients, family members, doctors and operators). The group accepted the request for performance in street festivals, in cultural festivals of the United Europe organized by

"Prometheus", a cultural association in the city of Torre del Greco, and in national competitions (PulciNella-Mente). The experience of singing out of the centre, after some initial difficulties of embarrassment, was very constructive for the patients. They lived the experience of enjoying their performance with the redemption of their condition of psychic suffering and the approval for their good work despite the difficulties of the disease. The group "SING THAT YOU GO" has become an opportunity to prove that "if you want you can". When the audience applauds, It does not do so only because it recognizes the difficulty of their work with people with mental illness but mainly because it loves the emotion received from listening to the song. These statements are supported by compliments addressed by the public and by singing juries to operators for their professional commitment, as well as by patients and by their families.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The singing group is the driving force of the rehabilitation work of the Day Centre of UOSM in Torre del Greco (Naples) DSM ASL NA 3 South. It was possible to work on this specific rehabilitation project using all these different resources (operators of social cooperatives, users, family members and volunteers) and work in harmony and joy. We complied with departmental guidelines and operational protocols allowing patients to overcome social problems, to recover lost skills and to enhance their strengths and to get over the social stigma of the disease. The choir led to an active group improving mood in all participants, helping to boost the effectiveness of drug therapy and individual psychotherapy, facilitating choral cohesion, not only in singing, but also in behavior. The promoted psychophysical wellbeing of the users and has been a valuable tool for psychosocial rehabilitation, improving self-care, self-esteem, social behavior, personal autonomy and interpersonal relationships. Above all, it has been effective in mood disorders and patients who suffer depressive psychotic disorders.

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