

The Power of Music Therapy

Abigail Hagan

Although music has been used as a therapeutic and medicinal healing agent throughout history, music therapy has only become a credentialed profession in the 18th century. Research shows that music can promote physical rehabilitation, manage stress, improve communication, enhance memory, alleviate pain, and help to express feelings. Many people are not informed about what music therapy is and do not understand that it is research based and has measurable results. My essay describes different examples of how music therapy has been used in different situations with actual results that prove the legitimacy of music being used as a healing tool.

As a student who is interested in a music therapy major, two of the questions most commonly asked of me are “What is music therapy?” or “What does music therapy do?” Since music therapy is a growing profession, it is not widely known or understood. Many people are skeptical of the legitimacy of music as a healing tool, and therefore cast aside music therapy as a hoax or as a placebo healing method. In the article “Science in our World: Certainty & Controversy,” Christopher D. Busch uses scientific research to show the powerful effect that music can have on the body that helps to back up the validity of music therapy.¹ After reading this article, researching this topic, and seeing scientific results I firmly agree that Music therapy is an effective method of treatment.

In his article, Christopher D. Busch uses descriptions and results of scientific studies from his research to prove the legitimacy of music therapy.² Psychologist Charles Emery tested the effects of music on physical activity. In his study he had half of the subjects exercise with music and half without. All subjects were then tested for mental activity. On average, participants who listened to music scored twice as high as those who did not listen to music.³ Psychologist Frances Rausher’s research showed that playing and writing music increases brain function and can increase IQ. Children who had music lessons scored 2 to 3 points higher than children who did not.⁴

The article says that listening to music that makes you feel happy or relaxed can have some of the same effects as restful sleep. This, they say, reduces stress, which is one of the biggest health hazards. In the article Busch writes,

¹ Christopher D Busch, “Music Therapy,” *Science in Our World: Certainty and Controversy* (2010): accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SIOW/2010/09/music-therapy.html>

² Busch, “Music Therapy,” n.p.

³ Charles F. Emery et al., “Issues in Cardiovascular Nursing: Short-term effects of exercise and music on cognitive performance among participants in a cardiac rehabilitation program,” *Heart and Lungs* (2003): 368-372.

⁴ Busch, “Music Therapy,” n.p.

“Nobel Prize winning scientist Bary Marshall once told me that when doctors don't know what's wrong with you they call it "stress". There may not be very concrete evidence yet, but I think we all understand how music can make us feel better, even if it is only a qualitative observation.”⁵

In an article titled Music Therapy from *Grove Music Online* I learned a lot about what music therapy is and how it works. The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) states that,

“Music Therapy is an established healthcare profession that uses music to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals of all ages. Music therapy improves the quality of life for persons who are well and meets the needs of children and adults with disabilities or illness. Music therapy interventions can be designed to: promote wellness, manage stress, alleviate pain, express feelings, enhance memory, improve communication, and promote physical rehabilitation.”⁶

Music therapists work closely with psychologists, psychiatrists, and physicians. Examples of places where music therapists work are in mental health areas, developmentally disabled, general hospitals, rehabilitation programs, geriatric settings, hospices, clinics for people with visual and auditory disabilities, and schools.⁷

I personally believe that music therapy is effective based on the research I've done and also from personal experience. My friend's younger brother is autistic, and goes to music therapy sessions to help him relate to others, and to learn how to express emotion. I know that listening to different songs causes different emotions in a person involuntarily, so why not use the effect in medicinal practice to help others.

Music as an auditory art apparently reflects a basic human need for pattern, form, and organization. Music can provide an aesthetic way to control and enhance the auditory environment. Human responses to music include the physiological, affective, cognitive, and associative. There are few individuals for whom music of some type does not have an attraction.⁸

I know from personal experience that a single song has the power to change a person's mood. Different chords release different endorphins in your body. A minor chord usually has a sound that the human mind relates to as sad or dark whereas a major chord sounds happy and light. Some songs are so moving to an individual that they cause a person to cry for reasons they cannot explain. This phenomenon illustrates the strong psychological affect that music can have on a person. I can understand how music can be used as a therapy to release emotion or used as a way to learn how to relate to others through emotional music. Music can also be scientifically used to access different parts of the brain that aren't normally used.

⁵ Busch, “Music Therapy,” n.p.

⁶ George L. Duerksen. "Music therapy." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2257019>.

⁷ Duerksen, “Music Therapy.”

⁸ Duerksen, “Music Therapy.”

