

Music Therapy for people on the Autistic Spectrum

Music therapy

A psychological intervention, music therapy uses the expressive elements of music as the primary means of interaction between therapist and client. Attentive listening on the part of the therapist is combined with shared musical improvisation using instruments and voices so that people can communicate in their own musical language, whatever their level of ability. Music therapists work with individuals and groups and the methods vary according to the setting and the theoretical approach of the music therapist.

How can music therapy help people on the autistic spectrum?

Many professionals refer to a triad of impairments in autism and music therapy can offer the following benefits.

Social interaction: Music therapy is based on forming a relationship between client and therapist. This can be a way to explore the idea of relationship in a very safe place.

Communication: Music provides an additional form of communication. The therapist attends closely to, and responds to, the client in a way that encourages further communication.

Imagination: The use of music encourages the clients to engage in a creative, imaginative process, with the support of the therapist. They



can often move away from a ritualistic use of instruments to a more flexible, creative use. This can also lead to the development of less rigid thought and behaviour patterns.

Main reasons for referral

Usually a music therapist will be addressing the mental health needs of the person on the autistic spectrum, though there may also be benefits as described above. Extreme anxiety may be experienced by this client group, and referrals are made for this and other mental health problems.

Benefits of music therapy

Music therapy provides a gentle, primarily non-verbal form of therapy. It can be structured in such a way as to reduce anxiety and enable the person on the autistic spectrum to engage with the therapist via the medium of music.

Case Vignette

J was an 11 year old boy with autistic spectrum condition and severe learning disabilities. He had no spoken language as such but communicated with a variety of vocalisations. He tapped and flicked objects constantly.

At first he found it hard to stay in room, becoming distressed and running out. In the corridor, we stood at either end with a drum. We met at the drum, making contact, and after six weeks J was able to stay in the room.

We gradually built an affectionate and trusting relationship, in which he found he could express both happiness and distress as well as his feelings about adolescence.

Finding a music therapist

To find a music therapist in your area you can contact our office or search on our website at www.bamt.org

Music therapists are trained at postgraduate MA level and are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.

The British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT) was established in April 2011. It provides information and promotes high standards of practice, training and research to further the advance of music therapy.