

**Music Therapy:
An Effective Approach to Helping**

David Sinclair

Abstract

Music therapy is a unique form of psychotherapy that has a broad range of applications. Music has the advantage of being an unobtrusive instrument with communicative flexibility, reaching to clients who may not accept other forms of therapy. The transformative qualities of music are valued because a client can ascribe meaning to sounds, or thoughts to music.

Music therapy is an effective form of expressive therapy. Clients who are unable or unwilling to communicate in traditional counselling styles (such as gestalt therapy or cognitive behavior therapy) may find success with music therapy because of its communicative malleability. Music therapy addresses a client's need for self-awareness and self-expression through the nonverbal interpretation of his or her issues and feelings. Music therapy is defined as "a special type of psychotherapy where forms of musical interaction and communication are used alongside verbal communication" (Gold et al., 2009, p. 194). In addition to music therapy as a form of psychotherapy, "music therapy as an expressive intervention includes both the activities of composing or improvising and playing music, or passively listening to it" (Tobin, 2007, p. 300). This article examines the importance of music to people, the flexibility of music therapy, and considerations for its use. It demonstrates music therapy as an effective type of expressive therapy.

The Importance of Music

Music is an intrinsic part of the human experience, and people's brains are attuned to the timbres, pitches, and rhythms that music offers. For virtually all people, music has great power (Sacks, 2007). An attraction to music is part of human nature, and going back to the beginning of the human species: it may be shaped by the culture, but it is an intrinsic force. Music generally evokes a positive feeling (Lehmann et al., 2007). To conceptualize how music has potential as a form of therapy, one needs to examine the intrinsic importance of music to a developing mind.

Provided that their hearing is within normal range, babies respond positively to music. Human babies are predisposed to attend to music; babies are able to extract precise information required for perception and memory of the complex melodic and rhythmic sequences that make up music (Lehmann et al., 2007). If babies can respond to music, they can create basic forms of music, as well. The early use of a baby's voice demonstrates his or her musical capacities: babies experiment with their voices, by playing with the elements that will later form speech, through cooing and pitch repetition. In response, parents will speak rhythmically with syllable emphasis, almost song like. It is possible that some of these music behaviors are may be biologically programmed to be useful and adaptive (Lehmann et al., 2007). This early positive musical relationship becomes the primary method of communication for a baby.

Because music is so important in childhood, it may be assumed that music is biologically significant. Understanding music is a universal, inherent human capacity, becoming part of what it means to be human (Lehmann et al., 2007). Music becomes a natural method to enclose a therapy type within its framework. If music is intrinsic and defining for people, therapy in the form of music can have universal appeal and work with people's natural response mechanisms.

Music's instructional qualities make it useful to help an individual who may be suffering. Through the use of music, the client can learn how to cope, because music is instructional and it was important in his or her childhood.

When I used music to teach English to young people in the Republic of China, students who participated in singing along to songs in English learned the language faster. The rhythmic qualities are easier to remember than are ordinary speech patterns. The qualities of music, as well as its ability to teach, make music an ideal vehicle for therapy. None of the children taught could speak English initially. Once an English language song was played, the children would jump up and start dancing (trying to sing the lyrics). Although a young child's mind is more elastic and can learn faster than an adult's, music helped the students enormously as they learned the complexities of the English language. With very few exceptions, all of us can perceive music, perceive the tones, timbre, pitch intervals, melodic contours, harmony, and rhythm in music (Sacks, 2007). Music is universal in its appeal, and very flexible in its uses.

The Flexibility of Music Therapy

Music therapy is a malleable approach to psychotherapy; it has the potential to offer a client relief from mental and physical ailments. As a form of therapy, music can be used in such situations as working with the elderly, working with people who suffer neurological disorders (such as apraxia), working to foster growth in a group counselling sessions to foster growth, working with clients who need an increased in self-awareness, and with individuals who are suffering physical pain, working to reduce pain symptoms in an individual. These are diverse areas, which establish music therapy as a malleable approach.

Elderly people may lose the intensity and quality of many of their faculties, such as memory or verbal skills. Music therapy offers a conduit for the elderly to communicate and relieve their symptoms (which may be stressful). Music has been proven to reduce pain, tiredness, and drowsiness in palliative care patients (Horne-Thompson & Grocke, 2008). For the elderly, music has the potential to reignite memories or create a sense of calm; better yet, in a quiet place such as a hospital, music can create an aural environment that is rich in comparison to the dull nature of a care facility. For patients who suffer from dementia, music therapy can enrich and enlarge their existence, and help suffering individuals to find freedom and stability (Sacks, 2007). Music therapy can help elderly patients who are losing the quality of their mental abilities.

Neurological disorders such as apraxia are challenging to deal with. In their study of helping a three-year-old girl with apraxia, Beathard and Krout (2008) used music therapy as follows:

The music therapy treatment involved a mixture of behavioral, improvisational, and creative approaches in what has been termed a data-based music therapy approach. A variety of musical interventions, visual, and interactive aids were used, as well as an engaging, playful dialogue between child and the clinician. (p. 107)

The goal of Beathard and Krout's research was to help the girl to communicate more effectively. When the study was completed, they noted that the girl had experienced an increase in vocalization skills and cognitive recognition of the individual letters of her name. Music therapy is not a cure-all for neurological disorders, but it has the potential to help clients who are difficult to reach by using other methods.

