

The Mental Health Benefits of Improvisational Music Therapy for Young Adults

Les bienfaits de la thérapie basée sur l'improvisation musicale pour la santé mentale des jeunes adultes

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Abstract: In this music and health series column we highlight the important role improvisational music therapy can have for university and college students experiencing mental health issues. While there are many music therapy approaches and techniques that are valuable in working with clients having mental health challenges, improvisational approaches play an important role when it is difficult for clients to verbally express or discuss emotions. We focus on the pioneering work of Kenneth Bruscia who outlined over 60 music improvisation techniques from which the discipline of music therapy continues to build upon.

Résumé : Cette rubrique de la série Music and Health (Musique et santé) traite du rôle important qu'occupe la musicothérapie basée sur l'improvisation musicale auprès des étudiants universitaires et collégiens qui ont des troubles de santé mentale. Bien qu'il existe de nombreuses approches et techniques de musicothérapie efficaces auprès des personnes aux prises avec des problèmes de santé mentale, les approches basées sur l'improvisation musicale sont particulièrement pertinentes lorsqu'il est difficile pour les clients d'exprimer ou de parler de leurs émotions. Nous nous concentrons sur le travail précurseur de Kenneth Bruscia qui a proposé plus de 60 techniques d'improvisation musicale qui contribuent encore à l'évolution de la musicothérapie.

Mental Health Issues

Kessler et al. (2007) note approximately half of all lifetime mental disorders begin in the mid-teenage years to the mid-20s. Due to a variety of reasons such as stress,



the prevalence of mental health issues is rising among adolescents, young adults and individuals studying in higher academic institutions. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (n.d) “ Over time, continued strain on your body from stress may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, including mental disorders such as depression or anxiety” (para 4). College and university students often experience considerable stress given the numerous changes they have to navigate. In typical years, these include adapting to a new learning environment and increased academic pressure and, for some students leaving their home and family, moving to a new city, and cohabitating with new individuals. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, some of these changes are present but there are further stressors, such as attending classes in different time zones (i.e., attending class at 2:30 am), learning on multiple platforms, giving online presentations, and the stability of the internet. These pressures all play an immense role in overall mental health (Hernández-Torrano, 2020).

Individuals impacted with mental health issues often experience social isolation as a result of stigma around mental illnesses, causing them to be reluctant to seek help (Storrie et al., 2010). There have been a number of good initiatives in Canada (i.e., Bell Let's Talk) and globally in the past decade helping to reduce the stigma; but nonetheless stigma still exists.

Music Therapy

Research shows the benefits of music therapy for various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, autism, trauma, and schizophrenia. Music acts as a