

MontclairPatch

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Professor Talk: How Music Can Be Used for Therapy

A new therapy approach gaining in popularity during the past few years is music therapy. Montclair Patch recently sat down with Brian Abrams, an associate professor at Montclair State University's School of Music, to discuss it.

So what exactly is music therapy?

Abrams: That's tricky since there are so many varieties and definitions. One definition you could use is that music therapy is a process where a client and therapist work together through music to promote the client's health and well-being.

How long has this type of therapy been around for?

Abrams: It's been in the United States since the 1950s. However, there have been forms that resemble music therapy since ancient times.

What research do you focus on?

Abrams: I do a lot of theory building, concerning what music therapy is and understanding music in various ways.

I have also done research in music psychotherapy.

And what is that?

Abrams: Music psychotherapy has to do with working through personal issues, your emotional life, your psychological well-being through music experiences and the therapy relationship.

So instead of using words, or drawing pictures as in art therapy, you use music to communicate?

Abrams: There is more to it to that, but yes. The music is a medium of experience through which the client and therapist explore, work through issues, have insights and so on.

Do the client and therapist listen to music or make music themselves?

Abrams: All of the above. They are listening at times; sometimes live music; sometimes recorded music; sometimes the client is co-creating the music with the therapist; sometimes it is precomposed.

What have you discovered in your research?

Abrams: What I have discovered are some of the very interesting ways people make sense of their lives through music. Some of the stories that emerge from their work is very inspirational.

How else can music therapy be used?

Abrams: Music therapy can be used in physical rehabilitation, language development, elder care — such as for Alzheimer's disease — and adult psychiatry.

There is also a huge area of application for children, for example children with autism or diagnosed with developmental issues.

How is music therapy used for children with autism?

Abrams: Often, one of the largest issues that children with a developmental disorder have is their ability to relate spontaneously and intentionally with other people. There are sensory processing issues that can make the relationship very difficult.

One of the things music therapy creates is multisensory possibilities for experiencing, sensation and perception, for which words in a social context are not going to allow for.

So through music, it creates a relationship bridge and creates all of these new possibilities for a child with autism to relate to other people.

In the process of using music therapy, a child with autism is learning a whole new vocabulary for communication, for emotional relating and understanding.

I read that you also have experience using music therapy with cancer patients. Can you tell me a little about that?

Abrams: Sure. Through my clinical work, music therapy can address the needs of people with cancer on all sorts of levels. On the physiological level, it can help address such things as pain, fatigue and nausea from the chemotherapy, and stress; and on the psychological level, it can help with depression, anger and anxiety.

Music used in support groups is also very useful.

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