

# Benefits of music therapy



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Music is said to be a universal language—no matter where you go around the globe, you will be hard-pressed to find someone who truly does not like music. Depression may be somewhat of a universal language of its own: “Between 10% to 25% of women and 5% to 12% of men experience major depressive disorder in their lifetime, and after the first depressive episode, 60% will experience a second episode” (Eckhardt 2012). Many of those people may seek drug treatment or psychotherapy for their recurring depressive episodes, but for those people who psychotherapy does not work well or for those who, like me, who are on many different medications and cannot stand to be on another one, another treatment—music therapy—could be a successful treatment for their depression and other mental health ailments. Semana makes a good point when he says, “...self-construction through musical engagement is not only related to symbolic outcomes in everyday life but also has consequences for the development and maintenance of spirituality” (2018). Hopefully, this analysis will leave another way for people suffering depression to heal themselves—their souls—and get back to a sense of everyday normalcy.

Another group of the population that depression is prevalent in is adolescents. Hendricks et. al states in their essay that “currently, depression is a significant problem for approximately 30% of the adolescent population, and one in five individuals report a minimum of one episode of major depression by the age of 18” (1999). Adolescents are also some of the biggest consumers of music (Have you ever walked by a teenager without their earbuds in? Me either). If that is the case, then why wouldn't it make sense that music could be a successful treatment for adolescent depression?

Hendricks et. al. continue to say that “ The association between music and elevated or depressed mood (Straseske, 1989) suggests that music would be an effective technique in therapeutic interventions” and “ Bradford (1991) found that using music made traditional forms of psychotherapy more effective and decreased depression levels more effectively than therapy only” (1999). However, even though there is enough evidence that music therapy would be successful treatment for adolescent depression, there is just not enough research done on the topic to conclude that this would be so (Hendricks et. al, 1999). Despite this, the heavy basis of music in an adolescent’s life and the studies done on adults in the area may be just enough to convince teenagers suffering from depression to try music therapy as a treatment for their depression.

The elderly is another group which may benefit substantially from using music therapy as a treatment for depression and anxiety. Karen Eells says in her essay on the subject, “ Older adults are vulnerable to a wide range of mental health problems including depression, anxiety,

delirium, dementia, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and drug and alcohol misuse (Ryan and Coughlan 2011). Wolitzky-Taylor et al (2010) report that depression causes the greatest proportion of mental illness in older adults, followed by anxiety and anxiety disorders” (2014). It is reasonable to think that someone who is struggling with losing their autonomy and their memories would fall into a deep depression. Older adults are also less likely to want to engage in medication or psychotherapy; Eells confirms this by saying, “ Older adults themselves appear to favour alternative treatment options, and are quick to appreciate the therapeutic benefits of the arts, and

of music and singing particularly, even if their hearing is impaired. This may be related to the well-established therapeutic benefits of music, with strong links between music and emotions” (2014). Her essay examines music therapy as a possible treatment for anxiety and depression for the elderly and senile of all types and causes, including dementia. Even Audun Myskia and Pål G. Nord note in their article for the *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* that while antidepressant medications are the primary treatment for depression, it can be a real challenge to administer these medications to the elderly because of the high level of side effects, dangerous drug interactions, and the fact that side effects seem to plague the elderly more commonly than younger adults taking the same medication (2008). Eells goes on to say that both singing and just listening to music have been shown in studies to alleviate anxious thoughts and behavior in people with dementia (2014). Similarly, de la Rubia et. al say in their study that “ after music therapy, the levels of cortisol [the stress hormone] decrease” in saliva samples taken from Alzheimer’s patients who suffered from anxiety and depression (2018). The facts listed above are indicative that music therapy may be a good treatment for elderly individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders.

Not only could music therapy be a helpful treatment for depression in regular adults, teenagers, and the elderly, but it could also be a successful distraction from pain and enhance the moods of those who are undergoing hospitalization for various ailments. Feifei et. al explains in their pilot study that, “ Upon being admitted to the hospital, people are separated from many of the comforts of home, including their pets and a favorite chair. Some also

are disconnected from their music. We hypothesized that a music medicine intervention that brings the patients' favorite songs into their hospital rooms would make patients feel better" (2018). I know for me, a chronic pain patient and sufferer of chronic illness, that sometimes, medication does not always work to relieve my pain, and I understand how miserable extended (or even brief) hospital stays can be. Music is one thing that truly allows me to escape from my pain and my diagnoses and allows me to, just for a little while, be a normal teenager again. Music's power of distraction is so powerful that even my psychologist suggests using music as means of distraction from my pain before I gravitate toward medication-based therapy. Because it works so well for me, I could see how it could enhance mood and distract hospitalized patients from their pain. Feifei et. al continues to explain their experiment by saying, " Patients listened uninterrupted to their favorite song(s) using noise-cancelling headphones. We reassessed mood and pain immediately after the listening session. Spontaneous comments were recorded from patients during and after the session" and " Our study appears to be unique in asking patients to choose their favorite songs from an Internet-based library. It is believed that expressing personal preference and making a selection play a role in the efficacy of music as a catalyst for pain relief" (2018). This shows that the patients listening to their own chosen songs, as was done in the experiment, provided the pain relief and enhanced mood that was noted in the results of the experiment. If music therapy is able to distract from pain and enhance mood in hospitalized patients who are more often than not suffering from some type of anxiety or depressed mood (illness can do this to you—I know), then surely it could be able to do the

same in physically healthy people suffering from anxiety and depression as well.

