

Music Therapy and Depression:
Music Therapy in Conjunction with Standard Therapies
May Increase Positive Results

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Abstract

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses in the world. In the United States, some 7% of the total population experienced an episode of major depression in 2017 (nimh.nih.gov). While treatment is usually prescribed in the form of behavioral therapy, medication, or a combination of the two, the novel treatment of music therapy is not typically prescribed. For people who are diagnosed with major depression, the rate of recovery is about 52%, and is higher in those with higher levels of education and a willingness to adhere to conventional psychotherapy. Clearly, depression is an illness that requires innovative approaches. Music therapy is an increasingly common modality used to treat many types of human ailments such as posttraumatic stress disorder, recovery from surgery, and high blood pressure. Music acts as an emotional stimulant for listeners- even in those with depression. Music therapy combined with conventional therapy can offer patients with depression the emotional breakthrough needed to recover (Aalbers et al).

Music Therapy and Depression: An Investigative Study

Introduction

Researchers are attempting to determine the extent of clinical applications that music therapy may provide. Music therapy can be prescribed for mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression, or physical ailments such as high blood pressure or to alleviate pain. Mental health practitioners attempting to treat those with depression are often at a standstill because the depressed patient has difficulty accessing important memories and emotions or may feel uncomfortable accepting their diagnosis of depression (Unutzer & Park). There is increasing evidence that music, when used in conjunction with standard therapies, can provide a breakthrough for a patient with depression. Music has the ability to calm a person and make them more comfortable with their surroundings (Sandler et al). These feelings can aid the traditional methods of treatment.

People use music to regulate their mood subconsciously- a key fact for music therapists. Researchers have found that most people turn to music when they feel a certain emotion- sadness, joy, loneliness, etc- and find that music helps to regulate or enhance these emotions. By providing music as a therapeutic intervention, the therapist is simply eliciting the same emotional

response that the individual might have when turning on music for themselves- in this situation, however, the emotional response will be repurposed to address depression (Baumgartner et al).

A study in the British Journal of Psychiatry further clarified these benefits as ‘affordances’. The depressed individual will feel a disconnection with their surroundings; they will feel cut off and alone- furthering their sense of low self worth and self hate. Partaking in music therapy will afford the patient with engagement- with a therapist or a musical instrument, meaningfulness, and pleasure- exactly the qualities that are being challenged during a spell of depression (Maratos, Crawford, & Procter). Music seems to help a person to express themselves emotionally- the breakthrough that clinicians hope for when treating someone with depression (Aalbers et al). Based on the research, music therapy would be a healthy alternative, or co-therapy, to address the symptoms of depression.

A History of Music as a Treatment Method

The concept of music being used as a therapeutic tool has existed for thousands of years. Hippocrates was known to have used music as a treatment for mental patients (Antrim). Plato, too, was known to use music to heal the minds of the sick (Misic et al). However, the modern movement of music therapy has not had clear results when it comes to depression. The modern movement of music therapy started to really flourish in the 1950s and 1960s. During those decades several prominent musicians and educators, such as Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins,

combined music and behavioral therapy to treat children with disabilities and/or behavioral issues. These researchers conducted extensive tests, ultimately leading to the opening of the Nordoff Robbins Music Center in 1974. Nordoff and Robbins conducted sessions with children and found that music facilitated communication and connection and increased susceptibility to treatment (Aigen). The modern world of science and healthcare has since begun to embrace applications of music therapy. Major depression requires more research- considering the important research findings and the prevalence of major depression.

So, does music therapy provide benefits for patients diagnosed with major depression? Depression is a common mental ailment around the world that occurs in both adults and children. Major depression is characterized by depressed mood, loss of interest in activities, low self worth, decreased appetite and energy level, and sleep problems. Research collected by the National Institute of Mental Health found that 4.5% of adults aged 18 or over in the United States experienced at least one episode of major depression in the year 2017. The number of adolescents (12-17 years old) in the U.S. who experienced a major depressive episode was 13.3% of said age group (nimh.nih.gov).

