

# A Day in the Life of a Music Therapist

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Humans have used music as a tool for improving health for a long time and Music Therapists now work in many health care and education settings.

As an overview to music therapy the Australian Music Therapy Association (AMTA) uses the following definition:

*Music therapy is a research-based practice and profession in which music is used to actively support people as they strive to improve their health, functioning and wellbeing.*

Music engages so many areas of our brains and bodies, from memories to heart rate, personal preferences and emotions. While people have been playing, listening to and enjoying music for centuries, the more recent development and availability of scans (such as functional neuroimaging) for research purposes, has provided increasing knowledge about what is actually happening when we engage with music. Research has found that music can release neurochemicals in our brains including endorphins and dopamine which are linked to pleasure, oxytocin associated with trust, and when engaging with sad music, prolactin which has a consoling effect. The stress hormone cortisol has also been found to decrease in response to music and engaging in musical activities (Bartlett, 1993; Nakayama, 2009).



*An oncology patient enjoying music therapy with her family.*

While music is considered to be abstract sounds, it has an ability to communicate different emotions. This is partly because music can mimic our physiological responses to different emotional states- for example, slow and heavy sounding music is usually interpreted as very sad which reflects physical symptoms of fatigue and lack of excite-

ment. Compare this to faster and bouncy music reflecting an elevated heart rate and 'bounce in your step' when excited. The differences in musical keys between major ('happy sounding') and minor ('sad sounding') have also been shown to reflect how we speak when happy or sad. Music can be used to match emotional states and slowly alter to a more positive state. When we are not able to comprehend our emotional state or use words to communicate, the music we play expresses our physiological responses to how we are feeling. This ability to express and play our emotions allows a release of emotional energy, for example banging on a drum when feeling stressed provides a therapeutic release (Carr et. al., 2011; Winkelman, 2003). Song writing is another method used for self-expression as some people find it easier to express themselves through music and song lyrics.

A music therapist's day starts with assessing who they will be seeing and the aims for that client. There are a wide range of potential aims a music therapist works towards from increasing the fluidity and speed of a client's walk to having a client say their own name in a learnt hello song, a relaxation session or providing an opportunity for self-expression. One session may focus on one particular aim or the therapist may have multiple aims which are being worked towards. As an allied health professional, the music therapist often works as part of a multidisciplinary team and will regularly collaborate with other professionals (such as Occupational Therapists) in setting goals and undertaking therapy.

The music therapist then determines the best methods for achieving the aims. Music Therapists conduct both individual and group sessions, depending on the needs of the clients, and the goals of therapy. Generally having people playing instruments and singing no matter the level of skill, enhances the positive effects and engagement to the brain. Simply listening to music is also beneficial especially for relaxation. The type of music is also important with preferred and familiar music being of most therapeutic benefit. The adaptive nature of music is great as it allows the therapist to manipulate a familiar piece of music to be either faster or slower or change other elements to achieve the desired aim. For example: In a music therapy session with an Autism class at a Special School, the song 'We Will Rock You' was used as a basis for a group song writing activity.

The process of composing new lyrics as a group addresses goals of self-expression and communication. The performance of the song, with its strong, steady rhythm, promotes active participation, engagement, and emotional expression. A day would finish with assessing how the day had gone and planning as well as cleaning and maintaining instruments and equipment as needed.



(Image acquired from: <http://www.studydiscussions.com/music-and-music-therapy-courses-in-new-zealand/>. 20/2/2014)

### Case Studies

Erin\* is a 10 year old girl with Autism Spectrum Disorder who attended weekly individual music therapy sessions. The goals of therapy were to promote social and communication skills, provide an avenue for self-expression, and improve fine and gross motor skills. Interventions used to address these goals included a structured session that allowed for some elements of choice, call and response musical activities, exploration and improvisation on a wide range of musical instruments (such as drums, chime bars, boomwhackers, and percussion), song writing, movement to music, combining music with other artistic expression such as drawing, and teaching skills on piano including reading musical notation. Outcomes of music therapy included Erin displaying enhanced verbal, non-verbal and musical communicative skills, improved self-regulatory ability, longer attention span and engagement in activities, increased confidence in self-expression, and improved coordination of both fine and gross motor skills.

Oliver\* is a 5 year old boy with moderate to severe developmental delay. He is non-verbal, is in a wheelchair, and has limited movement and fine motor control in his limbs. Oliver attends weekly music therapy group sessions with four other students in his class. Goals for all students in this session include opportunity for emotional and self-expression through music, promoting purposeful independent movement and physical rehabilitation, and encouraging social communication and shared experiences with each other. A specific goal for Oliver was self-expression and improved self-esteem through vocal expression. In working towards this goal, the music therapist used songs that addressed each student individually in a turn-taking exercise, inviting responses either verbally or non-verbally. The use of anticipatory pausing, and repetitive phrases in these songs provided impetus for Oliver to vocalise (often in time and/or

pitch), often resulting in him smiling widely. Oliver would continue his vocalisations for extended times showing increased attention span and engagement.

\* Names have been changed

The following websites contain further information about Music Therapy:

<http://www.austmta.org.au/>

Website for the Australian Music Therapy Association, including a listing of Australian Registered Music Therapists.

<http://www.nordoff-robbins.com.au/>

A form of music therapy working predominantly with intellectual and developmental disability and mental health clients.

<http://daniellevitin.com/levitinlab/LabWebsite/about.htm>

The Levitin Lab with research conducted by musician, neuroscientist and author of *This Is Your Brain On Music*, Dr Daniel Levitin and colleagues.

<http://www.loc.gov/podcasts/musicandthebrain/>

Library of Congress podcast series on 'Music and the brain'.

### References

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