

Psychotherapy and Music Therapy

Barbara Dunn, PhD, LICSW, MT-BC

Adding music therapy to psychotherapy can offer a refreshing way to address feelings and creatively transform a difficult situation. Psychotherapy in the private practice setting traditionally relies on verbal processing or talk therapy to address issues and problems. People commonly seek therapy because an area of their life is challenging and something needs to change. Music can augment this process by unlocking doors that might otherwise be closed. It can help create a shift in blocked emotions and/or offer a way to communicate deep and painful feelings. It can provide families members with a way to be together that transcends their seemingly intractable differences. This article will explore why and how one might add music to a psychotherapy session and provide a case example of this blending.

Why Add Music?

At the risk of oversimplifying the psychotherapy/music therapy process, I feel good therapy includes working toward greater balance between head and heart responses to our experiences. Sometimes people are too much into their thoughts about their problems and need a way to connect with what they are feeling. Sometimes they are so much into their heartfelt experience that they cannot see their way through the pain. Music can tap into feelings via poignant lyrics or a soulful sound that helps with connection on a heart and feeling level. Alternatively, the playing of music can be a grounding force that uses an outside task, such as playing the guitar, to connect to something outside of overwhelming, internal feelings.

Most people have at least some relationship to music. This can range from listening to music on the car radio to attending concerts/music festivals to playing and performing with a band. Adding music to psychotherapy can elicit a familiar and comforting experience and bring about an immediate physiological response that can be healing. Furthermore, with the multiplicity of inputs in our lives, such as 24/7 Internet access, our lives can seem quite complex. Music sometimes adds yet another layer to the chaos in our lives via iPods and headphones. But carefully chosen music can actually be used to decrease the stimulation and allow for more clear thoughts.

In my psychotherapy practice I see people with challenges that range from depression or anxiety to adjustment to disability or illness. Music can be used to fill in the gaps made by pain or other difficulties. Aldous Huxley stated, "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music." Music can tap into those deeply felt experiences and offer a way for expression that does not have to be translated into words.

Music can also provide useful information for the therapeutic process. It can serve as an informant for feelings that may lie deep. In Arts-Based Research, a qualitative research

methodology, the artform is used as a means of informing the data, as well as assisting with the overall analysis process. Art therapist, Cathy Malchiodi, noted “The answers to our search will not come from our clinical expertise alone, but rather from our knowledge of art and from an intimate, personal connection to our own art making.” In the therapy setting, I have seen music reach a deeply held hurt or joy in the matter of only a few moments into a song. Reaching this same emotion purely through talk therapy would have taken a much longer time.

Case Study

Specific details of this case have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Joseph has Parkinson’s disease and plays the viola. During our work together, we addressed several issues, from anxiety in social settings and panic attacks to adjustment to an illness that was progressively and dramatically changing his life. We discussed thoughts and feelings about the various challenges he was facing. We worked on relaxation techniques that included Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Imagery to recorded music that he selected. We addressed Panic Attacks with cognitive behavioral strategies that included positive self-talk along with use of familiar and comforting music via his iPod. To address his physical challenges, we collaborated with a physical therapist to work out an exercise routine that would help him stay as limber as possible as his disease progressed. The exercises were paired with music that helped create a structure and motivation for the workouts. We included the physical demands of playing the viola and ways to keep as limber as possible. Playing the viola was a lifeline for Joseph. When he played his face and body relaxed with the sound he was making. We used this heartfelt music as a way to process some of his fears and concerns about his disease. It provided a ready access to those feelings that could then be addressed through traditional talk therapy methods.

Closing Comments

Adding music to traditional psychotherapy suggests a specialized approach that is responsive to the unique needs and situation of the client. Using music therapy as part of psychotherapy is a subtle shift in awareness and intention to bring in music when needed and not forced when it is not appropriate. When used with care and attention, music can be just the thing to help someone along a path of change, health and healing. In the words of Khalil Gibran, "Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife."

Barbara Dunn, PhD, LICSW, MT-BC has a private psychotherapy practice in Seattle and directs the music therapy program at Whidbey General Hospital on Whidbey Island. Contact: 206-491-5047; barbaradunnmusic@gmail.com ; www.barbaradunn.com