

What Is Music Therapy

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I first asked this question on my 16th birthday when my father came home from work and told me of a “field” called “music therapy”. He told me it had something to do with using music to help people.

From that day on, I began my search to find out “What is music therapy?” I asked my band director about it. Much to my surprise not only had he heard of it but his wife was music therapist in the local psychiatric hospital. During my last two years of high school, I worked with her. Every time someone asked me, “What is music therapy?”, I proudly answered, “Helping people through music”.

It’s been 20 years since that time. I have both a BA and MA in music therapy and psychology, as well as more than 14 years of professional clinical music therapy experience. Over the years, I have worked with people of all ages from birth until the day they die and with people of all abilities, disabilities, and diagnoses. I have worked in hospitals, nursing homes, schools, community centers and currently in private practice. However, when people ask today “What is Music Therapy?”, I find that the answer is not as simple as it used to be. The answer I once gave does not satisfy me or those who ask the question.

Over the years I have found that people are familiar with music and therapy but somehow when you combine the two words “music therapy”, it seems to challenge, confuse, fascinate, and motivate people to ask that infamous question, “What is Music Therapy?”

In order for me to even begin to answer this question, I challenge you right now to answer the following... Have you ever listened to music? Have you ever felt more relaxed when you listened to music? Have you ever felt like dancing when you listened to music? Have you ever listened to music that instantaneously brought you back to a special time in your life from the past? Have you ever felt happy or sad as a result of things about these memories? Have you ever cried in response to hearing a song? Have you ever listened to a song identified with the words of the song and perhaps felt as though the words expressed exactly what you felt and were not able to express? Have you ever associated a song with a special person in your life? Have you ever sung in a church or temple or played an instrument with another person and felt closer to others when doing this? Have you ever felt a sense of inner strength or spirituality when listening to music?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions then you are aware and familiar with the power of music to change and evoke emotion, evoke memories, provide spiritual and social connectedness and provide a means of expressing feelings and thoughts that may be difficult to otherwise express. Music Therapy is about all of these things and much more. Music is the one medium that cuts through the boundaries of age, culture, ability, disability and disease. How music is used and what music is used is

determined by an assessment of the social, physical, emotional, and psychological needs of the individual or group that the therapist is working with. No musical talent is needed to participate and benefit from music therapy.

“Music therapy” has informally been around for centuries. Humans have often believed in the power of music to cure or ward off evil spirits. During this century medicine has become more scientific and treatment more specific. As a professional field of study, music therapy began after World War II. There are more than 70 universities and colleges that offer degrees in music therapy. There are more than 5,000 music therapists in the United States who work in medical hospital, psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes, schools, outpatient clinics, drug and alcohol programs, hospice programs, and private practice.

Music therapy can be used in neurological disorders as music has a particular way of organizing and reorganizing cerebral function when there has been damage. Music therapy facilitates relaxation and distraction from pain thus decreasing the need for pain medication for women during labor and delivery. Music therapy provides a means of expressing emotion which can decrease confusion, depression and grief and increase insight and self understanding. Music therapy provides opportunities to socialize, express memories and decrease agitation and other behaviors associated with Alzheimer’s type dementia.

Music therapists are specifically trained to use the medium of music to facilitate physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well being. Over the years, I have met some of previous client. They often tell me of the specific songs that were played during their music therapy session(s). Often they go on to tell me of the positive impact that the music therapy had on their life because a particular song played while they were in crisis helped them to express their feelings and nurtured their heart and soul. You don’t have to be in crisis to benefit from music therapy. Anyone can benefit. If you are interested in receiving music therapy for yourself, a family member, or would like more information, please contact me musictherapy@msn.com or (707) 695-4145.