The prevalence of depression is increasing, and many patients have high rates of remission (nimh.nih.gov). Given that depression is one of the most common and debilitating illnesses and is increasing in prevalence- there is a need for more innovative forms of treatment. According to the novel research, music therapy may offer patients and clinicians the necessary tool to increase the effectiveness of standard interventions. Clinicians around the world are increasingly offering music therapy as an intervention for many mental illnesses, and physical illnesses, but evidence-based results are scarce. There is a consensus that music therapy does

produce desired results in patients but the mechanisms and delivery methods have yet to be clarified. Most research points to an increase in emotional connection and a stimulating effect of the nervous system (Aalbers et al). These mechanisms are promising to clinicians who work with depressed patients.

A Pattern of Effectiveness in Engaging Music Therapy to Ameliorate the Effects of Depression

Adolescents experience depression at a slightly lower rate than adults, but the illness is still quite prevalent. An estimated 3.2 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 in the United States had at least one major depressive episode. This number represented 13.3% of the U.S. population aged 12 to 17 (nimh.nih.gov). Research shows that depression is on the rise among teenagers and that symptoms are showing up earlier in life. Adolescents with depression suffer mood swings, decreased appetite, school failure, increased emotional sensitivity, and behavioral issues. Children with depression are also more likely to engage in risky and dangerous behavior like substance abuse and unhealthy sexual behaviors (Thapar et al).

Music can help adolescents deal with depression by emotionally engaging them. For many teenagers, music offers a healthy way to express emotion and vent rage (Tand et al). In one study published in the *Journal of Research in Medical and Dental Science*, researchers from the Science and Arts University in Iran measured the effects of music therapy on depression and aggressive behaviors in high-school girls (13-18 years old) of Isfahan, Iran. In this study the music was delivered in a non-participatory way- there was no interaction on the part of the

listeners except for listening. Once a week, the participants would listen to either traditional Iranian music or modern pop music. Before and after each session, the students completed questionnaires to collect the data. Overall, the study showed that symptoms of depression and aggressive behaviors were reduced due to the music sessions (Saeidmanesh and Sharafi).

The effects of music therapy on childhood depression can be further acknowledged through the following experiment. In a study published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, researchers in Ireland conducted a study to investigate the effects of music on children experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties. Besides the usual treatment, the children engaged in weekly music therapy sessions and were encouraged to improvise and engage with the therapist. The children were given instruments to use, or were given the option to write lyrics. This particular intervention is noteworthy because of the *involvement* of the patients. The results showed that those who engaged in music therapy scored higher on psychological tests measuring self-esteem, depression, and other important scales. Interestingly, the study showed that only children aged 13 and older scored higher than the control group. Overall, the results are encouraging for clinicians (Porter et al).

Eating disorders are an area of huge concern for young people with depression, and clinicians are often at a loss on how to manage meal-time anxiety. In a controlled study, researchers examined whether music can have a positive effect on those suffering from this condition. Twice a week after meals, the study group engaged in an hour-long music therapy session. Both the study group and control group were assessed for anxiety and depression before and after meals. In the study group, results showed that the participants scored significantly lower than those in the control group (Bibb et al).

The above studies prove that music therapy is an effective modality to use in treatment of major depression in adolescents. Music therapy on its own affords a listener emotional connection and mood lifting. The goal of music therapy, for both adolescents and adults with depression, is to facilitate a better connection with one's feelings and thus improve the benefits of standard treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy (Tang et al).

Depression in adults is common- 4.5% of all U.S. adults experienced an episode of depression in 2017 (nimh.nih.gov). Treatment is normally restricted to behavioral therapy, where the patient engages verbally with a therapist to open up and break through emotional barriers (Aalbers et al). Often, the patients find it difficult to verbalize their emotions, leaving them stuck in their depressed state. Therapists search for that 'breakthrough moment' where the patient will finally feel comfortable opening up.

