

# **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.

## **Where do Music Therapists work?**

Music Therapists work in many different areas around the country, some examples are: hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, schools, 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 six-month internship. She or he is then eligible to sit for the Music Therapy Board Certification exam. Upon passing the exam, they are granted the title MT-BC (Music Therapist-Board Certified). Continuing education credits are required to maintain this certification. In general, the education requires two years of music theory, ear training, and music history. The student is also required to focus on one specific instrument throughout their schooling. Many programs also require competency in piano and guitar playing for music therapy majors. Students may also be required to take methods classes in flute, violin, clarinet, percussion and conducting. The rest of the requirements include psychology, physiology and music therapy techniques. There are more than 70 schools offering music therapy degrees in the United States. It is also possible to obtain a Master’s or Doctorate degree in Music Therapy.

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 WWII with returning veterans. Music was used to assist persons

suffering from “shell shock” - now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-PTSD (Gfeller et al., 1992). The 1940s 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.

### **References**

- American Music Therapy Association, 8455 Colesville Road, Suite 1000, Silver Spring, MD 20910, Phone: 301-589-3300, web site: [www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org)
- Davis, W., Gfeller, K., & Thaut, M. (1992). *Introduction to Music Therapy, Theory and Practice*, pp. 26-28.

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