

The Pain Practitioner

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Back Pain

Assessing and Treating Low Back Pain

An Interview with Bruce Nicholson, MD

Unraveling the Complexities of Back Pain Through More Specific Examination and Diagnosis

By David Glick, DC

Assessment, Treatment, and Outcome for Individuals with Low Back Pain: A Holistic Approach Using Five-Element Acupuncture

By Ruth Busko, MAc, LAc, Dipl Ac

The Use of Acoustic Therapy in Pain Management

An Interview with David Ison

NIH Hospital Offers Pain and Stress Relief for Patients and Staff

An Interview with George Patrick, PhD, CTRS

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The Use of Acoustic Therapy in Pain Management: An Interview with David Ison, Founder and President of TheraSound



David Ison

I've always been interested in how music affects people both physically and psychologically.

– David

In 1980, David Ison, a composer, musician, and meditation practitioner, broke his back in a car accident, leaving him in terrible pain, unable to walk. Faced with severe spinal injuries and the prospect of being permanently disabled, he joined his musical skills with his extensive knowledge of meditation practices to recover full mobility of his legs and torso. Out of this experience, he developed the compositional and psychological techniques that became the backbone of the TheraSound Method.

Today, David Ison is founder and president of TheraSound Inc. and is the composer of dozens of therapeutic compositions that contribute to pain management, stress reduction, and relief from the symptoms of clinical depression.

David's work has been extensively researched and is utilized by some of the most prestigious medical institutions around the country, including San Diego Children's Hospital, Bethesda Naval Hospital, and the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine. In 1999 the National Institutes of Health published a three-year study on TheraSound, which clinically validated the music's ability to bring about the relaxation response within the listener—documenting that the music led to a significant reduction of a wide variety of symptoms, including pain, anxiety, and depression.

Q. You compose and record music that has been clinically validated to reduce stress and pain. How did you develop this type of therapy?

David.

I've always been interested in how music affects people both physically and psychologically. Years ago, when I first started performing, I noticed that when I played this chord or that chord, this

note or that note, sang this song or played that song, the audience would respond in different ways. So I set out to learn the mechanics behind these responses to music and spent several years pursuing that interest.

Then in 1980 something happened that changed the course of my life forever. I broke my back in a car accident and was paralyzed from the waist down. At the hospital, they wanted to give me a spinal fusion operation. I made the decision not to have the operation. I decided to try to recover without the surgery by using specific meditation exercises. I know this sounds far-fetched, but it worked.

I had been practicing meditation for years. So, keeping the goal of being able to walk again firmly in my mind, I began to work. Through the use of deep, controlled breathing techniques, I was able to lower my pulse, drop my blood pressure, and create a deep state of relaxation. Through the implementation of these techniques, I began to move my legs a bit and my level of pain dropped considerably.

I was lucky enough to be in a hospital where, rather than insisting that I have the surgery, they worked with me on the unique approach that I was developing. When I left the hospital about a month later, I could walk with the aid of a cane. After that, I was home and in recovery for about six months. During that time, I continued the same meditation regime, and every day my condition improved a little. During this period of recovery, I had a lot of time to think, and I began to develop the idea of composing music that would produce physiological effects similar to the ones I was experiencing while meditating.

The studio became a laboratory dedicated to researching the science of sound and the effects that sound has on the body and on the mind.

Q. How could music do that?

David.

It's pretty simple, really. During my recovery, I learned that the relaxation response facilitated a reduction in pain and brought about a state of increased concentration. This state of body and mind is necessary for true recuperation to occur, so I decided to create a musical tool that would work to bring about these physiological and psychological effects.

This new kind of "acoustic therapy" would work to entrain the body's respiratory rate, mimicking the slowed breathing of meditation, and would, theoretically, facilitate the relaxation response within the listener. It would give listeners a tool for slowing their breathing without the rigors of difficult meditation techniques, and it would help people who were experiencing chronic pain, tension, and anxiety to reduce the symptoms associated with those conditions.

Q. And this idea eventually evolved into TheraSound?

David.

Yes. About a year later I was writing soundtracks for films and PBS broadcasts and in 1983, I built a sound studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was within this environment that I began to dedicate my life and work toward the science of sound.

This facility—The Lab—was close to MIT. My associates were MIT-trained engineers, software programmers, and fellow musicians. The studio became a laboratory dedicated to researching the science of sound and the effects that sound has on the body and on the mind. Within this environment, I created the very first therapeutic composition, I think, to come out on the market. It was called Balance.

Balance was the initial manifestation of the theory I developed during my recovery. The music actually worked. During the process of composing Balance I developed a way to design and engineer music so that it replicated the breathing

pattern of deep meditation. While listening to the basic tracks of Balance, we found ourselves breathing in time with the music. We began to record the changes in our pulse and blood pressure, and sure enough, they dropped considerably while listening to the music—we found ourselves experiencing the relaxation response. And all of a sudden TheraSound was born. After this initial confirmation of the breathing theory, I set out to compose music that would use that technique to provide practitioners and their patients with a set of musical tools for creating the relaxation response. Today, we have many effective therapeutic compositions available and we serve a wide variety of healthcare practitioners.

Q. How can acoustic therapy benefit people with pain?

David.

