

Music Therapy with Adolescents

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 adolescents?

Adolescence can be a difficult time involving the establishment of identity, morality and beliefs, development of sexuality and integration into society.

For some adolescents these may be exacerbated by experiences of trauma, insecure attachments, disability, social deprivation and exposure to negative influences which can lead to aggression, oppositional behaviour, criminal activity, depression or self harming.

Music therapy offers a safe, non-threatening space for adolescents to address personal and wider societal issues through a musical and verbal dialogue and to use their relationship with the music and with the therapist to help address their transition from childhood to adulthood. Sessions can be 1:1 or in groups, depending on the level of psychological support needed and the need for emphasis on peer relationships.

What happens in a session?

Generally the young people are free to guide the content of the session, within therapeutic boundaries. Adolescents frequently choose to compose music on a computer, write songs or raps and improvise on musical instruments. This can be 1:1 or in a group, and the music may be recorded onto a CD if they choose to share their compositions.



Group sessions allow young people to find positive and creative ways of relating with others through the music which they may not have previously experienced. Sometimes the therapist may suggest certain activities if s/he feels this may be beneficial.

Case Vignette

K was a fifteen year old boy with a history of significant trauma. There were concerns about his lack of empathy or responsibility for actions, aggressive outbursts and sexually predatory behaviour towards younger boys. He was also involved in street crime. Initially K would sit hunched up, fiddling with his mobile phone and found it hard to interact with the therapist. The therapist used K's mobile as a starting point for communication and they began to listen to tunes on his mobile and talk about what they meant for him. This gradually led to more general conversation in which he managed to talk about his hopes for the future, school and his family. As his trust in the therapist developed, he started to perform his own raps and write about the loss and chaos that he had experienced in his life, including his father's suicide; he was then able to discuss his lyrics

with the therapist, helping himself to form an understanding of the connections between these experiences and his current difficulties. Later he talked and rapped about wanting to break free from the cycle of violence and began to share feelings of guilt for some of his actions. He started to improvise on musical instruments with the therapist, something that he had rejected previously, and discovered new ways of communicating within the music.

He explored his sexuality too, linking sex to feelings of love and became increasingly aware that it was ethically wrong to take advantage of more vulnerable people sexually. After two years of therapy, the sessions ended as K was leaving the school where the sessions had taken place. Over the two years, his mood had improved dramatically, he had become more optimistic about his future and had started to develop a conscience about the impact of his actions on others. One year later, he was successfully managing a college course and had even been elected as a student representative.

Finding a music therapist

To find a music therapist in your area you can contact our office or search on our website at www.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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