

Healing Sounds in a Healing Space

by Chrys Blanchard



How we are managing in COVID-19 times

Emily sits in the dappled shade and a robin glides across her field of vision to land in the apple tree. Two white butterflies flutter together just to her right and she slowly turns her head to take in their courtship dance. The soft, deep, resonant sound of the gong travels through the heady perfumed air and Emily smiles and closes her eyes. This is a haven in these strange times.



Surrounded by nature in all her colours, scents and textures, today brings a familiar experience into a different, nurturing space. I am giving Emily her Sound Session in my garden.

I have been seeing Emily for three years now. At first it was for one hour per fortnight, and then for the past year and a half it has been every week. We have been on a journey together and today we settle quickly into a place where Emily knows what to expect and can relax. Familiar sounds in unfamiliar times. Normally her sessions are inside my studio and she can see out into the garden, so there is a link here too with the familiar.



Emily enjoying her Sound Sessions with Chrys

I set the instruments I will be using under the shade of the birch tree, in our 'tree circle' a cool part of the garden that offers shade and where I have enough space to walk around Emily leaving the requisite 2 metres to keep each of us 'safe'. I enjoy the process of setting up the two small tables with beautiful cloths and laying out the instruments, it is part of my 'yoga'. I hang one of Emily's



Our Sound Session continues

favourite gongs – a large Symphonic Paiste on a stand and the setting is complete. Emily responds particularly well to high frequencies, so I make sure that I have the appropriate instruments to hand. Amongst my selection today are singing bowls, tingshas, tuning forks and solfeggio chimes. She really seems to absorb those frequencies into her body like she's soaking it all up.

When they arrive, with her mum having pushed the wheelchair all the way from home, Emily is a little unsettled and this is reflected in her rocking, vocalisations and teeth grinding, but as soon as she hears the first sounds... always a C and G interval sounded by 2 tuning forks held either side of her head, not far from her ears, you can see her visibly relax her body. The teeth grinding stops for a moment as she stops to listen to the sounds. Emily's mum starts to relax too. She is sitting a short distance away and is enjoying the smell of the sage I have burning in the abalone shell which I do for just a few moments at the beginning of each outdoor session.

I continue with the tuning forks, around Emily's body, and work through a succession of positions and Emily surrenders to the process, becoming

calmer and quieter. The next tuning forks I apply directly to her body, mainly her shoulders (from behind) knees and her feet, so I come a little closer than the two metres. I am wearing a visor to protect me from droplets that sometimes spray in her spittle... and I angle my body so that I am either beside her or behind her. I avoid any postures that would involve face to face positioning and if I am nearer than two metres I make those moments fleeting. If Emily is particularly vocal during a session her mother is ready with a mask for her. All three of us were shielding at the start of lockdown and now we are each being cautious regarding social contact. If Emily starts to have outside carers again, then we will have to review the situation.

When I reach the gong section Emily becomes excited, you can see it in her expression, and she laughs. Her mother is happy to see her daughter so engaged. I ask Emily's mum to reposition her directly in line with the gong, so that she can feel the ripples of vibration. Emily closes her eyes as she is bathed in the deep sound waves, and a smile appears when she hears the dolphin sound I make by stroking the gong with a flume. This is her favourite gong out of the 8 big gongs I have. I hang it on a frame in the garden especially for her session. I sometimes add a smaller, hand held gong behind her to be able to 'sandwich' her in sound waves. As the gong plays I weave a story for Emily... It's ongoing and is about a mermaid who happens to look very like her. Each week the story unfolds and the mermaid has many adventures. I use lots of sensory language, painting vivid pictures for Emily, with colours, textures and descriptive scenes. Emily seems to get more and more engaged with the story every week.

A month has passed since I started writing this article and we have been continuing

the sessions in the garden. Autumn is approaching so we are making adjustments to be able to keep the sessions going. I feel that they are valuable for not just Emily, but for her mum too, who has been her sole carer throughout this time. I noticed last week that Emily was the most settled I have ever seen her in a session. There was no teeth grinding whatsoever and no jerky hand movements. Her mum commented on this. It was a joy to see Emily so relaxed.

I have added in a new section recently. Dancing! Yes dancing. Towards the end of the session I play music on my 'Hang'. Emily's mum particularly likes this too. During the music I lead us through a guided visualisation in which Emily dances somewhere special... sometimes in the woods, another time by the sea, perhaps on a mountain in the full moon. I hope Emily feels like she really is dancing when we do this, so that she can 'experience' the freedom of movement that she is unable to access in reality. I really believe that she can take herself to that place in her mind's eye and escape to a world where she can do anything. Emily seems to like this newer section, so we'll see where it goes in the coming months. Today is colder and they are due to arrive



A very relaxed Emily!

soon. I have put up an open sided shelter in the garden... next week I think we will light the chiminea if it is chilly.

Emily has profound challenges, with no speech or signing and has severely restricted physical movement. I talk to Emily and work with her, as if she understands everything I say perfectly... I'd like to think that she can function in a parallel reality and I try to create opportunities for her to use her imagination. Who knows?

Both Emily's family and myself feel deep gratitude for the NHS support that we receive to fund these sessions. Several of the staff involved with Emily have attended the sessions and been able to see how she reacts. I have trained one of my former students, now qualified to practice, to work with Emily to cover for when I am away so that Emily doesn't miss out. Another of my students has also attended some of our sessions and has been preparing to work with people like Emily when he becomes qualified. I hope that more people in the future will be able to benefit from the kind of work we are doing.

It is a privilege to be able to offer these sessions, I learn so much from Emily and feel my life is richer for knowing her and being on this 'sound journey' together.

Chrys is tutor for the College of Sound Healing and besides giving one to one sessions and running courses and workshops in her garden studio in South Wales and further afield in UK and Ireland, she trains students to become accredited to work with sound.

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