MUSIC THERAPY

COMFORT AND CARE THROUGH MUSICAL EXPRESSION

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THE ECHO OF THE DRUM BEATS

against the twinkling keys on the piano. It's not a song anyone would recognize – the notes aren't played in any particular rhythm, the tune isn't written down anywhere – but it calms the 37-year-old man with nonverbal autism.

Music therapy sessions are not music lessons. No one learns how to play an instrument, although they might use them to express emotions or say things that are difficult to communicate in everyday conversation, says Lauren Rowe, music therapy manager with Living Unlimited in Harrisburg.

In addition to helping people on the autism spectrum, music therapy is used to help a variety of individuals with intellectual disabilities, depression, anxiety and those who need to improve social skills. Therapists often meet with clients one-on-one, but they also make appearances at schools, nursing homes and public centers to use music to bring groups of people together.

A child with autism might use music to communicate with "hello" and "goodbye" songs that help them practice shaking hands and making eye contact. Adults with Alzheimer's and dementia might use familiar songs to spark conversations about the past or engage in activities that keep their bodies and minds going.

"People almost don't realize they're working on something," Rowe says. "It's a positive experience. It's interaction they might not normally have."

For most music therapy patients, assessments are done to determine their strengths and weaknesses. A treatment plan is developed to guide sessions that use music to teach non-music skills, Rowe says. Music is the tool, but the lesson focuses on emotional, social and cognitive skills.

Amy Brant, a life skills special education teacher at Shippensburg Area Senior High School, has seen how music therapy with Living Unlimited helps students learn teamwork, respect, counting and following directions.

"The self-confidence they gain will help them in many aspects of their life," she says.

Music Therapy Legislation

The Pennsylvania State Task Force of the American Music Therapy Association is working to get Pennsylvania lawmakers to adopt legislation that would help music therapists achieve licensure in the state.

Licensure would give certified music therapists access to state funding and grants. It also would help people who often have to pay out of pocket for music therapy sessions because many insurance policies do not cover those services.

For more information on the task force or to learn how to help, visit mar-amta.org.

Lauren Rowe, music therapy manager with Living Unlimited in Harrisburg

Kristyn Beeman, WB Music Therapy co-owner

Similar results have been seen in the residents at Homeland Center, a continuing-care community in Harrisburg. Ashley Bryan, the director of activities/social worker at Homeland Center, began working with WB Music Therapy to provide once-a-week sessions for a group of 10 people. The sessions became so popular in the skilled-care unit that an additional hour was added each week for groups of up to 20.

"Families and staff have reported that, after music therapy, residents are more alert and engaged," Bryan says. "Music seems to have a calming effect for individuals with dementia in an environment that can be over [stimulating]."

Instead, residents have better relationships with their family and friends, and health care workers report reduced workloads as residents gain confidence and become calm, Bryan says.

Kristyn Beeman, who launched WB Music Therapy with co-owner Melanie Walborn, worked as a nursing-home feeding assistant in high school when she learned that music therapy was a field that would allow her to be creative and continue helping people.

WB Music Therapy sends therapists to provide services in homes, schools, group homes and adult day cares in the Harrisburg, Hershey and Lebanon areas.

"One of the big things is keeping it age-appropriate," Beeman says. "We're not going to use the same songs we do with children as we do in an assisted-living facility."

Knowing someone's interests – not just in music, but in all areas – can also help people grow in their areas of struggle, whether it's motor skills, coping or self-expression. Patients also might start with one-on-one sessions to build trust with the therapist before joining a group where they can work on interaction and socialization, she adds.

But judging how well music therapy is working depends greatly on the individual's needs, Beeman says. She has seen some clients for six months and others for 11 years. It really depends on whether they've met their goals or if they're someone who would benefit from continued care.

With a lot of patients, she says, goals are broken into objectives. A child who needs to increase communication skills might have the initial goal to hold a conversation for 10 seconds, then 30 seconds and, finally, an entire minute. Someone who has trouble verbalizing conversation might start singing their responses to questions and then slowly work toward using a lighter rhythm in their words and eventually speak normally.

For one patient, Beeman saw music therapy become a tool to unveiling a locked-up past. An elderly man with autism didn't speak to anyone until he was introduced to music therapy, she says. A call-and-response song helped him recognize cues he might not otherwise understand in regular conversation. Soon, Beeman knew everything from childhood vacations to school struggles and trauma and abuse. He sang his life story to her.

"I've seen music therapy make someone come to life," Beeman says. "You know it can help them learn new skills and develop talents, but when you see it change their life, you can't help but be changed, too." ⊙