

The Use of Music Therapy on an Adolescent Psychiatric Unit

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ABSTRACT. *This article considers the therapeutic value of a music therapy group with adolescents at an in-patient psychiatric facility. Emphasis is placed upon individual success for a given group task as patients are encouraged to participate at their own level of comfort. It is the responsibility of the music therapist to ensure that the participants are comfortable and do not feel threatened by high expectations or measures of evaluation. The process helps enhance group skills as a result of increased trust among peers and the adolescents' improved self-esteem. Expressing one's feelings gradually becomes less threatening and tends to get generalized into other group therapies.*

SINCE THE EARLY 1950s, music therapy has been a legitimate means of treating physically and mentally disturbed patients. By 1953, E. Thayer Gaston had begun expanding the use of music therapy to such institutions as schools and hospitals, using it as an adjunct to traditional therapy for work with mentally handicapped, emotionally disturbed, and geriatric patients (Johnson, 1981). Music therapy has since progressed to a point where it is a more widely accepted mode of treatment in the United States. The therapeutic value of music has been known to other cultures for thousands of years and has been used in the shamanistic tradition as a tool for healing (Moreno, 1988). Currently, much research is being conducted to establish credibility within this profession, with an emphasis placed upon behavior changes through musical symbol, activity, and style (Soloman and Heller, 1981).

A Safe Outlet for Emotional Expression

A music therapy group can be a useful form of treatment when one is working with hospitalized adolescents in a psychiatric facility. Depending on the group theme, participants can benefit from music therapy because it provides a safe outlet for expressing emotions, either verbally, physically,

or mentally. Music therapy groups may also help teach the participant appropriate social skills that might result from group interaction with the therapist and peers and from a range of feedback and a variety of interactions (Moreno, 1980). Music exercises should be planned to enable all to participate at each individual's level of comfort. This is particularly important when working with those of a quiet and introverted nature.

Groups are facilitated with an ever changing variety of exercises and approaches, which enables the patients to participate at the level of their own expressive capabilities. Choice for a particular group depends upon the participants' level of functioning and needs. Success may be different for adolescents, depending on the group theme. As an example, in one group, simple instruments can be used to communicate feelings nonverbally. The next group may offer relaxation techniques through the use of music combined with a guided imagery. Other groups may participate in a structured discussion on the current musical interests of adolescents in which they explore feelings related to lyrics, music, and social image. The intent is to allow the group and its individuals the opportunity to function at varying levels.

Effects of Music Therapy

The usefulness of a music therapy group becomes evident with the participants' positive behavior changes, which may be obvious in their other groups. The participants' anxiety within other group experiences may be reduced. Furthermore, music therapy can increase patients' self-awareness as a result of their personal introspection or experiences related to brief group discussions following a particular group. The purpose, however, is not to gain psychological insights but rather to experience affect with low-level inhibition. This is a difficult task, especially when tackled with an adolescent population that may be resistant to and mistrustful of the therapist.

It is the responsibility of the therapist to stress to the adolescents that they may work at their own pace. Simultaneously, the group progresses from simple tasks to more complex and creative ones. This step-by-step process is a desensitization that lowers the adolescents' anxieties and helps individuals move toward more creative and expressive experiences. Whether it is shared with peers or personalized, the experience is of value and should have lasting effects. Trust may increase as a result, and comfort among peers should carry over to the more intrapsychic groups. Adolescents who tend to act out may learn cooperative skills while those who are withdrawn and isolative may begin to interact with less inhibition. Trust, cooperation, and interaction are vital skills to be learned and transferred into other group settings. Within group psychotherapy, pa-

tients are often encouraged to be open and honest with traumatic life experiences. Such disclosure of personal issues tends to be painful. Therefore, the trust level among adolescent peers must be high and receive appropriate support if the personal disclosures are to be complete.

Music therapy should be enjoyable for the participants, and any means of evaluation should be avoided. A patient's stress or anxiety is likely to be the result of his or her perceptions of self. It is the responsibility of the therapist to work with the adolescents who are experiencing insecurities and feelings of low self-esteem. Simply by showing concern and giving support to an uncomfortable participant, the therapist gives that person a sense of worth (Gewirtz, 1964). Again, it should be stressed that the desired result is freedom of expression in a safe and therapeutic environment. The therapist needs to be aware of the adolescent's initial anxieties about letting go of defenses while attempting to increase participation and the expression of feelings (Schulberg, 1985, pp. 249-250). Less inhibition and higher levels of participation tend to improve self-esteem for adolescents (Brennan, 1985). Special care is needed to reassure participants that they are in a safe environment and that they are free to work at their own level.

The many benefits resulting from the use of music therapy to treat the adolescent population will serve the group as a whole as well as the individual, provided that the group continues for a reasonable length of time, such as in an in-patient psychiatric facility. The primary purpose of music therapy groups is to build trust among peers and improve individual's self-esteem. These goals are achieved through success at group exercises. Once these goals are met at some new level, the groups can then function at a more-intense level of interaction in other therapeutic groups or in individual psychotherapy.

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