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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT—SUPPORT FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

Music Therapy with Adolescents Experiencing Loss

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Issues of Adolescent Development and Tasks of Bereavement

The factors in human development that characterize adolescence present challenges for those attempting to help teenage clients cope with grief and loss. In order to understand the implications of grief and loss experienced in adolescence we must first consider the developmental context of the adolescent. There are five core issues of adolescent development that are affected by major loss experiences.

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These core issues include:

- trusting in the predictability of events,
- gaining a sense of mastery and control,
- forging relationships marked by belonging,
- believing the world is fair and just, and
- developing a confident self-image (Balk & Corr, 2001).

Influencing these core issues of adolescent development are the adaptive tasks of bereavement and crisis the adolescent encounters. Adaptive tasks of bereavement and crisis are:

- establishing meaning of the event and its personal significance,
- confronting reality,
- sustaining personal relationships,
- maintaining personal balance, and
- preserving a satisfactory self-image and maintaining a sense of self-efficacy (Balk, 1996).

Both the core issues of development and the tasks of bereavement exist along a continuum and may be influenced by numerous personal, cultural, spiritual and social factors. As a multi-faceted therapeutic profession, music therapy can address the unique needs of the grieving adolescent within a developmental context while promoting developmental and bereavement related goals.

Music therapy addresses these challenges through the application of music as a unique mediating stimulus. This article will introduce what music therapy is to others in the grief and loss community and identify who does music therapy and how they are trained. In addition to describing music's positive effects on psychosocial factors, we will discuss how neurophysiological stress response models found in the grief literature have correlates in recent music studies. Finally, we describe what a music therapy intervention might contain in the group or individual session and make recommendations for the application of music therapy to address loss issues other than death loss in the adolescent population.

Definition of Music Therapy

Music therapy is the enhancement of human capabilities through the planned use of musical influences on human brain functioning. In the accomplishment of therapeutic aims, music seeks to restore, maintain and improve mental and physical health. Under the proper conditions music can be used to facilitate changes in emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual, and physiological states (Davis et al., 1999).

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Professional Training in Music Therapy

Music therapists are professionals who have completed extensive training in order to practice. Music therapists must have successfully completed the academic and clinical training requirements for music therapy as established by the American Music Therapy Association. In addition to undergraduate general education, music therapy students are required to take music theory, music history, piano, voice, percussion, conducting and arranging classes. The curriculum also includes courses in social studies, human development, psychology, anatomy, and physiology. While on campus, students are supervised through a minimum of 128 hours of practicum experience with various clinical populations. Further, each candidate for certification must complete a 6-month, residence internship at an approved training site off-campus. Upon completion of the coursework and clinical training, they are eligible to sit for the Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT) examination. The CBMT exam is a national examination that tests the competence of music therapists at the entry level. Further training in music therapy at the graduate level is strongly encouraged after clinical practice.

Why Use Music Therapy as a Therapeutic Support for Adolescents Experiencing Grief and Loss?

Primary need areas of adolescents experiencing grief and loss are emotional expression, release, and regulation, the development of effective coping mechanisms and the development of significant, supportive peer relationships. Underlying the many positive ways that music and music experiences support coping and emotional processing may be music's effect on neurophysiological measures of stress and immune function. Grief and loss researchers have reported that the experience of grief and the anticipation of the death of a close loved one is significantly correlated with elevated stress hormones (e.g., cortisol, epinephrine, norepinephrine) and depressed immune function measures like T cells and natural killer cells (Bartrop, et al.,1977; Goodkin, et al., 1996; Irwin, et al., 1988; Jacobs, et al., 1987; Jacobs, et al., 1986; Roy, et al., 1988). These authors suggest that the sustained negative measures over extended periods of time (longer than 6 months) may be linked to the development of pathological grief evidenced by depression, anxiety, and compromised physical health. Reports of several music studies indicate that music-listening and music-playing may actually lower stress hormone measures and raise or enhance measures of immune functioning (Bittman et al., 2001: Charnetski & Harrison, 1998; Field, et al., 1998; Kumar, et al., 1999; McKinney, et al., 1997; Miluk-Kolasa, et al., 1997; Rider, et al., 1985). Furthermore, music mood induction techniques have been found to be 100% effective in modifying the affect of subjects with depression, increasing emotional state towards greater positivity, promoting greater levels of arousal, and promoting greater present-mindedness (Clark, 1983; Field, et al., 2000; Shantin, 1970; Sloboda, 1999; Thaut, 1989).

