British Association for Music Therapy

The British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT) is the professional body representing music therapy and music therapists in the UK. It is a source of information, support and involvement for the general public, and acts as a voice for those who could benefit from music therapy and those who provide music therapy.

What is music therapy?

As human beings, music plays a fundamental role in our identity, culture, heritage and spiritual beliefs. It is a powerful medium that can affect us all deeply. In music therapy, music therapists draw upon the innate qualities of music to support people of all ages and abilities and at all stages of life; from helping new born babies develop healthy bonds with their parents, to offering vital, sensitive and compassionate palliative care at the end of life.

Everyone has the ability to respond to music, and music therapy uses this connection to facilitate positive changes in emotional wellbeing and communication through the engagement in live musical interaction between client and therapist. It can help develop and facilitate communication skills, improve self-confidence and independence, enhance self-awareness and awareness of others, improve concentration and attention skills.

Central to how music therapy works is the therapeutic relationship that is established and developed, through engagement in live musical interaction and play between a therapist and client. A wide range of musical styles and instruments can be used, including the voice, and the music is often improvised. Using music in this way enables clients to create their own unique musical language in which to explore and connect with the world and express themselves.

Music therapy is an established clinical intervention, which is delivered by HCPC registered music therapists to help people whose lives have been affected by injury, illness or disability through supporting their psychological, emotional, cognitive, physical, communicative and social needs.

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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

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Music therapy and mental health – making positive, safe connections

Worldwide, it is estimated that approximately 450 million people have a mental health problem. In the UK, one in four people will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime, and the financial impact of poor mental health has been estimated at £100 billion in the UK[1].

Music therapy is recognised as an effective psychological intervention in the care of children and adults with mental illness. It can play a valuable role in helping minimise the trauma and disruption often associated with hospitalisation, and can have a positive impact on negative symptoms experienced with a mental health illness, such as motivation, social withdrawal and diminished affective experience and responsiveness.

Currently, provision of music therapy is uneven across the UK and people are not always able to access the support they need.

Many more people affected by mental health problems could benefit from music therapy if music therapy services are supported to grow and expand.

Music therapy is an effective psychological therapy in supporting and enabling people with mental health problems to manage their condition.

Photo by: Key Changes Music Therapy © Alick Cotterill

[1] http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/supporter-kit-2015.pdf

Music therapists work across the spectrum of mental health: from anxiety and depression (including post-natal), eating disorders, addiction and drug abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, phobias, psychosis and schizophrenia.

Improvising together with a music therapist or in a group allows someone experiencing or recovering from mental illness an opportunity to relate safely with other people, and to explore and express feelings that may be too frightening to verbalise. Music therapy can also help a person with mental illness access positive and creative aspects of themselves, often hidden by feelings of low self-worth.

For some adolescents, the transition to adulthood can be exacerbated by trauma, insecure attachments, disability and social deprivation leading to aggression, depression or self-harming. Music therapy offers a safe space for young people to explore these issues.

Kyle, a fifteen year old with a history of significant trauma, was referred to a music therapist after concerns about his lack of empathy, aggression and sexually predatory behaviour towards younger boys. He was also involved in street crime.

Initially Kyle would sit hunched with his mobile phone and found it hard to interact with his therapist. As a starting point, the therapist used Kyle's mobile to listen to tunes and discuss what they meant for him. This led Kyle to talk about his hopes for the future, school and his family.

As his trust in the therapist developed, he began performing his own raps and writing about the loss and chaos in his life, including his father's suicide. Discussing his lyrics with the therapist he made connections between these experiences and his current difficulties.

As the sessions developed, Kyle talked and rapped about breaking free from violence and began sharing feelings of guilt for his actions. Improvising on musical instruments with his therapist, Kyle discovered new ways of communicating within the music. He explored his sexuality, linking sex to feelings of love instead of power.

Photo by: Key Changes Music Therapy © Alick Cotterill

"After two years of therapy, Kyle became more optimistic and developed more understanding about the impact his actions can have on others. "

After two years of therapy, Kyle became more optimistic and developed more understanding about the impact his actions can have on others. One year later, he was attending college and had been elected a student representative.

Music therapy can also help patients in high-secure hospitals, who are often isolated and in great emotional distress, form positive connections with other patients and staff.

Music therapist, Helen Short worked at a high-security women's hospital where she ran a music therapy group for six women. Each patient was permanently segregated in a room with a small hatch through which they communicated. With an average age of 28, diagnosed with personality disorder, all had experienced severe trauma as children, and some were victims of sexual abuse. Many had assaulted nursing staff and relationships between patients were fragile.

Photo by: Key Changes Music Therapy © Alick Cotterill

The aim of the music therapy group was to develop a sense of community and foster relationships. Both staff and patients improvised together using traditional musical instruments. Those patients able to leave their rooms joined the group in the ward's corridor whilst those patients who remained segregated played instruments through the door hatch with the help of nursing staff.

The women were consistently enthusiastic about participating in the group. 'What struck me about this group,' said Helen, 'was the music. It was always very beautiful and sensitive.' Two women, Sonya and Jenny, had never spoken to each other face-to-face. Confined to their rooms, they played drums through the hatches while Helen facilitated a musical conversation between them.

Each woman listened then repeated the other's rhythmic patterns precisely. They laughed together and mimicked each other's vocalisations. Helen recalls one of the nursing staff saying, 'Wow! This is real music therapy!'

Music therapy enabled these women to form positive connections with each other and allowed nursing staff to be part of that experience. The ward's consultant psychiatrist also recorded the positive impact music therapy had on the women and their relationships with others.