What’s Music, Doc?

Juliette Arnold

When you hear the word “therapy,” the white rooms, calming colors, and a nice, comfortable couch where you repeatedly answer the question “and how does that make you feel?” are usually the first images to come to mind. But calling a treatment “music therapy”… does that mean music is just added to the equation? No; in reality, music therapy is a whole other branch of treatment entirely.

Music therapy has been around since Biblical times, but has only recently started becoming a well-known form of therapy and rehabilitation. An outgrowth of medicine, psychiatry, and special education, modern music therapy has developed into a highly specialized field that requires board certification, standards of practice and clinical training [1]. However, since it is still a relatively new discipline, music therapy is often misconceived as simply having music playing in the background in a therapeutic setting – which it is not.

In reality, music therapy is a “wonderfully diverse” field of work with patient groups ranging from both children and adults with autism, addictions, sensorimotor deficiencies and more [1]. One study has demonstrated how music, coupled with the brain’s natural ability to change, can help individuals suffering from sensorimotor deficiencies resultant from stroke, Parkinson’s disease, and other brain trauma. By using rhythmic auditory stimulation, such as a metronome or music with rhythmical accents, patients have had an improvement in gait quality [2].

Nonfluent aphasia, or the loss of ability to speak, can also be treated by music therapy, as seen by the recovery of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who, after an assassination attempt that left a hole in her head, lost the ability to speak. Through music therapy, she was eventually able to sing “what were at first small snatches of songs, and later became a whole repertoire of tunes. Slowly Giffords learned to sing ordinary phrases, which she would eventually come to articulate with the natural rhythm of speech” [1].

It has also been shown how music can help those with addictions. For one non-formal music therapy group in Calgary, Monday nights have become a time for jamming, spiritual rebirth, and an escape from the personal demons known as “drugs” and “alcohol.” Even though the group that created this sanctuary isn’t board certified, bona-fide music therapists, they have been able to share and create music to engage the individual “intellectually, emotionally and spiritually” [3].

So, if you ever find yourself suffering from addiction, poor motor function, some other malady, or are just sick of seeing typical physicians, turn on some music and move it out; using music as a healing device is the way to go!

Sources

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