Nordic Network for Research in Singing for Health and Wellbeing

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Background

The Nordic countries are currently facing significant challenges related to mental health, loneliness, chronic illness, social cohesion, and quality of life. At the same time, there is a growing demand for new approaches to prevention, rehabilitation, and health promotion that more actively engage people's resources, opportunities for participation, and sense of meaning.

In this context, singing and music have attracted increasing attention among researchers, healthcare professionals, cultural institutions, and practitioners. Over recent decades, a broad field of research has emerged that examines the relationship between singing, health, and wellbeing. The overall body of research suggests that singing may contribute to health and wellbeing across the lifespan and across health, cultural, and educational settings (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Clift, 2012; Irons & Hancox, 2021).

At the same time, singing is more than a health intervention. Singing is a fundamental human activity, a cultural practice, and a way of creating meaning, belonging, and community. For generations, singing has been an important part of Nordic societies and continues to play a role in everyday life, education, leisure activities, and cultural life.

Against this background, the Nordic Network for Research in Singing for Health and Wellbeing has been established. The network seeks to strengthen Nordic research collaboration, promote knowledge exchange, and contribute to the development of a field of research with scientific, cultural, and societal relevance.

What Do We Know Today?

Existing research indicates that singing may influence health and wellbeing through several parallel mechanisms. When people sing, they engage respiratory function, vocal production, movement, attention, memory, emotional processes, and social relationships. Several scientific reviews highlight singing as an activity that simultaneously engages physical, psychological, social, and cognitive resources (Clift, 2012; Irons & Hancox, 2021; Heydon, Fancourt & Cohen, 2020).

Across the research literature, a relatively consistent picture emerges suggesting that singing, and especially singing together, can contribute positively to:

- Physical health
- Psychological and emotional wellbeing
- Social participation and a sense of community
- Cognitive functioning
- Quality of life and a sense of meaning

Group singing and choral singing, in particular, have been widely studied. Several systematic reviews describe positive associations between participation in singing groups and experiences of social connectedness, community, identity, and belonging (Helitzer, Clements-Cortes & Moss, 2022; Reagon et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2021).

The overall research evidence also suggests that the benefits of singing cannot be explained by any single mechanism. Rather, health and wellbeing outcomes appear to arise through interactions among physical, emotional, social, and cultural processes (Dingle et al., 2019; Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

A Life Course Perspective

The health and well-being potential of singing appears relevant throughout life, although benefits vary across life stages and contexts.

Among children and young people, research points particularly to associations with emotional wellbeing, identity development, self-esteem, social participation, and experiences of belonging. The literature also highlights the potential of singing as an inclusive activity within educational and recreational settings (Glew, Simonds & Williams, 2021; Welch et al., 2014).

Among adults, research has focused especially on mental health, social cohesion, stress management, and quality of life. Systematic reviews have documented positive associations between group singing and reduced symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improved psychological wellbeing (Williams, Dingle & Clift, 2018; Reagon et al., 2016).

Among older adults, research points to potential benefits related to social participation, emotional wellbeing, quality of life, cognitive stimulation, and rehabilitation. This includes work relating to dementia, Parkinson's disease, and chronic respiratory conditions (Thompson et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2016; Barnish et al., 2025).

Taken together, existing research suggests that singing can represent a valuable resource for health, wellbeing, and participation throughout the life course.

The Nordic Potential

The Nordic countries are uniquely positioned to contribute to the advancement of this field of research.

The Nordic region is characterized by strong traditions of participatory culture, popular education, communal singing, and cultural engagement. At the same time, research environments across the region possess considerable expertise in music, health, culture, and welfare.

Strengthened Nordic collaboration can contribute to:

- Stronger dialogue between research, practice, and society
- Enhanced research quality and impact
- Interdisciplinary knowledge development
- Joint research projects and publications
- Increased international visibility for Nordic research

Singing has the potential to contribute positively to addressing welfare challenges in the Nordic countries. A wide range of practical experiences over many years has demonstrated that singing initiatives can strengthen health-promoting efforts for diverse population groups throughout the lifespan. However, there remains a need in many cases for more structured approaches that ensure professional quality and facilitate the systematic collection and sharing of experience. This requires, not least, stronger dialogue between research and practice within a broad societal perspective, where public health needs meet the potential of singing within evidence-informed frameworks.

Our Position

The Nordic Network for Research in Singing for Health and Wellbeing recognizes that existing research demonstrates considerable potential for singing as a resource for health, wellbeing, participation, and quality of life throughout the lifespan.

We see a particular Nordic opportunity in bringing together researchers, educational institutions, and knowledge environments across national borders in order to strengthen the quality, visibility, and societal relevance of research. We seek to communicate research-based knowledge to policymakers, decision-makers, and professionals with the aim of supporting the implementation of singing as a tool for health and wellbeing promotion across the Nordic countries. In this regard, we also seek to support approaches that are grounded in professional expertise and informed by attention to potential benefits as well as issues of patient safety.

The ambition of the network is not to promote singing uncritically, but rather to contribute to a qualified, evidence-informed, and nuanced understanding of how singing may support human health and wellbeing, and under what specific conditions this potential can best be realized.

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