



Sound Effects

For some patients, music therapy hits all the right notes

by **Beth Luberecki**

Music can make you dance, or it can help you relax. It can put you in a romantic mood, or get you through a tough workout. But it can also be an effective source of therapy for people with a variety of illnesses and other medical problems, everything from autism to Alzheimer's disease to depression.

"Due to its unique and appealing structure, music helps people to organize their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors," says Shannon K. de l'Etoile, program director and assistant professor of music therapy at the University of Miami's Phillip and Patricia Frost School of Music. "So a music therapist will use music as a tool to help patients either maintain or improve upon critical life skills."

The American Music Therapy Association defines music therapy as "the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program." More simply put, it's "a health profession that uses music as a treatment tool to address

nonmusical goals," says Al Bumanis, the association's director of communications.

Music therapy can be practiced in a variety of ways, which often depends on where the therapist attended college and to what philosophical approach he or she subscribes. "The approach we take here [at the University of Miami] is neurologic music therapy, which means we take an evidence-based approach," says de l'Etoile. "Everything we do is based on scientific evidence, and that evidence pertains to how it is that the brain is involved in perceiving and producing music."

But regardless of the approach, music therapy consists of more than simply turning on a CD and having the patient sit back and listen. "One of the first comments I always hear is, 'Music therapy is wonderful; listening to music helps everybody,'" says Connie Warriner, a North Fort Myers-based music therapist. "But it involves a lot more than that. It involves an assessment process, setting goals or objectives for the patient, and then charting their progress as they go along."

Music therapy is usually an active form of therapy, where patients might

pick up instruments and play along with the therapist or write songs to express how they're feeling. The patient does not need to have any previous musical skills to benefit from this kind of treatment. "It doesn't take a musician to play a drum, but playing together in a group, that experience creates a therapeutic environment," says Bumanis.

The modern practice of music therapy dates from the years following World War II, when musicians would play for injured soldiers at veterans' hospitals. When it was seen that the music had a positive impact on the patients both physically and emotionally, interest in music therapy grew and colleges and universities began offering degree programs.

Since then, advancements in technology and increased research have led to a greater scientific understanding of how people perceive and process music and have shown that music therapy can have an effect on a number of conditions, such as complications following a stroke. "The physical act of singing is largely controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain, and by contrast, speaking and using language are typically controlled by the left hemisphere

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of the brain,” says de l’Etoile. “If a stroke caused damage to the left hemisphere, the person might have a condition in which he’s not using language very well. What’s interesting though is because the right half of the brain is still healthy, the patient can still sing. So a music therapist would then use a technique known as melodic intonation therapy. It’s systematic and structured, and you begin with singing and work down to a simplified version of singing and speaking by accessing what is still healthy in the brain to help that person relearn that functional behavior.”

Warriner has worked in the past with developmentally disabled adults and has used music therapy to help them learn how to do everything from getting dressed to preparing a meal. “Learning is just easier with the music,” she says.

Other conditions that can benefit from music therapy include autism, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease, schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and various types of sensory impairments. “I always say that music therapy can be used wherever it’s applicable or through evaluation or assessment it can be shown that there’s a possibility it can be a tool that would bring about positive change,” says Bumanis. “I think it’s probably been applied to almost any illness or disability, but the first step is an assessment. Then you see if the client can react positively, is this a good way to go.”

With the increase in research and clinical practice comes a greater understanding and acceptance of music therapy. And because of that recognition, health insurance companies have begun to cover music therapy services in some cases.

Music therapists can be found in private practice or working at hospitals, schools, nursing homes, or mental health facilities. Fort Myers-based Hope Hospice and Community Services employs four full-time music therapists, who use music in a variety of ways with patients. “It might be life

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review, it might be emotional support, it might actually be helping them to integrate the experiences they're having," says Samira K. Beckwith, the nonprofit's president and CEO. "Sometimes it's a way to help them communicate about their experience. It's not just putting on a nice song that reminds somebody of a happy time but knowing what that person's needs are and then utilizing music in ways to help with that therapeutically.

"At Hope Hospice, we really look at the person that we're caring for at the end of life as a person and not just a patient," continues Beckwith. "We're trying to take care of the whole person and not just the disease that the person has. Because we're looking at ways to add more quality of life to each day that we have and how to provide patients with more comfort and support, music therapy is one of the ways we can accomplish that. Music can be the medium or the tool to help work on many of the issues that they're facing."

Currently, seventy-one colleges and universities in the United States offer degree programs in music therapy. Music therapists must obtain at least a bachelor's degree in music therapy, which involves study of both music and psychology as well as hands-on clinical training and research. "People don't realize the level of education required to get into this field," says Warriner. "You just don't pick up a guitar or sit at a piano and do music therapy. It takes a lot of training." In fact, many music therapists don't stop at just a bachelor's degree but go on to get a master's in music therapy.

"I think one of the biggest misconceptions about music therapy is that people don't realize there is a scientific foundation for what we do," says de l'Etoile. "We all know how music can impact us, but we don't all know why that happens. So with music therapy, we strive to have a scientific understanding of how that happens.

"I think that there's also a misconception about music therapy being categorized as a complementary or alternative form of medicinal treatment,"



continues de l'Etoile. "I'm not always comfortable with that, because then it's lumped in with things like aromatherapy and pet therapy. And those are fine, there's just no scientific evidence for those approaches, and that's what really sets us apart. I don't want people to think of music therapy as a last resort. I think music therapy is what it is and does what it does and it can serve very specific functions for certain people.

And if used well and used right it can really have some impressive outcomes. But it's not a do-all, end-all, be-all, great-for-everything kind of intervention. Not everyone needs music therapy. If you haven't heard about it, it's probably because you just didn't need it."

To learn more about music therapy or to find a music therapist in your area, visit the American Music Therapy

Association at www.musictherapy.org. Many states also have their own music therapy associations. 🎵

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