

The Effectiveness of Group Music Therapy as a Treatment for Youths with Depression

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents are uniquely susceptible to depression, which is a mood disorder that causes severe symptoms which affect how one thinks, feels, and handles daily activities (Geipel et al. 1: National Institute of Health). Pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy are the two leading modes of treatment for youths, but pharmacotherapy has been found to increase risks of relapse and suicide (Erkkila et al. 2). Within psychotherapy, group music therapy has emerged as a strong treatment option to meet the unique needs of adolescents. Music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music intervention to accomplish individualized goals within a therapy program (American Music Therapy Association). Group music therapy allows for connections and interpersonal relationships to be built, provides an alternate form of expression, and has a collaborative aspect; this differentiates group music therapy from other types of therapy. This paper will examine what current treatment options for depression in youths are lacking, different opinions about group music therapy, and challenges against implementation of group music therapy as a widespread treatment method for depression in youths.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of 2019, approximately 280 million people in the world had depression (World Health Organization). Youths constitute a large portion of this group and are uniquely susceptible to depression. In fact, according to Dr. Amy Cheung, a researcher at the University of Toronto specializing in childhood depression, 9% of teens meet the criteria for depression at any given time (Cheung et al. 2). Depression is clearly a prevalent issue among youths, and efficient solutions must be found. One suitable treatment for youths has emerged: group music therapy. Group music therapy has two main merits that make it both unique and more efficient than other forms of therapy for depression. First, it utilizes music to build connections between patients and therapists while providing an alternate form of expression. As shown through the Estonian Song and Dance Festival, creating music together helps induce feelings and emotions while providing a vessel for people to express them through (Nikon Japan). Second, group music therapy participants work collaboratively with others which brings benefits that individualized forms of therapy do not. As published by the Royal Society, ritualistic synchrony, which is found in group music therapy, can lead to cooperation and prosociality, both of which aid treatment (Gelfand et al. 2). These factors, combined, make group music therapy an advantageous treatment for youths with depression.

However, debate exists over the effectiveness of group therapy as a treatment. Some argue that there is a risk that generalized forms of group music therapy may not suit the specific needs of patients (Young). Furthermore, concerns exist that music therapy can induce overstimulation in children which can have adverse impacts on patients (Hiller and Gardstrom). From these concerns rises a question of whether or not group music therapy is truly an effective treatment for youths with depression.

Depression

Depression is defined by the National Institute of Health as a mood disorder which causes severe symptoms that affect how one thinks, feels, and handles daily activities (National Institute of Health). The disorder is also very common in youths. According to *The American Academy of Pediatrics*, a peer-reviewed journal, as many as one in five teenagers experience depression at some point in their adolescence (Cheung et al. 2). Depression can be caused by a variety of factors including genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors such as social isolation and loneliness (National Institute of Health). Moreover, in the peer-reviewed journal, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, the chance of depression was found to increase during adolescence because youths face additional unique risks for depression (Geipel et al. 1). Researchers at the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank, found that these reasons include academic, social, and parental pressure (Horowitz and Graf 1).

Furthermore, depression can affect all aspects of one's life and potentially lead to tragic outcomes. Jaako Erkkilä, a licensed music therapist and professor, found that depression can lead to generalized anxiety disorder, unexplained physical changes, self-harm, and even suicide (Erkkilä et al. 1). In fact, suicide, a widespread result of depression, has become a severe problem; worldwide, over 700,000 people die from suicide each year, and it is the fourth leading cause of death in 15–29-year-olds (World Health Organization). Clearly, effective treatments for depression must be identified, especially for youths. Two main methods of treatment exist for depression. They are pharmacotherapy, which utilizes medicine, and psychotherapy, in which patients work with therapists for care. Pharmacotherapy has worse long-term impacts and can actually lead to relapse and suicide risks, making it inadvisable for treatment in youths (Erkkilä et al. 2). As such, the WHO states that pharmacotherapy should not be the first option for treating depression in youths (World Health Organization).

Music Therapy

Music therapy is an example of psychotherapy and is defined by the American Music Therapy Association as “the clinical and evidence-based use of music intervention to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program” (Tang et al. 1). Group music therapy consists of various activities including singing, composing, and playing instruments, all of which are done with a group. Music therapy has diverse applications, but it is often used for depression; 31% of music therapists treat patients with depression (Geipel et al. 2).

A unique characteristic that makes group music therapy well-suited for treating youths is that it allows for alternate forms of expression, such as non-verbal communication. A challenge of verbal psychotherapy is that major depression may lead to psychomotor regression in the area of speech which can express itself through a prolonged period of quiet episodes (Erkkilä et al. 2). As such, group music therapy is a helpful alternative to traditional verbal therapy. Dr. Michael Silverman, director of Music Therapy and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Minnesota, conducted a study comparing music therapy to verbal therapy. Results showed that the music therapy group had lower depression scores and higher change readiness scores than the verbal group. Additionally, participants enjoyed music therapy and found it to be much more helpful than traditional verbal therapy (Silverman 185). This study serves as an apt example of the differing effects of group music therapy in comparison to other treatments even though the participants were all adults with depression while recovering from substance abuse. Oftentimes, different demographics are studied in music therapy trials, making it difficult to pinpoint the effects of music therapy on a specific group. So, it is important to examine and compare all aspects of different studies.