While none of the grief researchers cited above looked at grieving adolescent populations specifically, one recent music study did examine the effects of listening to preferred music on depressed female adolescents. Field, et al. (1998) found that elevated cortisol levels and abnormal frontal brain firing patterns were significantly improved in depressed adolescent girls after they listened to a 23-minute recording of preferred music. A control group established by random assignment showed no changes in either measure after simply sitting in silence for the same amount of time. Could it be that music can intervene in the dysregulation of biochemical feedback systems associated with stress, anxiety and depression in adolescents? This was a small study (n=28) and results must be confirmed in new studies. The stress hormone portion of the study is presently being replicated at Colorado State University in the Department of Music, Theater, and Dance (music therapy master's thesis study).

The emphasis placed on social relationships and developing a sense of belonging during adolescence, as well as the often-experienced sense of social isolation and poor social support that occurs with grief and loss during adolescence, necessitates the application of music therapy interventions within a social context. Therapeutic experiences within a group setting allow for opportunities for social support, positive social interactions, experiences in social competence and in social learning. Within a social learning model (Yalom, 1995), musical experiences serve to enhance the social microcosm through allowing group members to reveal and examine emotions and behaviors and then practice more desirable patterns of emotional expression and regulation, social interaction, and behavior (Bright, 1995; de l' Etoile, 2000).

Music Therapy Interventions

Based on the need for adolescents experiencing grief and loss to experience affect modification, express and release emotions, develop effective coping mechanisms, experience social support and a sense of belonging and learn desirable social behaviors, therapeutic music experiences can be created in accordance with models of affect modification, the Associative Network Theory, classical conditioning and social learning (Bower, 1981; de l' Etoile, 2000; Thaut, 1989; Yalom, 1995). Music therapy experiences that address these therapeutic needs include instrumental improvisation, structured drumming experiences, group song writing, lyric analysis, music and relaxation, music and drawing, and music and movement. For example, instrumental improvisation can be used to facilitate affect modification combined with emotional expression and release while simultaneously engaging the adolescent in problem-solving strategies and developing coping mechanisms. Lyric analysis can be used to assist the grieving adolescent in establishing the meaning of the loss event, confronting the reality of the event and identifying with various related emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, guilt and relief. Experiences in music and relaxation help the adolescent to develop effective coping mechanisms that they may implement independently. While these music experiences are very successful within a group context, each experience can be adapted for individual music therapy sessions.

Further Recommendations

Music therapy is effective in the therapeutic support of adolescents experiencing grief and loss within a variety of situations. Music therapy can be used to therapeutically support the needs of adolescents who have experienced the death of a family member or friend, loss related to a physical injury, loss related to divorce, loss related to abuse and loss related to adolescent pregnancy and

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parenting. These are just a few of the significant loss experiences that any adolescent may struggle with and need support for.

Conclusion

As in all age groups, adolescents are confronted with many other types of loss experiences that can have a significant negative impact on development and healthy physical and emotional functioning. These events can include the loss of parents or siblings in the living situation due to chronic illness, divorce, incarceration or chronic substance abuse. The loss inventories for children and adolescents in foster placement and at residential treatment centers are extensive. Pregnant teens and teen parents also have multiple loss issues that imperil the healthy progression of pregnancies and transition to parenthood.

Since the mid-20th century, music has been a particularly significant socializing factor for the adolescent in the United States and westernized world. Teens find identity, expression of emotions and a worldview that is unique to their age group in the music they listen to and dance to. The music popular with teens becomes a soundtrack to their experience of coming of age. Music, as a nonverbal, non-threatening modality, can be used by those trained in music therapy to meet adolescents struggling with loss issues where they are, emotionally, cognitively, and developmentally. In this meeting, or intervention, negative cycles of emotion, thinking, and behavior (perhaps even neurophysiology) can be affected. We hope that this brief overview has provided others in the grief and loss community with some idea of what is music therapy, who practices it, and why it may be useful to the adolescent needing help in dealing with death and other significant loss events.■

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