



# HARMONICA FOR LUNG HEALTH

By Chris Startup

My journey with Harmonica for Lung Health started at the end of 2017 and came from a hunch. Initially a multi-instrumentalist and music teacher from Northamptonshire, I had the incredible opportunity to complete my Singing Lung Health Practitioner training with The British Lung Foundation earlier that year and began running several weekly singing groups for people living with respiratory conditions. All sessions were designed to improve breathing and to maintain healthy cognitive skills through the medium of songs and music.

Being an experienced saxophone and harmonica player, I speculated that using a wind instrument in my sessions could bring additional benefits. Although it incorporates similar breathing principles to singing, in practice it is quite different as players are faced with the resistance of the reeds. Different pressure and breath control is required; not to mention that the harmonica is one of the rare wind instruments that involves not only breathing out but also breathing in, in order to play a tune.

I became intrigued by the potential benefits of “Chugging” or “Circuit Breathing” exercises, as a combination of in-breaths and out-breaths use quite different breathing techniques. From a cognitive aspect, playing a musical instrument taps into additional skills such as coordination, pacing and sequencing. Socially, it creates bonds and opens up discussions as participants discover and share different music genres.

I am proud to say that, from day one, the participants' response was overwhelmingly positive; not only from the original group but throughout the pandemic when people joined online from all over the UK and continue to do so today.

In 2020 and 2021 we were asked to take part in an exciting research project led by Dr Adam Lewis, Lecturer in Physiotherapy at Brunel University, London. It explored the benefits of playing the Harmonica with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and produced some very encouraging results. Most participants stated that, although playing the harmonica with COPD was hard at first, they were able to gradually adapt and key into their breathing. As the breathing became easier, they were able to focus on the songs and escape their respiratory condition while they were playing. Participants also noted a marked improvement in their ability to clear their airways. Additionally, they valued the social aspect of

the group, as it allowed them to stay connected with others in some of the most challenging times of the Covid pandemic; many added that the group became a central activity in their weekly lives. (Lewis et al., 2021)

More recently, I was approached by Asthma and Lung UK to run their first Harmonica for Lung Health group. The feedback collected at the end of the 6-week course was just as incredibly positive.

86% said that they were “extremely likely” to recommend this group to a friend.

100% of respondents said that they felt “better in themselves” after the sessions, with 72% saying they felt “a lot better”.

100% of respondents reported that they “learned something new” and 95% said that the sessions were “very important to them”.

85% reported feeling better about their condition as a result of attending these sessions and 62% reported “improved symptoms”.

I am really excited about the future of Harmonica for Lung Health; I feel that we are only beginning to unlock its potential. I am looking forward to continuing to develop my method by creating a variety of challenging and stimulating exercises that support positive lung health and help improve the well-being of people living with respiratory conditions. I am also confident that the use of online teaching will help me to reach out to more people.

Reference: Lewis, A., Conway, J., Middleton, J., Startup, C. and Wyatt, J., 2021. Playing the Harmonica with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. A qualitative study.