Psychiatric patients are often times the ones who come to mind when one thinks about people who are suffering from mental health disorders. Ae-Na Choi et al. say in their article, " These studies have shown that music therapy is beneficial for anxiety, tension, stress reduction, or mood enhancement. Music therapy can also be used in psychotherapy under certain conditions in some patient groups." They conclude the introduction to their study by saying, " Based on previous findings, it is pertinent to assume that music intervention may also help to improve the psychological health of psychiatric patients" (2008). In the study, they established a small group of patients picked at random to undergo music therapy and a group of patients whose treatments were unaltered for a control group. In the music therapy group, they played songs promoting relaxation, concentration, and good self-esteem. At the end of the study, Choi et al. found that music therapy significantly lowered the patients' depression survey scores based on their ratings before and after the music therapy sessions (2008). More research must be done to confirm that music therapy is an appropriate and successful treatment for psychiatric patients, and each patient's treatment plan should be decided on an individual, case-by-case basis, but this study suggests that music therapy is an effective supplement to medications and other psychotherapy treatments for psychiatric patients.

There is also a possibility that some victims of depression and other mental health ailments could benefit from music therapy as a treatment for their depression, rather than antidepressant drugs such as selective serotonin

reuptake inhibitors [SSRIs] and serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors [SNRIs] (Castillo-Pérez et al., 2010). Drugs like these can have dangerous side effects; I was a victim of this. While spending some time in a Jacksonville children's hospital in order to find a diagnosis for what I know now is a facial nerve condition, I was given the Effexor recently prescribed to me for migraines (Effexor is a SNRI and the drug that Andrea Yates was on when she drowned all of her children in her bathtub. This required a 'may cause homicidal tendencies and ideations' label on the bottle. Yikes.) and an antiemetic [nausea medication] called Compazine intravenously. This sent me into a disorder called Serotonin Syndrome, a condition where your brain is overloaded with serotonin and causes your body to undergo intense muscle tremors and muscle rigidity, confusion, extremely high blood pressure, dilated pupils, and even sometimes seizures and death. The muscle rigidity was so bad that my jaw locked while trying to eat, nearly choking me, and for a while, that my eyes were stuck at only looking in one spot. It was incredibly difficult to speak normal sentences. After my night nurse from the night before figured out what was going on, I had to have two shots of Valium to reverse the Serotonin Syndrome before I was back to normal. Serotonin Syndrome is very rare and is only one of several potentially life-threatening risks when taking prescription medications of any kind. Because of this, many people suffering from neurological or mental disorders are reluctant to take those medications. In that case, psychotherapy is an option, but there is new research to suggest that music therapy could be a new, valid, and successful treatment for depression and other mental disorders. Castillo-Pérez et al. tell in their article, "Depressive scores for the music-listening group were significantly reduced, as were their

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sub-scores of depression in comparison with controls (Hsu & Lai, 2004). People with chronic non-malignant pain exposed to music showed more power and less pain, depression, and disability than the control groups” (2010). Countless research and proof continues to appear that says music therapy is a successful treatment for mental health ailments and should be treated as such. In their study, a music therapy group and a psychotherapy group of patients were observed over 8 weeks and surveyed on their depression and anxiety before and after the various sessions (2010). The results of the study showed that music therapy had a significant advantage over psychotherapy and, “ Our findings extend the knowledge derived from previous studies by showing that Classical and Baroque music not only decrease the frequency of depressive symptoms, but also stimulate beneficial feelings and decrease levels of depression” (Castillo-Pérez, 2010). The fact that prescription medications have so many dangerous and unwanted side effects and psychotherapy may not be a good treatment for everyone proves once again that music therapy would be a successful and valid for people with depression, anxiety, or other mental health illnesses.

These findings listed above prove with facts time and time again that music therapy has a positive impact on depression, anxiety, and overall health and that it is a treatment that may be successful for those who are sensitive to medications and do not want to go to psychotherapy. At the end of the day, any treatment that allows a person suffering from these illnesses to be able to function and have a sense of normalcy, to be able to feel somewhat like the person they were before the depression, anxiety, or other illness took over, is an excellent treatment. This research can assist others in finding that



music therapy might just be the treatment for them. If music therapy is able to give them their life back, one can only imagine the effects it can have for the rest of us. Hopefully, one day, music therapy will be recognized as a valid treatment for depression, anxiety, and other mental health illnesses, and people will be living again, all around the world.

Ah, to be free again. What a day that will be.

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