Research shows that music therapy may provide this key to opening up a patient and readying them for talk therapy. In one study published in the *British Journal of Psychology*, researchers in Finland conducted a randomized trial of 79 adult patients with depression. The patients in the experimental group engaged in 20 one-on-one sessions with a music therapist twice a week. The patients were given instruments and played along with the therapists- developing a musical relationship. The musical improvisation led the patients to open up more and have more meaningful talk sessions. The participants in the experimental group scored significantly higher on a depression-scale test after the music therapy treatments. The researchers did admit that the small sample size and an insignificant difference in another mental health test displayed the need for more research in this field (Erkkila et al).

For adult women, an especially challenging time can be childbirth. Many women experience postpartum depression. In a peer-reviewed study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, researchers examined the effects of music therapy on the childbirth experience. Specifically, the variables tested were pain management during labor, anxiety during labor, satisfaction with birth, and postpartum depression. There were 70 women in the experimental group and 70 in the control group. The women were instructed to choose relaxing music to listen to during labor and after delivery. The results of the study showed that women who engaged in music therapy through the birthing process did have lower rates of depression, decreased anxiety, increased satisfaction, and fewer cases of postpartum depression. The study is limited because it did not investigate and compare the types of music chosen by the women. Additionally, the researchers only assessed depression rates in women in early postpartum- late postpartum depression was not studied (Simavli et al).

Comorbidity between Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and depression is common. In an experiment published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, researchers in Iran theorized that music therapy would benefit sufferers of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The study consisted of 30 patients- 15 in the experimental group and 15 in the control. The participants were asked to fill out questionnaires commonly used to assess the degree of OCD. The normal treatment for OCD commenced with the addition of bi-weekly music therapy sessions for the experimental group where a professional musician performed various forms of traditional and contemporary music. After several weeks of experimentation, the patients filled out the questionnaires again. The results showed a larger decrease in OCD and depression symptoms in the experimental group (Bidabadi et al).

Case Study: Isaac, An Examination of Mood Change and Enhancement

Isaac (random name chosen to protect identity), is a 26 year old male who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is characterized as a mental disorder that causes extreme mood swings- from manic 'highs' to depressive 'lows' (nimh.nih.gov). Isaac experiences these mood swings regularly and is therefore very familiar with depression and its symptoms. Isaac meets with a therapist on a weekly basis for talk therapy related to his symptoms. Isaac is also prescribed medication for bipolar disorder.

As a semi-professional guitarist, Isaac is an ideal candidate to discuss the interactions between music and depression. Isaac stated that he does find a correlation between his music and his depression. He finds that when a state of depression hits, music helps him to keep his mind off the depression- a healthy distraction. He noted a distinction between writing music, listening, and playing guitar. Writing songs sometimes furthers his depression, while playing music is the best. Isaac does not feel that music would be able to replace the talk therapy that he engages in, but can help him open up during those sessions.

Conclusion

The results show that music therapy is a beacon of light for those treating adults with depression. The nature of major depression and its comorbidities means that a patient is often ‘stuck’ with their negative disposition and can spend months or years in talk therapy without making significant progress. The studies cited above show that music can promote an emotional response that standard modalities often fail to achieve. The poet Heinrich Heine stated, “Where words leave off, music begins” (Peter 343). This quote succinctly expresses the vital role that music can play in treating a disorder that is characterized by a lack of ability to express oneself verbally. Music allows human beings to explore emotion in deep ways and helps to lift us out of sadness.

However, music therapy is not recommended as the primary therapeutic tool to treat depression. A therapist may be able to stimulate a strong emotional moment in a patient but without further work the patient will likely continue through their depression. Therefore, music therapy should be viewed as an important intervention that may lead a depressed patient to greater susceptibility to standard psychotherapy. Perhaps in the future, as research continues, music therapy will be commonplace alongside talk therapy, and the combination of the two will help the millions of people suffering from depression.

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