



Mainstay Music Therapy, Inc.

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What is Music Therapy, and Why Does It Work?

If you are like most people, you are drawn to music. Music makes us feel good. It triggers our emotions, brings back memories, and moves us in ways we find difficult to describe. We use music to cheer on our favorite sports teams, heighten feelings of expectation in a movie, and make time pass more quickly when doing chores. We find this affect in people and cultures all over the world. Music motivates us, encourages us, cheers us up, and validates our deepest feelings. As a therapy, music is a powerful way to bring about change and promote healing and growth.

Music therapy is a healthcare profession that uses music intentionally to help clients reach a variety of developmental, health, and wellness goals. Music therapists work with the same people who seek help from physical, occupational, speech and psycho-therapists. It is the tool that we use in therapy— music— that makes music therapy unique.

What is it that makes music a useful tool for therapy?

Much of that answer can be found in the ways music is processed in our brains.

Music is a whole brain activity.

Listening to and participating in music activates many distinct areas of the brain. Rhythm, pitch, timbre, harmony, and tempo are all processed in different regions of the brain, and music requires these regions work together in order to create a unified experience of music. Music also requires integration of both the more analytical left hemisphere and the more creative right hemisphere. In fact, neurologists have suggested that music activates more parts of the brain than any other single human activity. This has led researchers to argue that the human brain is hardwired to respond to music.

The effects of music on our brain and body go beyond what regions light up when we listen to music. Music has a direct impact on our physiology. It can change our heart rate and blood pressure, and can impact hormones and neurochemicals such as endorphins, dopamine, and cortisol. Music therapists use this knowledge to help clients reduce pain perception and overcome addiction.

Music also triggers neuroplasticity, the process in which our brains make new connections. Music can help foster new neural networks that compensate for damaged areas of the brain. This makes for powerful therapy for individuals seeking physical rehabilitation, or for children with developing brains.

Music is motivating.

The connection between music and our emotions also lies deep within our brains. Listening to music activates regions associated with reward, motivation, and arousal. The ability of music to motivate us is so powerful that some sports competitions have even banned listening to music during races, as it can improve performance so much it is considered a “competitive edge”.

Music therapists use the motivational aspect of music to help clients with a wide range of challenges meet their goals and accomplish new things. Music therapy can help clients associate difficult tasks with the feel-good chemicals released when we engage in music. Music can motivate children to communicate and connect with others, or motivate seniors to move more.

Music gets us moving.

Our bodies are activated by rhythm. Rhythm is something highly organized that occurs across time. Moving our bodies can be described in a similar way. Research demonstrates that our bodies naturally entrain to— or match— a rhythmic beat. Or more simply, when we hear a beat, we tap our foot. The ability and desire to move when we hear music is innate and spontaneous. Music therapists utilize this quality in therapy, using music as a tool to help people with a range of movement disorders. Music provides an auditory cue for movement, and can help people with Parkinson’s Disease, stroke, or traumatic brain injuries improve their gait, balance, and speed of movement.

Music builds upon strengths and abilities.

Music is available to everyone, no matter their age, culture, interests, ability, or activity levels. Everyone can respond to music in some way, whether it is through a change in heart rate or by picking up an instrument and playing along. A music therapist uses each individual’s response to music to create opportunities for them to succeed through music. Music therapy builds upon what each person can do, and using the flexible nature of music, therapists can change any element of the music to maximize strengths while promoting growth.

Music is fun!

Music brings us pleasure and makes us feel good. And when something feels good, we want to keep doing it. Making music a central part of therapy means people come to enjoy their music therapy sessions, even while making measurable progress towards their goals.

With all of the benefits that music provides to our brains and bodies, it is no wonder that music makes an effective tool for therapy. Music therapists bring together the many ways music can impact us with targeted interventions that address a wide variety of non-musical goals. These goals range from the physical (improving gait and balance, improving fine and gross motor skills, decreasing pain perception), to the emotional (decreasing anxiety, improving mood,

increasing coping skills). Some goals target cognitive skills such as memory, focus, and attention, while others improve communication through verbal and nonverbal expression, diction, and breath control.

What makes it therapy?

Music therapy requires three things: a board certified music therapist, a client seeking growth or change in some area of functioning, and music. It is the relationship that develops between the therapist and client, through music, that makes music therapy.

Like all therapies, music therapy involves an assessment of current functioning followed by the development of interventions targeted towards areas of needs. Unlike other therapies, these interventions involve music. These might include instrument play, singing, improvisation, songwriting, or simply listening to music. These interventions might be implemented one on one, as in individual therapy, or with a group of people participating in group music therapy.

Music therapists are board certified healthcare professionals with extensive training in music, psychology, research, and therapy principles. To become a music therapist, one must complete an approved music therapy degree program, including 1200 hours of clinical practice. This is followed by a national certification exam that designates the credential MT-BC or music therapist board certified. There are currently just over 7,500 board certified music therapists working in the United States.