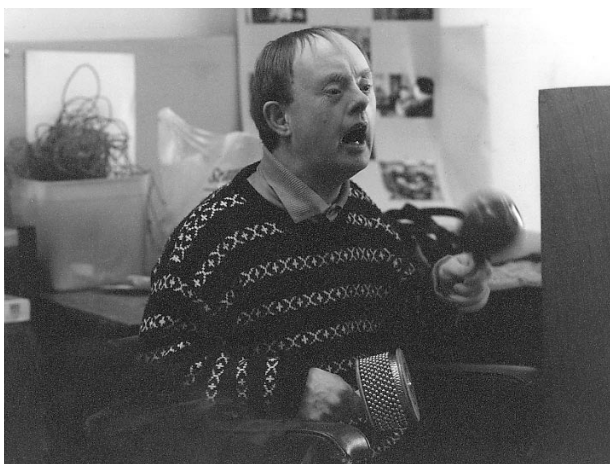


# How can music therapy help people with learning difficulties?



## **Kevin's story**

Kevin has profound and multiple learning and physical disabilities. He was referred to music therapy by his carers who were worried because he seemed sad and distressed. Kevin's carers were finding it hard to help him with these feelings.

Initially, Kevin attended a five week assessment. This helped the team to see that music therapy would be helpful. After the assessment, Kevin attended another 12 weeks of individual therapy.

Although Kevin does not have language, he was able to use his voice, and a limited number of instruments. The music therapist encouraged Kevin to make sounds, and used her own music to respond. This created a two-way musical dialogue built around Kevin's own style of music. Kevin's music had a sad, mournful quality, and the therapist responded to these musical 'communications' in a supportive way. Using improvised music, Kevin was able to connect closely with the therapist, and share some of his sadness. Kevin went on to join a music therapy group.

Music therapy helped Kevin to communicate and explore his feelings in a direct way. The group he moved into focused on offering clients ways of being together and communicating with each other, using the non-verbal medium of music.

*All names in this leaflet have been changed*

## **What is music therapy?**

Music therapy is an interactive, primarily non-verbal intervention. It provides a process through which clients can express themselves, become aware of their feelings and interact more easily. Music therapy can provide new insights into a client's functioning. Therapists work with all age ranges, in a wide variety of settings.

Music therapy can help in areas including:

- communication disorders
- learning disabilities
- mental health problems
- physical difficulties
- emotional problems
- challenging behaviour

Music is a powerful emotional medium, which can affect all of us deeply. In music therapy sessions, interactive music is spontaneously created by the client and therapist. The client does not need any musical training or experience in order to make use of music therapy. Accessible instruments are provided for the client to play. These might include a selection of percussion instruments.

The therapist seeks to establish contact with the client through the shared use of sound. The therapist responds to and supports, with music or words, any form of communication from the client. This could include the client's music, vocal sounds, movement, words or facial expression.

By establishing a relationship through music, the client can experience and explore new ways of relating, leading to development and change.

## **What are the aims of music therapy?**

The aims of music therapy are primarily non-musical, and are determined by the needs of each client. Typically they might include:

- helping clients to communicate
- developing healthy ways of interacting with others
- providing emotional support
- building relationships
- promoting independence
- enabling clients to express themselves
- helping clients to share their difficulties or problems

## **The practice of music therapy**

Music therapists provide group and individual assessment and treatment sessions, according to the needs of each client. Music therapists also provide the following services:

- writing reports and summaries
- taking part in multidisciplinary case conferences and meetings
- offering advice and consultation for staff groups
- offering workshops on music therapy
- undertaking joint working with team members

Music therapy is a State Registered profession. This assures the public that those who practise music therapy are competent to do so.

## **Working with anger**

Following referrals from colleagues and carers, a group was established for clients with mild learning disabilities, who found it hard to manage their feelings of anger and frustration.

The group used both music and words in their work. The non-verbal medium of music helped the people in the group to share some of the difficult situations and the angry feelings that they experienced. Sometimes one person would lead, describing a situation and asking people to play in a certain way or on a certain instrument. The group also used the music more spontaneously to express emotions that were hard to talk about. Playing music allowed these frightening, angry feelings to be communicated within the group in a safe way.

The group members found sharing experiences very helpful, and began to find their own solutions and ways of coping. They thought about their angry responses and the situations when this occurred. Group members considered the different roles that they took, within the group, and in wider groups such as family, college and friends. They thought about finding different ways of reacting in order to manage their anger.

Towards the end of the group, the members wrote some song lyrics about the work that they had done, and sang their song to end the process of therapy.

The **Association of Professional Music Therapists** (APMT) is the national organisation for qualified music therapists and those in training. If you would like further information about employing a music therapist, or would like to find a therapist in your area, please contact:

Association of Professional Music Therapists  
24-27 White Lion Street  
London  
N1 9PD  
Telephone: 020 7837 6100  
Email: [apmtoffice@aol.com](mailto:apmtoffice@aol.com)  
Website: [www.apmt.org](http://www.apmt.org)

The **British Society for Music Therapy** (BSMT) is a registered charity. Its aim is to promote the use and development of music therapy. Membership is open to all with an interest in music therapy. The BSMT organises conferences, workshops and meetings, and is a centre for information. Members of the BSMT receive the British Journal of Music Therapy twice a year, and the BSMT Bulletin three times a year.

For further information contact:

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N1 9PD  
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Please enclose an s.a.e. with written enquiries