First, people with chronic pain—are in constant pain. And these folks will do just about anything to get out of pain. Most often, they will take drugs. The current approach to the treatment of pain, or the reduction of the symptoms associated with chronic pain, is pharmacological intervention. I am interested in a non-pharmacological approach to pain reduction. Not that I'm anti-drug. Certainly, drugs are of great benefit to pain patients. My feeling, however, is that drugs are too easily prescribed. That way of thinking needs to be adjusted. The non-pharmacological approach, which involves stress reduction techniques, breathing exercises, stretching, yoga, tai chi, acupuncture, and music should be *first* rather than last.

Patient involvement and commitment are essential in this kind of approach to pain reduction. In order for patients to reduce their pain without taking drugs, they have to do the work that needs to be done.

So, my work focuses on techniques that involve the patient—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Pain is reduced by learning and

practicing techniques that create the relaxation response—relaxing the mind and the body and rejuvenating the spirit. As I mentioned before, there are many ways of doing this—tai chi, yoga, chi gong, meditation, acupuncture—all of these are very helpful in reducing pain.

And all of these techniques have something in common: *Working with the breath*. There is a way to achieve a deep state of relaxation using the breath that can be taught to almost anyone. By breathing in this way over a twenty-minute period, patients will drop their pulse and blood pressure and go into the relaxation response. And from within this place of deep relaxation and focused concentration, they will experience reduction in levels of pain, tension, and a host of other symptoms.

While these breathing techniques are easily taught to the patient, the practitioner is faced with the very real problem of patient compliance. As any pain management professional knows, teaching the patient these techniques is the easy part...

Getting the patient to *practice* these techniques on a regular basis is very difficult. In fact, studies show that as a person's level of pain diminishes, so does that person's dedication to the performance of pain-reducing exercises. So we need to provide patients with tools that will support their work and encourage them to keep at it.

Q. *How can we help pain patients to practice these techniques?*

David.

Patients love music. It touches them on so many levels. TheraSound music is beautiful and it's been carefully designed to bring about the relaxation response through the regulation of the listener's breathing. Patients respond to it willingly and keep using it over time. When designed correctly, music becomes acoustic therapy and supports the

patients' personal journey toward a pain-free condition and inspires them to stick with their pain-management routine. Patients actually look forward to doing the work themselves.

Q. *How can acoustic therapy support patient involvement in the pain reduction process?*

David.

Most pain and stress management programs encourage patients to learn how to respond to the causes of pain and stress by changing their outlook on life. And most pain management professionals know how difficult it is for chronic pain patients to get past their pain and see some light at the end of the tunnel. This lack of hope is often responsible for terrible bouts of depression and anxiety, causing patients to slip deeper into the cycle of pain.

I have found that when patients are directly involved with their therapeutic process, their mental outlook is greatly improved. The mind gets calmer and more settled. When patients get directly involved in their treatment, they experience a sense of purpose within themselves and gain a deep sense of accomplishment, personal satisfaction, and fulfillment.

Once again, music is a wonderful vehicle for turning a patient's outlook around—not just TheraSound music, either. Pain management professionals should make a concerted effort to encourage their patients to listen regularly to their favorite music. It's an easy thing to do and it lifts the spirit.

People who get involved and experience actual pain reduction as a result of their own efforts find this to be a powerful and uplifting experience. It is this experience that should be continuously encouraged by the practitioner.

Q. *How does the pain management practitioner apply acoustic therapy?*

David.

Acoustic therapy is music that you use.

Practitioners use the music in their sessions, in conjunction with ongoing programs, and in their facility's waiting room and lobby. Patients use the music at home to reinforce the treatment sessions and to continue the pain management work on their own.

Pain management practitioners use acoustic therapy as relaxing background music during their sessions or as a vehicle for demonstrating the breathing exercises associated with stress and pain management. The music helps the patient to find the breathing rhythm, easily and comfortably, without a lot of the nervousness that is often associated with "learning to meditate." Through the use of the music and with the aid of the practitioner, patients can move easily into the relaxation response and experi-

ence the pain- and tension-reducing benefits of their efforts the very first time they try it. This initial experience is then replicated through the use of the music at home by the patient. Over time patients become comfortable with the practice of creating the relaxation response through breath regulation and mental concentration. They continue to experience the benefits of reduced levels of pain and develop a positive outlook due to their direct involvement in the therapeutic regime.

Q. Can your music be used with other kinds of therapies?

David.

Yes, it can and it is. Every practitioner, from an anesthesiologist to an acupuncturist, from an oncologist to a chiropractor, from a dentist to a body worker, wants his or her patients to be relaxed, receptive, and responsive to the treatment they are about to receive. Because of its unique ability to create the relaxation response and to reduce symptoms, this music is used as adjunctive therapy in a wide variety of clinical settings and supports the therapeutic effects and efforts of those practices.

Q. What's next?

David.

I am always expanding the horizons of the science of sound. We are continually researching and seeking to improve the clinical efficacy of the use of music as a therapeutic tool. I'm constantly amazed at the depths of this work and discovering yet another level of efficacy as I continue on this journey.

Q. How can our readers find out more about your work?

David.

If people want to know more, they can always visit us on the web at www.therasound.com.