Group counselling dynamics can be complex, and finding a unifying force when counselling a group (if needed) can be challenging. The task of helping clients who are suffering the same illness, such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), can be daunting. In one study, playing instruments together (drums) as a group created a unifying force and alleviated symptoms of PTSD: group drumming was found to create feelings of openness, togetherness, sharing, closeness, connectedness and intimacy (Bensimon et al., 2008). Without having the sufferers of the PTSD did not speak to their symptoms; they were able to communicate and alleviate

effectively through drumming. Additionally, in a separate study, music was found to have strong and significant effects on global state, level of general symptoms, negative symptoms, depression, anxiety, functioning, and musical engagement (Gold et al., 2007). Music therapy is flexible enough for use in group counselling.

Self-awareness is understanding oneself. Many events in life can distance an individual from his or her centre. Music is universal and a part of our early upbringing; in a sense, people evolve with music. For clients to regain a lost or missing self-awareness, music therapy has great potential. Much of modern music employs lyrics, with which most people are familiar. One may imagine clients conceiving their own lyrics to represent themselves. O'Callaghan & Grocke (2009) found lyric writing to be very powerful, because "through the therapist's supportive presence and musical validation, client song writers can develop new awareness or rework troubling issues" (p. 327). If clients are asked to write a poem, it may appeal to them. It is likely, though, that creating a song may be more effective in raising the clients' self-awareness because it appeals to the intrinsic qualities of music and sound.

The use of music can be productive in treating various forms of illness or pain: "Physical ailments such as headaches, fever, dizziness etc., are shaken off through the musical exercises as a result of singing, clapping and dancing" (Adedeji, 2008, p. 150). If a client has physical illness or pain, a counsellor may suggest listening to music. Recently, I had the opportunity to play music for people who were not feeling well. I played soft music, and many of the participants reported that they felt better. The music had created a soundscape that absorbed their focus. With their focus shifted, some paid less attention to the issues related to their feelings. Music is effective in helping individuals deal with their physical or mental pain.

For music therapy to be appreciated, the flexibility of the approach needs to be understood from the clients' and counsellors' points of view. Music is an adaptive form of creativity; therefore, it becomes an adaptive form of therapy. To fully appreciate and understand the effectiveness of music therapy, other considerations need to be addressed. These other considerations are guidelines to consider when employing music therapy.

Other Considerations

The effectiveness of music therapy depends on two factors: the music style being appropriate and motivating to the client, and the administrator of the therapy being patient and understanding. In his study to determine the effectiveness of the guitar as a suitable instrument for music therapy, Krout (2007) found that "the guitar as an instrument of motivation, preference, and choice has been used a vital resource for music therapists in their clinical treatment options with clients ranging from young children to seniors" (p. 48). It is essential that the appropriate music be selected for the demographic of the client. For example, it is unlikely that an octogenarian would respond favorably to a clinician suggesting hip hop songwriting. Though this example seems obvious and unusual, it does distil the point that the client should be properly acknowledged during the therapy.

Though music is universal in many ways, its appeal can waiver if it is introduced incorrectly. A counsellor needs to maintain an open mind, and regard the client as a participant. The counsellor should not bias the approach to suit his or her own taste in music. It is important that the client feels comfortable in order for music therapy to reach its potential in helping and healing. Therefore, patience and understanding, in addition to choosing the appropriate music, are essential factors to consider when implementing music therapy.

Conclusion

Music has a universal appeal; therefore, for most clients there is something in it that they can grasp. Clients may perceive the innate intrinsic quality, or simply the aural sensation that may relieve them from their issues. Music therapy also has the advantage of being unobtrusive,

as long as the client has a say in the type of music used, and the therapist is careful with the approach. The flexibility of sound makes it endearing to most people. Music therapy belongs in a counsellor's repertoire; accordingly, "music in one sense 'belongs to' medicine as an adjunct resource in healing" (Evans, 2007, p. 143). Music therapy is uniquely flexible in its use and adaptive in its application. Because music is a part of almost everyone's life, it can create a comfortable and enriching environment for a client to receive help within the protective setting of a counsellor's or therapist's office. Music translates feelings into sounds, poetry into song, and passivity into action. Music therapy is effective and should be a part of any therapist's approach.

References

- Adedeji, F. (2008). The theology and practice of music therapy among Nigerian indigenous churches: Christ Apostolic Church as a case study. *Asia Journal of Theology*, 22(1), 142-154.
- Beathard, B., & Krout, R. E. (2008). A music therapy clinical case study of a girl with childhood apraxia of speech: Finding Lily's voice. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 35(2), 107-116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/2008.01.004>
- Bensimon, M., Amir, D., & Wolf, Y. (2008). Drumming through trauma: Music therapy with post-traumatic soldiers. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 35(1), 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/2007.09.002>
- Evans, H. M. (2007). Medicine and music: Three relations considered. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 28(3), 135-143. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-007-9035-z>
- Gold, C., Solli, H. P., Krüger, V., & Lie, S. (2009). Dose-response relationship in music therapy for people with serious mental disorders: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(3), 193-207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.01.001>
- Horne-Thompson, A., & Grocke, D. (2008). The effect of music therapy on anxiety in patients who are terminally ill. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 11(4), 582-590. <https://doi.org/10.1089/2007.0193>
- Krout, R. E. (2007). The attraction of the guitar as an instrument of motivation, preference, and choice for use with clients in music therapy: A review of the literature. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 34(1), 36-52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/2006.08.005>
- Lehmann, A. C., Sloboda, J. A., & Woody, R. A. (2007). *Psychology for musicians: Understanding and acquiring the skills*. Oxford University Press.
- O'Callaghan, C., [you need "&" here] Grocke, D. (2009). Lyric analysis research in music therapy: Rationales, methods and representations. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36(5), 320-328. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.2009.09.004>
- Sacks, O. (2007). *Musicalophilia*. Knopf.
- Tobin, B. (2007). *Expressive therapies now: Action-oriented creative arts strategies for healing and growth in children and youth*. Kleewyck Press.