What is Music Therapy?

Music Therapy is a discipline whose professionals make use of clinical and evidence-based music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program. Music therapy is an established health profession that uses music and the therapeutic relationship to address physical, psychological, cognitive and/or social functioning for patients of all ages and disabilities. Because music therapy is a powerful and physically non-invasive medium, unique outcomes are possible when interventions are directed to reduce pain, anxiety, and depression. These outcomes appear to be mediated through the individual’s emotional, cognitive and interpersonal responsiveness to the music and/or the supportive music therapy relationship.

A review of the extensive published literature on this topic reveals several lines of research, largely among three major disciplines: music therapists, nurses, and physicians. Many of these studies were conducted independently by the various disciplines; however, collaborative research among Board Certified Music Therapists with other professional disciplines (particularly nursing) is on the rise.

When music is employed as an ambient and adjunct modality or tool during procedures, in the perioperative environment, and/or for use in chronic pain management, there exists considerable diversity in the literature with respect to the music listening protocol. In many cases, the authors of the published literature do not specify the exact protocol and/or why certain music was used. This is a limitation of a portion of the literature; however, it is important to understand that many of the findings from these studies can help shape, inform, and refine future research by Board Certified Music Therapists, other professionals, and in collaborative research environments.

Finally, it is important to note that the Board Certified Music Therapist employs a wide variety of music therapy interventions based on a) the best available evidence from the published literature, b) the therapist’s training, expertise and specializations, and c) the client’s needs and preferences. Programming and selection of individualized music and sound stimuli is only a small piece of the Board Certified Music Therapist’s practice. A diverse array of underlying theories forms the foundation for music therapy interventions. Examples include frameworks from behavioral, psychodynamic, psychological, and neurobiological theories. For the topic of pain and pain management, emerging findings from neuroscience with applied music therapy interventions are trending towards a fuller understanding of why certain music therapy interventions influence outcomes more favorably than others.

OVERVIEW OF SELECTED RESEARCH

Systematic Reviews, Meta-Analyses and Literature Reviews


Music Therapy reduces pain perception.


**Music Therapy reduces physiological indicators of anxiety and reduces need for sedation and analgesia, increases completion rate, and shortens examination time during colonoscopy.**


Music Therapy reduces cortisol in healthy adults.


Music Therapy reduces physiological and psychological indicators of distress in perioperative patients. Perioperative music therapy changes the neurohormonal and immune stress response to day surgery, especially when music selection considered patient preference. While clinically important, outcome effect size and significance levels vary across studies.


**Engaging in group music therapy and listening to music reduces anxiety associated with chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Listening to music reduces nausea and emesis for patients receiving chemotherapy.**


**Participating in Music Therapy sessions increases comfort and motivates bone marrow transplant patients during treatment.**


**Listening to music alleviates pain, fatigue, and anxiety of hospice cancer patients.**


**Providers can teach patients with nonmalignant chronic pain how to use music to enhance the effects of analgesics, decrease pain, depression and disability, and promote feelings of power.**


**How Does Music Therapy Make a Difference?**

Music therapy has been shown to be an efficacious and valid treatment option for patients experiencing pain related to a variety of diagnoses. Music therapy interventions can focus on pain management for physical rehabilitation, cardiac conditions, medical and surgical procedures, obstetrics, oncology treatment, and burn debridement, among others. Music is a form of sensory stimulation, which provokes responses due to the familiarity, predictability, and feelings of security associated with it. Research results and clinical experiences attest to the viability of music therapy even in those patients resistant to other treatment approaches.

**What Do Music Therapists Do?**

Music therapy utilized in the treatment and management of pain complies with the expectations and requirements inherent in the medical model of treatment. Music therapy programs are based on individual assessment and collection of extensive data for the development of complex patient histories and client-centered treatment plans. Patient objectives are specific and relevant to medical diagnosis, course of treatment, and discharge timeline.

Once goals and objectives are established, music therapists use music activities, both instrumental and vocal, designed to facilitate changes that are non-musical in nature. Through a planned and systematic use of music and music strategies, the music therapist provides opportunities for:

- Anxiety and stress reduction
- Nonpharmacological management of pain and discomfort
- Positive changes in mood and emotional states
- Active and positive patient participation in treatment
- Decreased length of stay

Functioning as members of an interdisciplinary team, music therapists also evaluate the patients during the course of treatment, implement changes that are indicated by the patient’s response, and document benefits in medical, not musical, terms.
**How Does Music Therapy Help Patients?**

Music therapy can help to relieve pain and reduce stress and anxiety for the patient, resulting in physiological changes, including:

- Improved respiration
- Lower blood pressure
- Improved cardiac output
- Reduced heart rate
- Relaxed muscle tension

Music therapy has been shown to have a significant effect on a patient’s perceived effectiveness of treatment, self-reports of pain reduction, relaxation, respiration rate, behaviorally observed and self-reported anxiety levels, and patient choice of anesthesia and amount of analgesic medication.

**Music Therapy Protocol for Pain Management**

“[This protocol]... is based on a cognitive behavioral model of therapy, which posits that new thoughts, feelings and body states may be conditioned to replace dysfunctional patterns. Specifically, a relaxed body and pleasant visual images may replace tension and worry when they are conditioned as a response to familiar, calming music. The conditioning process takes place when listening to this music is paired with deep relaxation through repeated practice. Over time, the music alone cues the response...

The music therapy protocol is designed to perform several functions:

- To direct attention away from pain or anxiety, distracting the listener with comforting music.
- To provide a musical stimulus for rhythmic breathing.
- To offer a rhythmic structure for systematic release of body tension.
- To cue positive visual imagery.
- To condition a deep relaxation response.
- To change mood.
- To focus on positive thoughts and feelings and to celebrate life.”

- Professor Suzanne Hanser, EdD, MT-BC, Berklee College of Music

**Who is Qualified as a Music Therapist?**

Graduates of colleges or universities from more than 70 approved music therapy programs are eligible to take a national examination administered by the Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT), an independent, non-profit certifying agency fully accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies. After successful completion of the CBMT examination, graduates are issued the credential necessary for professional practice, Music Therapist-Board Certified (MT-BC). In addition to the MT-BC credential, other recognized professional designations are Registered Music Therapists (RMT), Certified Music Therapists (CMT), and Advanced Certified Music Therapist (ACMT) listed with the National Music Therapy Registry. Any individual who does not have proper training and credentials is not qualified to provide music therapy services.

**Where Do Music Therapists Work?**

Music therapists offer services in medical hospitals, skilled and intermediate care facilities, rehabilitation hospitals, adult day care centers, senior centers, hospices, psychiatric treatment centers, drug and alcohol programs, schools and other facilities. In pain management applications, music therapists can work in many different hospital units, including ICU, NICU, Pre- and Post-Op, surgery, cardiac care, obstetrics, emergency, pediatrics, physical rehabilitation, and outpatient programs. Some therapists are self-employed and work on the basis of independent contracts, while others are salaried hospital employees.

**How Can You Find a Music Therapist or Get More Information?**

American Music Therapy Association
8455 Colesville Road, Suite 1000
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: (301) 589-3300
Fax: (301) 589-5175
Web: www.musictherapy.org
Email: info@musictherapy.org