Group music therapy also helps with expression through the nature of music itself. Music can help regulate moods and emotions because of the strong association between the brain networks responsible for processing music and those active in regulating emotions. In fact, music therapy was found to improve interaction skills and relational abilities (Geipel et al. 9). The concept of music evoking various emotions and feelings is corroborated by testimonies

from participants in the Song of Freedom at the Estonian Song and Dance Festival. At the festival, Estonians gather to sing songs in the Estonian language to convey their appreciation of their language, joy for freedom, and pride in their heritage (Nikon Japan). Moreover, the festival proves that music can be a vessel for emotions and that the joint experience of creating music helps facilitate a safe environment to express feelings. The environment created at the Estonian Song and Dance Festival is echoed in group music therapy as patients gather regularly to engage in music-related activities to express emotions. Emma Windle, a music therapist and professor, found that a common theme in surveyed responses following her group music therapy trial was feeling safe due to the group (Windle et al. 6). Both the festival and group music therapy are conducive to expressing emotions.

Working with a group during group music therapy also brings unique benefits. Through group music therapy, participants regularly embark upon shared music-related activities, thus building connections with one another. Once again, the nature of music plays a powerful role, as it strengthens the connections between members of music therapy groups. A review of nine studies pertaining to music therapy as a treatment for depression published in the *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, a database for systematic reviews in health care, tells that music therapy trials tend to have high levels of engagement because music-making itself is a “social, pleasurable, and meaningful activity” and evokes and modulates the shared moods and emotions between people (Aalbers et al. 9). Dr. Teagan Cruwys, a professor at the University of Queensland, states that social isolation is often a predictor of depressive symptoms (Cruwys et al. 1). This stresses the importance of the social aspect of group music therapy, as isolation can alter the effectiveness of treatment. She states, “depressed respondents with no group memberships who joined one group reduced their risk of depression relapse by 24%; if they joined three groups, their risk of relapse reduced by 63%” (Cruwys et al. 1). These results establish a clear connection between group memberships and rates of depression. By providing a social group through the utilization of music, group music therapy helps lessen the isolation felt during depression, thus reducing chances of relapse and making treatment more effective.

More benefits arise from being in a group during music therapy. An article in the peer-reviewed *Philosophical Transactions B*, examined the effects of ritualistic synchrony, or the repetition of shared activities within a group. Group music therapy is an example of ritualistic synchrony because members collaboratively sing, compose, or create music together on a regular basis. As such, the high levels of engagement found in group music therapy can, in part, be attributed to ritualistic synchrony. Ritualistic synchrony leads to collective effervescence, “the feeling of excitement and connection felt when a community participates in a collective or synchronous action” (Gelfand et al. 2). It has led to increased cooperation, prosociality, trust, and comradery among group members (Gelfand et al. 4). Thus, the social element of group music therapy leads to increased connections among members and creates a safe space for sharing and participation.

Counterargument

Although group music therapy has proven to be an effective treatment against depression in youths, concerns remain. The two main arguments against the effectiveness of group music therapy in youths with depression are the risks of misapplication and the possibility of overstimulation. Music therapist and professor with over 25 years of experience, Dr. Laurel Young, worries that the rise in public knowledge of music therapy brings risks of oversimplified perceptions of how to conduct treatment. She states:

“the “miraculous” effects of music as featured in popular media along with the widely accepted notion that music is a “universal” medium can lead to false generalizations and over-simplification of how music can and should be used in healthcare or other psychological contexts.” (Young)

Regarding the argument that music therapy leads to overstimulation, professors of Music Therapy at the University of Dayton mention that music therapy may trigger negative memories or trauma due to the emotive nature of music (Hiller and Gardstrom). They also state that the potential risks of music therapy vary based on the method

being used, but methods like listening, composing, and improvising can lead to effects such as confusion, distortion of experiences, and self-consciousness (Hiller and Gardstrom).

Despite these concerns, group music therapy serves as an effective treatment for depression in youths. First, music therapy is administered by licensed therapists who understand how to adjust treatment plans to accommodate specific needs. Second, many forms of group music therapy are available, allowing patients to find one that works best for them. Last, although all forms of therapy have the potential of triggering trauma (Hiller and Gardstrom), group music therapy has been proven to have unique benefits, compared to other types of therapy, which help alleviate any possible negative experiences. For instance, the group element provides a safe space where participants tend to feel more comfortable. As observed by music therapist and professor Emma Windle, the most common themes found in responses following her group music therapy trials were the feeling of group safety and the thought of music as a new means of processing feelings and experiences (Windle et al. 6). As such, group music therapy helps adolescents process past experiences in a healthy way. A meta-analysis with five studies judged music-based interventions as a potentially effective tool for reducing the severity of internalizing symptoms in adolescents (Geipel et al. 2). Music therapy was also found to increase opportunities for group bonding which increased comfort in discussing past experiences (Silverman 1).

Limitations

Even so, limitations to the potential of group music therapy as a widespread treatment for depression in youths exist. First, stigmas surrounding depression make it difficult to access treatment. This, combined with insufficient resources and a lack of professionally trained healthcare providers, results in more than 75% of people with mental disorders receiving no treatment (World Health Organization). In fact, this is exacerbated when it comes to accessing group music therapy because music therapists require a special license. As of 2020, there were only 20,800 recreational therapists, a group within which music therapists are included, in the U.S. and thus even fewer music therapists. However, the field is projected to grow by 10% over the next decade which will play a role in increasing access to group music therapy (U.S. Bureau of Statistics).

Conclusion

The two main components of group music therapy, the use of music as the mode of therapy and working with others in a group setting, combine to differentiate group music therapy from other treatments and mark it as an effective method of treating depression in youths. The American Music Therapy Association found that group music therapy improved communication, resilience, identity formation, competence, and connectedness in adolescents (Shuman et al. 51). Group music therapy is a tool with the potential to help millions of youths with depression around the world, so it is imperative that access to group music therapy increases so that all youths have the opportunity to treat depression and go on to live full lives.

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