

Using Music Therapeutically



Music can greatly affect our mood. Choose your piece of music wisely. When we feel low, it can be tempting to play music that fits with how we feel, which may make us feel worse. It can be much more helpful to choose music that is close to how we feel now, but just slightly above it, or instance a little faster or slightly more upbeat, or music that starts slow and sad, but changes and influences our mood in the same way.

Music is very personal, and what works for one person may be very different from what works for another. If you're not sure what piece of music to use, then get a few tunes together, and try them. You'll soon know if a song or piece of music is going to do the job! Very quickly you'll notice it starting to affect you.



Watch out for song lyrics. Whilst the music does the main job of affecting our mood, the lyrics also play a part. If you're going to practise mindful listening, then it may be best to choose music without words.

Listening

Sometimes you can put the music on in the background whilst you carry on with your daily activities. It's okay to sing or hum along, or even dance! You may prefer to do that alone, although it can be more fun with others.

Make play-lists according to your mood, starting for instance with music that fits with your mood, then, for example, gradually becoming lighter and faster if you feel sad, or calming if you feel tense.

Mindful Music

Put some time aside to sit or lie down and be with the music, so that you can give it your full focus of attention. Ask others not to distract you, turn off your phone and do whatever else you need to do to reduce distractions.

Find somewhere comfortable and give it your total focus, with your full attention on the music. As you listen:

- Bring your attention to aspects of the music that you don't normally notice: the rhythm, the different instruments or sounds at different times, the pauses, the tune and the background harmony, the varying loudness and speed of the music, the high and low notes, long and short.
- Notice how the music is affecting you as you listen: notice your breathing, your heart rate, your body's rhythm.
- Bring your attention to the rest of your body, and notice the physical sensations as you listen to the music.
- Notice what emotions the music bring up, and how your mind is being affected (calming, energising, inspiring, more alert, relaxing).
- Listen to the music as a whole – let it sweep you away and along, getting lost in that music. If any thoughts come into your mind, just notice them and allow them to be carried away on the music, then bring your attention back to the music.



Participating



Singing or humming can be a very effective way to express yourself. Again choose the music wisely. Watch out for the song lyrics too – they can be very relevant.

Dancing or moving – when we allow ourselves to move our bodies with the music, it can strengthen the power of the music to affect us. Any form of exercise is likely to be beneficial. In depression, physical activity has a very powerful anti-depressant effect – it’s motivating and energising. When we’re feeling tense, because of stress, anxiety or anger, then physical activity uses the energy that the adrenaline response has created, thereby having a calming effect.

Playing an instrument – however ‘badly’ – can help relieve stress, improve concentration, give you a sense of achievement and enjoyment, build confidence, improve your ability to think rationally, and has the benefits of including physical activity. If you don’t have an ‘instrument’ at home, maybe it can just be banging on pans or cushions with wooden spoons.



Taking up and learning to play a musical instrument may give you a focus, a sense of purpose, a goal, a sense of achievement and enjoyment, self-confidence and all the benefits previously described.

Playing music with others will add to the sense of fun and enjoyment and give you a sense of being close to others. That’s particularly important if you normally isolate yourself from others – music can be a great and less threatening way to get together with others who have similar interests – any conversation is likely to be about the music and the activity. If you don’t already play an instrument, you could always join in with a community drumming group or choir in your area.

There are various “online music maker” tools that will enable you to create or compose your own music or sounds.

However you choose to use music, enjoy it, and notice how it affects you. If it doesn’t have the desired effect, then just choose a different piece of music, or a different musical activity.

Encore!