Representative Gabrielle Giffords went through music therapy treatment after she was shot in the head to help her regain her speech.

Giffords suffered from aphasia -- the inability to speak because of damage to the language pathways in her brain's left hemisphere. But by layering words on top of melody and rhythm, she trained her brain to use a less-traveled pathway to the same destination.⁹

Although the part of the left hemisphere of Gifford's brain had been damaged, she was still able to regain her speech by using the musical side of her brain. The part of your brain that is used for speech is entirely separate from the side that processes music. Gifford's was able to regain her speech by focusing on the right hemisphere of her brain and teaching it to associate words with music. This phenomenon is called neuroplasticity; the brain's ability to pave new pathways around damaged areas.¹⁰ Without music therapy Giffords would not be able to speak again. This is a perfect example of how music therapy is effective and can improve the lives of the people it services.

Since music therapy is a growing form of alternative medicine, there is still a lot of research to be done in this field. There are still some kinks to be worked out including issues regarding the subjectivity of musical preferences. Of course the type of music is very important in music therapy because everyone has different taste in music.

One must also remember that personal taste plays a role in whatever health benefits may give. Those who enjoy heavy metal or hypnotic club music may not find the soothing quality that classical music listeners get. I do however believe it is important to research music therapy and other non-traditional forms of healing. We live in a culture where every illness or ailment is treated with a pill prescribed by a doctor. While these prescription drugs are helpful I believe that we as a society overdo it. There are safer, more natural ways to alleviate discomfort. Unfortunately, the health care industry is so big and worth so much money that trying to find these alternative forms of healing will be difficult.¹¹

Although music therapy may be subjective to musical preferences, I believe that this fact is helpful to the direction of the industry. Music therapy has the potential to become specialized to the individual needs of each patient. Each patient requires his or her own type of music that may not have the same effect on another patient. I agree with Busch in this excerpt from his article because I also believe that natural healing methods should always be used first. If there is an ailment that can be healed without having to use medication than I think it is safer to stick to the more natural route. Modern medicine is obsessed with giving prescription drugs that are filled with all sorts of unnatural ingredients that may be healing one part of our body while harming another. All the drug usage today seems over-the-top and I would much rather use alternative healing methods including music therapy rather than taking pills with ingredients that are unknown to me that have the potential to cause dangerous side effects.

⁹ Moisse et al., "Gabby Giffords: Finding Words through Song," *abc News* (2011): n.p., accessed October 13, 2014, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/w_MindBodyNews/gabby-giffords-finding-voice-music-therapy/story?id=14903987

¹⁰ Moisse et al., "Gabby Giffords: Finding Words Through Song," n.p.

¹¹ Busch, "Music Therapy," n.p.

The practice of music therapy is spreading worldwide and the future of music therapy looks bright. In journal called *New Developments in Music Therapy*, Darko Breitenfeld writes in regard to music therapy stating that,

The number of papers and discussions which followed are evidence of the widespread current activity and seriousness of work in this field which includes psychiatrists, music therapists, musicologists, musicians, and social workers. The participants and guests of the Congress had the opportunity to visit local institutions where music therapy is practiced and to attend a series of concerts and other musical events. The Congress recommended the establishment of national organizations of music therapy, and closer relations between music therapists all over the world.¹²

This excerpt shows how real and legitimate music therapy is around the world. Music therapy has been proven results of healing and has been approved as a valid medicinal practice. I conclude my argument saying that based on research and the widespread current activity of Music therapy, not only around the country but around the world, I agree that Music Therapy is an effective method of treatment and should be more widely practiced.

Works Cited

Christopher D Busch, "Music Therapy," *Science in Our World: Certainty and Controversy* (2010): accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SIOW/2010/09/music-therapy.html>

Darko Breitenfeld, *International Review of Music Aesthetics and Sociology*, Vol. 1, No.2 (Dec., 1970), pp. 212-213

George L. Duerksen. "Music therapy." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2257019>.

Charles F. Emery et al., "Issues in Cardiovascular Nursing: Short-term effects of exercise and music on cognitive performance among participants in a cardiac rehabilitation program," *Heart and Lungs* (2003): 368-372

Moisse et al., "Gabby Giffords: Finding Words through Song," *abc News* (2011): n.p., accessed October 13, 2014, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/w_MindBodyNews/gabby-giffords-finding-voice-music-therapy/story?id=14903987

¹² Darko Breitenfeld, *International Review of Music Aesthetics and Sociology*, Vol. 1, No.2 (Dec., 1970), pp. 212-213