

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Music Therapy



Music has been used as a means of therapy for many hundreds of years, because of the healing powers it possesses. In the last half-century, it has developed into a clinically applied therapy, as a paramedical profession, where therapists are trained at the graduate level. It is accepted differently in different countries and states, but in Europe the study has been based on psychotherapy models. Often the therapist, who is a trained or competent musician, uses a clinical improvisation to establish a musical relationship with patients. State licensure is not required in Kentucky, but is, however, in Tennessee. In my own practice I occasionally use music with clients, especially in groups of elderly or cognitively challenged people. As a trained musician, composer, and critical listener, my experiences have confirmed the powerful effect of music as a means of therapeutic communication.

Music therapy is effective with many different clinical populations, particularly in developing communication and building rapport with patients with autism (a communication disorder) as well as neurological disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease, Huntington's chorea, and Parkinson's disease. It has been shown to help patients overcome emotional, psychological, and physical problems, and improve their sense of well being. It is also used as a reward, stimulant, or relaxant. It is particularly effective with the elderly and infirm to help cognitive function, slow decline, and relieve stress, anxiety and depression.

Historically, music therapy was used in healing for several thousand years, in the following four areas.

First of all, according to the theory of the harmonic vibrations system of music-as-sound (harking back 2500 years to the work of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who used a one-stringed measuring device called a monochord to make measurements), each pure sound has its own unique vibrations; these vibrations were measured in vibrations per second, or hertz. Today's standard is the middle A at 440 Hz or 440 vibrations per second. These vibrations can be doubled or halved, by doubling or halving the string in the monochord, for example, yielding the same note one octave lower or higher, respectively (as men and women can sing in unison in different octaves). Other proportions will produce harmonics, yielding different notes and harmonies (think of a guitar note), all following natural laws and mathematical precision, whether the sounds are made by the wind blowing through a hollow formation, or by man's own instrumental inventions. Harmonics form the various intervals we know as musical scales (pentatonic, diatonic, and chromatic, whose use is based on cultural preference). Thus music is based on the laws of nature, and can be perceived by the human mind. Pythagoras also believed that the notes reflected a cosmic and spiritual level, and could cause a person to reflect

upon, or be influenced by these vibrations and their harmonic (consonant) and disharmonic (dissonant) proportions. These vibrations connected body, mind, and spirit.

The second area followed the dominant medical theories (humoral medicine) of the 16th and 17th centuries which theorized that good health was a balance between the four bodily fluids or humors, and that music was a tool that could restore this balance.

Throughout Western philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche), there have been doctrines of health-promotion based on the use of music to apply to specific ailments. They used the vibrations of harmonic bodies based on experiments and on medical or social observations. This is called the Ethos Doctrine, the third area.

Finally, there were various beliefs about music and the mind, particularly that the mind can affect health and that music can influence the mind to help heal the body. Plato praised the use of certain rhythms and modes that encouraged man to a harmonic life (Dorian and Phrygian modes), and stating that others (Lydian and Mixolydian) encouraged laziness and sadness. The great Renaissance man, Marcilio Ficino, considered that music carefully chosen and performed was the best method of bringing about balance, unity and harmony. He engaged in therapeutic playing much like today's music therapy, being in a state of empathic awareness and communicating with the listener/client at this level. Throughout history, music was regularly performed for patients at mental and medical hospitals.

Music therapy may be defined in a variety of ways. The definition of music therapy may vary depending on where it is used, and by whom, but in general it means the use of music as a therapeutic medium in clinical, educational and social situations to treat patients or clients with medical, educational, psychological, and social needs. There are different levels of use and intervention: the non-therapeutic but related auxiliary level; the augmentative level, used to enhance other treatment methods; the intensive level, where it takes a central role, and; a primary level, where its use is singular and indispensable.

There are many theories regarding the analysis and understanding of music. In the clinical application of music therapy, music is viewed as a distinctive means of communication, some kind of language, following rules of syntax, able to be written, and having meaning for people, even though it is symbolic and thus ambiguous.

The four basic models of music are: Objective Music which uses music's inherent physical properties to directly influence a client's body or behavior, documented through research; Universal Music which uses music as a 'living energy form' – sounds and vibrations – with healing properties; Subjective Music which uses music processes of improvising or listening to explore client values and relationships to self and others, and; Collective Music which views music through a socio-cultural lens where it provides shared identity within a community or provides a ritual re-enactment of group experiences. A person may impose one or two of the following two experiences over

these four basic models. The Esthetic music experience allows a client to experience beauty in the music, or in life, as represented by the music, in any of the four categories listed above. The Transpersonal music experience, allows a person to move towards an experience of Oneness.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Recent medical research has shown that hearing tests may measure loss in the brains ability to process information (cognitive decline) in the elderly. Problems with central hearing processing may be a measure of early dementia. These tests apply only to one type of hearing problem that involves detection, recognition, and comprehension. It does NOT involve the physical decline of hearing ability, which can be helped by the use of a hearing aid. The central processing decline is often revealed when a person cannot understand speech while other conversations are going on – called the “cocktail party effect”. A hearing aid will not help these problems. Your physician can arrange for you to have CENTRAL AUDITORY TESTING if you think this may be your problem. This is a simple standard test. The hearing decline can be slowed down and managed with basic programs that help patients listen more carefully so that they can better understand what is being said.