The Benefits of Music Therapy for Depression

by ERIC PATTERSON

Music for Depression Treatment

You have tried therapy for years with limited results. You have tried more medications than you care to remember with no success. You changed your diet, your sleep patterns and cut caffeine out of your life completely with no change. You mediate, journal, do yoga, volunteer weekly and you even took up running because you read that exercise is really good for you. After all of this, you remain depressed.

When depression strikes, it can come on all at once, or it can nibble away at you over time. Left untreated or without effective treatment, depression will debilitate the sufferer. You will feel lowered mood, less motivation, less energy, lower self-worth and changing sleep and appetite. You worry because you want to stop the development of depression as soon as possible. If nothing else has worked, what can you do?

Have you tried music for depression therapy yet? The field of mental health treatment has been paying a lot of attention to music therapy lately. In recent months, there was a study published from Northern Ireland about the efficacy of music therapy for people with depression. The study took 251 people under the age of 18 with emotional and behavioral problems and split them into two groups. The first group received standard mental health treatment. The second group of participates received the standard care combined with music therapy. The researchers learned that participants that received the additional music therapy were more likely to report reduced depression and improved self-esteem.

What is Music Therapy?

Music therapy is a type of expressive arts therapy. Music is used in the therapeutic relationship to address the needs and improve the well-being of the client. A trained music therapist will assess the strengths and goals of the client to build a treatment plan. The plan may include singing, playing or moving to music. Music therapy also involves creating music through writing lyrics or composing original pieces of music. The goal is that music provides the client with abilities and strengths that are transferable to other aspects of life.

A music therapist is a trained and credentialed professional that has at least a bachelor’s degree. They can be found in a range of settings including hospitals, schools, personal care homes and outpatient therapy. They work with a number of physical and psychological issues including depression, anxiety, autism, dementia, mental retardation and prematurity in infants.

When working to understand what something is, it is equally important to note what it is NOT. Activities that include music but are not necessarily music therapy include:

- Someone listening to his favorite song
- A concert at a school
- A guitarist in a nursing home
- A piano player in the lobby of a hospital

- Nurses playing background music for patients

That's not to say that these things are not beneficial, but they are not considered music therapy. True music therapy must be done under supervision of a music therapist.

Next page: outcomes of music therapy and more.

How Does Music Work?

Proponents of music therapy say it works by stimulating the brain in a widespread way. MRIs have been done while the patient listens to music to confirm this point. Music is the only stimulus that activates all centers of the brain simultaneously. This is an impressive feat because when all parts of the brain are engaged, your hearing, memory, concentration, touch, awareness of space, vision, balance and muscle activities become involved and work together. The increased stimulation of your brain strengthens your skills and adds new abilities.

Outcomes of Music Therapy

In previous years, music therapy benefits have been described through anecdotal evidence. That means that professionals would describe to others the changes and improvements that they saw first-hand. They would discuss how someone who was nonverbal learned to express himself through playing music, or someone that was chronically suicidal finding reason to live through song writing. Anecdotal evidence is interesting, but it does not provide the strong scientific backing that people seek.

Although it had been done before, the study out of Northern Ireland changed views because it involved many participants and because it seemed to show that music causes general improvements in mood and self-esteem with the inclusion of music therapy. But it turns out that these benefits are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the power and presence of music for therapy. Other improvements from music therapy include:

- Less physical tension
- Less anxiety, agitation
- Improved motivation
- Improved relationships and communication
- Improved expression and awareness
- Improved ability to recognize and coping with trauma

Is Music Therapy Risky?

With music therapy, there is no risk. Unlike prescription drugs, music therapy has no harmful side effects or intimidating warning labels indicating danger. It simply applies what is already a part of your life in new, productive ways. You do not have to modify other aspects of your life or daily routine in response to music therapy.

Though there are no actual risks, music therapy has several limitations. For one, music therapy is not widely available in certain areas. The American Music Therapy Association has a 'Find a Music Therapist' page on their website, but you may have to travel a distance to access a professional.

Additionally, your insurance provider may be reluctant or unwilling to pay for music therapy as a method to improve your depression. With luck, a wave of support will build based on the outcomes research has presented. The last limitation is the lack of information the public has on the benefits and uses of music therapy. This could be a long process, as movement within mental health and general health care is slow.

Next page: music therapy at home.

Music Therapy at Home

Seeking out a qualified and experienced therapist is the best course of action for someone looking to improve his or her depressive symptoms through music therapy. For others, limitations of distance, expense or lack of therapist availability make receiving services impossible.

Does that mean that you should be left without options based on music? No. In fact, other types of treatment have already adopted music-based treatment interventions. Here's how to use music for mood:

- **For many people, music is already part of their lives.** Most people listen to the radio and have some kind of emotional response. You love country but hate rap. You cry every time that you hear the song that reminds you of a heartbreak. Bringing music from the background to the foreground can help tremendously. Set aside time to listen to music daily and track the impact. Try to listen to music that matches the mood you wish to achieve. If you desire happiness, listening to upbeat, positive music may shift your mood in that direction. You can also try listening to music that mirrors your current mood. Listening to sad songs while depressed can serve as an appropriate outlet, while gaining the understanding that you are not alone with your feelings.
- **Creating music with your voice or musical instruments is a powerful process.** Oftentimes with depression, you feel powerless and out of control. Imagine standing over a drum and banging away to reduce anger or frustration. Imagine lightly plucking the strings of your guitar to communicate the uncertainty of your life. Consider penning a song about your fears, hopes, worries or challenges that face you, and then sing your heart out. Song writing is a form of journaling and singing is a great way to calm your body because it utilizes the same deep breathing techniques used in relaxation. Sing from your diaphragm to flood your blood with oxygen.

- **Dance, whether it looks good or not, is another way to express yourself when you cannot find the words to write or say.** Feeling angry? Put on a heavy rock song while you jump, pump your fist into the air and swivel your hips. Feeling sad? Put on a slow R&B favorite as you sway to the music. As with the 'listen' stage above, experiment with dancing and depression by choosing music that matches your mood as well as music that goes against it to find what works for you. Even the gentlest sway is likely to increase your cardiovascular activity, and you know that exercise is great for depression.

Conclusion

The simplest truths are the ones that endure time and distance. For hundreds of years, people have said that music soothes the savage beast. Thousands of years before that, Plato knew that music "gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and charm and gaiety to life and to everything."

Music will not resolve all of your problems or reverse your depression, but maybe music is the thing to give you hopes for a better tomorrow. Whether it is a CD, record, cassette tape, 8-track or mp3, push play to feel better.