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Music Therapy Strategies for Wellness

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Music Therapy Strategies for Wellness

Abstract

A revolution in healthcare, known as integrative health, is supporting the use of nontraditional treatments that take into account the needs and capacities of the whole person. Music therapy is supported by a growing body of evidence in favor of improved psychosocial, physical, neurological, emotional, and spiritual outcomes, in addition to quality of life, and its interventions serve individuals at home, in hospital, and wherever they might need a coping strategy. People encountering everyday stress, others with life-threatening or painful conditions, and anyone else open to self-discovery can benefit.

Music and Health Institute Terms

Music Therapy; Pain; Receptive Music Methods; Recreative Music Methods; Stress

Disciplines

Music Therapy

Music Therapy Strategies for Wellness

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In my career as a music therapist, I have worked with many people who have faced significant health challenges: for instance, chronic illnesses like cancer and heart disease; degenerative conditions like Alzheimer's disease; and psychological disorders, like anxiety and depression. Through decades of this clinical work, I have implemented diverse music therapy strategies and tested their impact in randomized controlled trials and other research methodologies. I have attempted to uncover the mechanisms and the influence of these techniques on all sorts of people – not just those in dire need – and have honed these strategies into music-based practices for helping individuals get through everyday stress and strain. These techniques address the struggles that come along with living a full life. Rather than simply “treating a patient,” they attempt to empower individuals to identify their inner resources and potential in order to heal. Instead of considering the patient or client a passive recipient of therapy, this approach refers to therapist and individual as companions on the journey to wellness. Obviously, music accompanies this journey and emphasizes the positive and beautiful in life, while uncovering reserves of creativity to help manage unpleasant circumstances and solve problems. The therapeutic goal becomes a holistic sense of wellness or wellbeing, rather than a cure for disease or medical condition.

Fortunately, a revolution in healthcare, known as integrative health, is supporting the use of nontraditional treatments that take into account the needs and capacities of the whole person. Music therapy is one of many such services, amongst yoga, acupuncture, nutritional supplements, exercise, and a variety of lifestyle recommendations. These practices encompass ancient philosophies, medical and technological advances, and their combined forces to provide innovative ways to heal. An outgrowth of complementary and alternative medicine, integrative health counts on scientific evidence to determine those interventions that are most effective for particular goals, and it offers interventions alongside more traditional treatments. Indeed, music therapy is supported by a growing body of evidence in favor of improved psychosocial, physical, neurological, emotional, and spiritual outcomes, in addition to quality of life, and its interventions serve individuals at home, in hospital, and wherever they might need a coping strategy.

The emerging specialty of psychoneuroimmunology provides a model for explaining some of the ways in which music-based interventions are capable of enhancing health and wellbeing, as it explicates the interrelationships between mind, body, and spirit. From the psychological perspective, positive psychology is building theories to form a foundation for the use of music as therapy, including the stress/coping model, the breakout principle, the broaden-and-build model of positive psychology, and cognitive-behavioral approaches. Of course, music therapists were some of the earliest positive psychologists, as they have consistently built on the imaginative and musical abilities that every person holds. From a neurological point of view, areas of the brain that are activated by different forms of musical behavior and are responsive to music are widely distributed. Every lobe of the brain may be active when one is engaged with music: the frontal

lobe when a person analyzes the music; the parietal lobe, when they sense the fingers on the strings of a violin, for example; the temporal lobe to process auditory stimuli and sounds; and the occipital lobe to galvanize visual images that are elicited by certain pieces of music. The limbic system is flooded with memories and associations, while creating chills, changes in heart rate, and other involuntary responses as a function of music that carries meaning. Furthermore, the reward centers are involved, dopaminergic axes are intensified, and even the opioid-mediating midbrain can be excited by musical stimuli. From the immunological vantage point, recent research points to the effectiveness of music interventions in affecting neurochemicals like salivary immunoglobulin A, stress hormones, and other markers of resilience.

Stress and pain are phenomena that can plague anyone, but suffering is optional. There are a number of music therapy strategies that address these unpleasant realities of life, while unlocking that sixth sense – one's natural creativity, intuition, or felt sense – inspiring people to grow, evolve, and fulfill their potential. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) handles stressors in a variety of ways and offers clues as to how music therapy works. The ANS is composed of the sympathetic part (SANS) – the one that stimulates the fight/flight/freeze response once responsible for saving humankind by tackling threats to human survival, and the parasympathetic part (PANS) – the portion that relaxes and allows for rest and digestion. While music therapy is sometimes indicated to produce a deeply relaxing state of mind and body, even an altered state of consciousness, it can also excite and energize a depressed or apathetic condition. Because it is capable of bringing the ANS into homeostasis – balance, stability, and equilibrium, few other modalities can be as effective as music therapy in this process of allostasis.

Pain is actually a sensation that is based on a number of factors. It is a response to an insult or injury, but its perception is mediated by nerve fibers carrying information about the insult to the brain. The neuromatrix theory of pain has established that several domains affect the response to a painful stimulus. These include behavioral, conscious, cognitive, motoric, sensory, and emotional dimensions, and are processed in the central nervous system. A network involving the prefrontal, somatosensory, insular, and motor cortices plus spinal cord, brain stem, thalamus, and limbic system determines how pain is felt. Because music is processed in so many parts of the brain, and has impact on many of these dimensions, it can change the experience of pain.

Music therapy strategies to cope with stress and pain are numerous and multifaceted. In *Manage Your Stress and Pain through Music*, Dr. Susan Mandel and I present techniques that work through the integration of mind, body, and spirit. In addition, interventions that have had significant effects on the experience of illness/wellness are described in my book, *Integrative Health through Music Therapy: Accompanying the Journey from Illness to Wellness*. These strategies are designed to provide pathways through the journey, and include ways to comfort, awaken, find the musical self, cope, and bring peace. People encountering everyday stress, others with life-threatening or painful conditions, and anyone else open to self-discovery can benefit. Some of the more imaginative strategies developed by companions on the journey are described below.

A man with leukemia creates original musical compositions, based on his laboratory reports of white/red blood cell and platelet counts. A young woman with brain cancer learns to play the ukulele and sings her way through chemotherapy with joy and life. A woman who panics when

she has her blood drawn hums to herself, focuses on the sounds, and “forgets” that the nurse has just placed a needle into her vein. A man who is hospitalized with massive edema writes a song that proves to be an existential analysis of what it is like to be in the medical center, knowing neither his diagnosis nor what the future will bring. A woman with sickle cell disease who is experiencing a painful vaso-occlusive episode concentrates on her new piano skills during hospitalization and finds that she has a talent for this. A young man who is overwhelmed with stress takes a musical holiday, when he chants a personal power song that affirms his ability to cope. A daughter soothes her mother in her final hours, by singing the lullaby her mother sang to her as a baby. An adolescent copes with debilitating stress by singing and analyzing songs with themes of gratitude, love, and hope. A depressed older man plays the drum along with his music therapist, as she gradually accelerates the tempo and energy of her blues at the keyboard. But it is not only these musical experiences that define the therapy. The presence of a qualified music therapist makes it possible to create meaning from these musical encounters, process the affect and impact, and gain insights that will serve these individuals, no matter what the future brings.

Self-awareness, mastery, and a sense of flow are some of the by-products of music therapy. Bolstered by the insights encountered on their journeys to wellness, these companions demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit and the remarkable personal resources that are accessible when music brings out the best and most creative aspects of life.

References

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