

Music Therapy with People with Learning Disabilities

Music therapy

Music therapy is a psychological therapy which uses mainly musical improvisation to build a relationship between therapist and client. It can help people of all ages and abilities but is often used when someone finds it difficult to engage with a purely verbal therapy.

How can music therapy help?

Work in music therapy is undertaken through building relationships both with a therapist and with music. People can discover new ways of communicating through the music and the therapeutic support allows them to gain confidence that people will listen.

Music therapy supports the four guiding principles from Valuing People (2001) giving attention to the areas of rights, independent living, control and inclusion.

People with a learning disability may find it harder than some people to think things through or express themselves.

Music therapy can help with:

- developing a clearer sense of identity and autonomy;
- increasing self-esteem and confidence;
- encouraging greater integration with other people and the community;
- increasing skills and abilities in communication and interaction with others, thereby reducing the need to use behaviour as a way to communicate distress or frustration;
- facilitating personal and emotional development by supporting the expression of difficult feelings and emotions;
- increasing the ability to reflect on, and process feelings.



Typical reasons for referral

Communication issues: taking turns, being in charge and accepting other points of view can increase awareness and tolerance of others.

Emotional difficulties: music can convey feelings without the need for words. This may particularly support people who exhibit challenging behaviour or who have experienced bereavement, anxiety or abuse.

Relationship issues: these may be explored within the musical relationship with the therapist and other members in group therapy.

Case Vignette: Charlie, a 35 year old man with severe learning disabilities and autism, was referred to music therapy because of his difficulty in interacting with others and with new environments.

Charlie's family and carers wanted him to be able to use his community more but this frequently presented great challenges as he found it very hard to tolerate meeting new people and working with others. Initially he attended individual music therapy sessions.

At first Charlie was not sure if he wanted to come to music therapy, so the therapist and carer worked gradually with him, offering a short session at first and slowly increasing the session length. Charlie engaged musically, and he began to work with the music

therapist who offered him different opportunities to communicate non-verbally. He began to use several instruments and was soon able to stay in the session for 30 minutes.

He built up a strong relationship with the therapist, and the music helped to contain and express his anxieties. Charlie used percussion instruments and his voice in the sessions. The music therapist was able to pass on ideas and advice to other staff working with Charlie that helped him when he was feeling worried.

In discussion with Charlie, the music therapist and carer began to plan a group that he would attend. Despite feeling anxious, Charlie was able to attend with four other group members. His relationship with the music and with the music therapist helped him to feel safe as he negotiated this new experience.

Others in the group responded positively to Charlie and he was able to develop an idea of himself as someone who contributed to the group. This helped Charlie build his confidence, and he slowly began to access the community a little more. Charlie attended therapy for a year, until he moved on to a new day centre.

Finding a music therapist

Please contact our office on info@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 the highest standards of practice, training and research to further the advance of music therapy.

To find out more about music therapy services in your area, or to support or learn more about music therapy, please visit www.bamt.org and contact info@bamt.org or call 020 7837 6100

The British Association for Music Therapy wishes to thank all those who have contributed to these materials. We hold to a policy of strict confidentiality for service users and any personal details have been altered to respect the needs of confidentiality.

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