

WHAT IS MUSIC THERAPY?

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According to the American Music Therapy Association “*Music therapy is the prescribed use of music by a qualified person to effect positive changes in the psychological, physical, cognitive, or social functioning of individuals with health or educational problems.*” The underlying purpose of music therapy is to address client challenges through musical means. For some people verbal communication does not come easily, but they can communicate with music. Sometimes playing an instrument is just the motivation needed to work on regaining physical use of a hand after an accident. Physical pain can sometimes be felt a little less in the moments of a song.

Music Therapists work in many different areas around the country, some examples are: hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, schools, private practice, mental health centers, in-patient psychiatric facilities, or centers for persons with developmental disabilities, group homes, child birth centers...to name a few.

Music therapy with an individual or group begins with an initial assessment and then ongoing progress reports are written documenting changes in a client(s) that are related to the therapy. Goals and objectives for the work are established from the information gathered in the assessment. Some of the techniques used in sessions might include song writing, relaxation to recorded music, instrument playing, movement to music and/or singing.

How does one become a Music Therapist?

In the United States, music therapists complete a bachelor’s degree at an accredited program for Music Therapy. After successful completion of a degree, the student must complete a clinical 1,200-hour internship. She or he is then eligible to sit for the Music Therapy Board Certification exam. After passing the exam, the title MT-BC (Music Therapist-Board Certified) is granted. Continuing education credits are required to maintain this certification. The education includes music theory, ear training, and music history. The student is also required to focus on one instrument of study throughout their studies. Many programs require competency in piano and guitar playing for music therapy majors. Students may also be required to learn to play additional instruments. The rest of the coursework includes psychology, physiology and music therapy technique classes. There are over 70 schools offering a music therapy degree in this country, with many more currently in the process of becoming accredited. It is also possible to obtain a Master’s or PhD in Music Therapy. Currently there is movement within the profession to change entry requirements to the obtaining of a master’s degree to become a Board Certified Music Therapist. Most academic programs around the world have masters level entry requirements.

Extensive musical training has been absolutely invaluable in my work as a music therapist. I often need to transpose a song on the spot because it is too high for a client or a group. It is also helpful to know enough about other instruments to use them in my work. I once worked with a woman who was 100 and she hadn’t played the violin in 80 years. She was thrilled to get that bow back in her hands!

From a historical perspective

The profession of Music Therapy has roots early in the 20th century. Classes on “musicotherapy” were taught at Columbia University in 1919. These classes prepared musicians to work in hospitals as therapists. The National Association for Music in Hospitals was formed in 1926. During the 1930’s, there was a Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration under the Roosevelt Administration. This project entailed the use of music at hospitals and prisons in New York City*. The profession gained momentum after W.W.II with returning veterans. Music was used to assist persons suffering from “shell shock” (now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-PTSD). The 1940’s also saw the first degree program and core classes to be offered in Music Therapy at Michigan State University and Kansas University. In 1950 the National Association for Music Therapy (NAMT) was established. Until 1998 there were actually two national music therapy associations: NAMT and AAMT (American Association for Music Therapy). The two associations merged to form the American Music Therapy Association. AMTA publishes a quarterly journal with current research studies in music therapy. They also publish a quarterly newsletter and a semi-annual clinical publication entitled Perspectives.

Bibliography and Suggested Readings

*1. Introduction to Music Therapy, Theory and Practice, W. Davis, RMT-BC, K. Gfeller, PhD, RMT-BC, M. Taut, PhD, RMT-BC, 1992, pp. 26-28.

2. Music Therapy: *An Introduction*, J. Schmidt Peters, MMT, RMT-BC

Note: these publications, and many more related publications, can be obtained through MMB Music, Inc web site: www.mmbmusic.com or call for a free catalog: 1-800-543-3771.

Resources

1. American Music Therapy Association, www.musictherapy.org
2. Music Therapy Association of Washington, www.musictherapywa.org