



Music Therapy

Music. When many of us think of music we think of songs we hear on the radio, dancing, concerts or entertainment for a long car trip. But music is also a powerful medium. I worked with a little boy with autism who self-stimulates on “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” instead of hitting himself, rocking, or hand flapping. A young man with cerebral palsy had difficulty moving his arms, but would beat a drum during his music therapy sessions with me. I currently provide therapy to a teenage girl with autism who cannot pay attention to a task for more than a few minutes, but will focus on music therapy for 30 minutes. There is a power in the notes, rhythms, and silences that makes music so wonderfully therapeutic, and makes music therapy a great mode for learning and achieving therapeutic objectives.

Music has many beneficial characteristics. It is a success-oriented medium where each person has the opportunity to create—regardless of ability level or developmental limitations. Music maintains attention and structures time in an understandable way. It gives meaning and joy to repetitive exercises. It provides a safe social space and is an effective memory aid. It provides immediate feedback and conjures emotions and memories.

Music therapy utilizes all the above characteristics to provide a safe place where the client can achieve therapeutic goals beyond musical education. According to the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA),

“Music therapy is an established health profession similar to occupational therapy and physical therapy. It consists of using music therapeutically to address physical, psychological, cognitive, behavioral and/or social functioning. Because music therapy is a powerful and non-threatening medium, unique outcomes are possible.”

Music Therapists are trained to assess when a person will benefit from music therapy services. The music therapist will then provide services when music is found to positively effect change. He/she will write goals and objectives specific to each client’s needs; develop a written treatment plan; regularly re-evaluate the client to review the effectiveness of the interventions being used; write documentation; and dismiss the client, if services are no longer effecting change.

A board certified music therapist is identified by the letters MT-BC (Music Therapist-Board Certified). This certification shows that the therapist has graduated from a university program approved by AMTA, has completed an approved internship of no less than 1040 hours, has passed the board certification exam given by the Certification Board of Music Therapists (CBMT), and renews his/her certification every five years through continuing education. Music



therapists are held to the standards of practice and the code of ethics, outlined by AMTA and CBMT.

Every music therapist is responsible for maintaining his/her musical proficiency in voice, piano and guitar. He/she will be able to craft a session using music and materials tailored to the specific needs of the client, including developmentally and age appropriate strategies. The therapist will also have a working knowledge of the characteristics of various disabilities and diagnoses, appropriate to his/her field (e.g., education, psychiatry, or hospice).

Many of the same goals that your child is working towards in physical therapy, occupational therapy, or speech therapy, can be accomplished within the music therapy session. Examples of these goals are: appropriate greetings and social interaction with peers, speech sounds, name recognition, turn taking, eye contact, development of pre-academic skills (colors, numbers, shapes, animals, professional people, etc), development of fine and gross motor skills, focusing on an object or picture, increasing memory skills, articulating sounds, listening skills, following directions, spatial awareness, appropriate social dance, imitation, identifying body parts, impulse control, tactile stimulation, and many others. In music therapy, many goals can be achieved simultaneously.

Music therapists provide developmental, corrective, supportive and evaluative services in a variety of settings: hospitals, private homes, rehabilitation clinics, mental health facilities, schools, nursing homes, hospice care, and many others. He/she cooperates with other professionals toward the same goals, using music as a complementary approach. The therapist can also help facilitate meaningful communication and interaction between the client and his/her family.

How is it possible that music can so positively impact a young man with cerebral palsy or a child with autism? Although research is still ongoing to answer this question, we do know that music is formed in and stimulates a part of the brain separate from the logical and verbal centers. As a result, it is able to achieve outcomes that traditional therapeutic modes cannot. I've seen amazing changes in the children I've worked with. Music helps people learn, communicate, socialize, emote, and grieve. It captivates attention, recalls memories, stimulates the brain, entertains, and brings joy. For all of these reasons, and so many more, music is an effective and fun form of therapy.

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