

Listening music therapy



Lorraine O'Rourke and Monica Cooper
combine counselling skills and a love of
music in their therapeutic work with groups

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In this article, we talk about a bespoke therapeutic music group which we deliver to children and young people. This simple idea evolved from a love of music, combined with a passion for therapeutic work. We listen to music for self-care in personal everyday settings and recognise how beneficial this can be. The group we discuss in this article is representative of one of our groups, delivered over a 10-week period, with nine young people who have various presentations and backgrounds. Here we talk about two fictitious young people, who are amalgamations of those we have met.

Louise is 14 and has mild learning difficulties. She is reserved, anxious and lacks confidence. She is always eager to please others and finds social settings difficult. Louise has a small group of friends, despite her struggle with her peer group. She has a loving and stable background where feelings are discussed openly. Mikey is 13. He is loud, disruptive and has difficulty self-regulating his emotions. He has a chaotic, dysfunctional and violent family where there is poor communication and feelings are not discussed. Mikey is currently a looked-after child who has been separated from his younger siblings and has been placed out of area for his own safety. He has no friends.

On first meeting the group, we work in collaboration with the young people to set rules of engagement and desired outcomes. These have been agreed as:

- To build confidence
- To be able to read and understand other people's emotions and learn how to respond, rather than react
- To learn ways to express ourselves calmly and be heard
- To learn coping strategies.

Mikey has chosen not to sit with the group as it's 'dumb'. He makes it clear from the start that he will

not be participating much. Instead, he sits close to the window on the other side of the room, swinging on his chair while shouting out random comments. We can see that he is watching everything from afar and seems interested in what's going on in the group. We do not push him to join us.

To introduce the concept of matching emotions to music, we play a selection of songs and ask the group to tell us how each one makes them feel and what it reminds them of. Louise quietly tells us that each song makes her 'happy', despite her facial expressions suggesting something quite different. A few of the others give mumbled responses in a non-committal manner while watching their peers' reactions.

Developing self-awareness

Our last song starts. It's Gerry Cinnamon's *Belter*,¹ and immediately the atmosphere in the room changes; everyone, including Mikey, is moving their feet and bodies in time to the music. A few are out of their seats, dancing and singing. A couple voice their surprise at us 'old codgers' having knowledge of such music. They are all desperate to share their feelings and experiences of this song, which opens up the dialogue and allows us to be part of the young people's worlds.

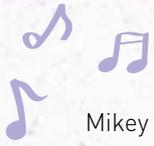
Over the next few weeks, we continue to use listening to music combined with fun, interactive activities and our skills as counsellors to help the group organically access their emotions, while promoting self-soothing and self-regulating principles. Subtly, we create an environment that allows the young people to develop self-awareness, self-worth and respect for each other, while building resilience and confidence. We provide a safe space that gives opportunity for the group to share sensitive information, if they wish, and this can be held and responded to. This appears to help drop barriers and cement formation of a more trusting and cohesive group. It becomes evident that tolerance, respect and acceptance for each other are growing. During these weeks of the programme, we are taken on a rollercoaster of emotions and participate in many lively discussions.

Louise relaxes her need to please us. She starts to mix more with her peers and voice her opinion, even when it doesn't match that of the majority of the group.

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Mikey slowly becomes more integrated within the group and sits in the circle with us. He continues to be reactive from time to time; however, he learns to manage and respond to this in a less explosive fashion.

In week eight, we set the individuals in the group the task of bringing us a song to match a particular emotion. We select the one emotion we perceive they are individually struggling with, for example fear, sadness, worry. In week nine, they bring their selections.

We play each song to the room without saying who has brought it. Turns are taken to guess who has brought the song and what emotion they are trying to express. This naturally opens up the conversation around how each of them feels as they are guessing who brought it. At the end of each piece of music, the person who has brought it shares the emotion attached to it and why they have selected that particular song. This session is especially emotive; we are completely astounded by the selection of music chosen, because of the depth of emotion and honesty behind each one.

Shared emotion

Louise has been given the emotion ‘fear’, and she brings Shawn Mendes’ *In my blood*.² She speaks very softly of her daily battle with anxiety and the debilitating affect this has on her ability to enjoy everyday things. We hear of her frustrations of not being as pretty or academic as her peers and her belief that she is ‘ugly and stupid’. We learn of the bullying she has endured throughout her school life and the impact this has had on her confidence and self worth. She appears surprised that this was an experience shared by the majority of the group.

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Mikey participates in this task better than we could have ever imagined. He brings Chord Overstreet’s *Hold on*³ to represent the emotion of ‘sadness’. He speaks of his biological mother’s poor mental health and her many suicide attempts. With tears in his eyes, he shares how painful it has been for him to ‘abandon’ her and describes his overwhelming guilt that he wasn’t able to look after her or his siblings. As he

speaks, the room is silent, and everyone listens intently to his words. We witness the group offer support and kindness to him in a way that is genuine and sensitive. As a group, we reflect and process what has been shared in the room. We develop a personalised playlist certificate to present to each individual in the group at the end of the programme. We also produce a framed group playlist.

We wanted to combine our professional counselling skills with our love of music to create something that could be used in a therapeutic group setting. From our varied experiences of delivering therapy, we had noticed a gap within formal service provision. We witnessed a significant number of clients unable to effectively engage due to their inability to access or express their emotions. Recognising this often led to a ‘revolving door’ scenario, where clients with chronic difficulties feel trapped and unable to progress in a positive way. That is why we set out to bridge this gap. With the knowledge that ‘one size does not fit all’, we have developed an alternative way to help people, regardless of age, ability, gender or culture, to express and explore what they feel through listening to music.

The evaluations gathered have provided valuable information that will allow the group to grow and develop. We are wholeheartedly convinced that our group offers something different from what is already available, and is attractive to all areas within the community. We are due to pilot the group with an adult audience in the summer.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that listening music therapy (LMT) can be part of the solution that helps to rebuild our communities.



Lorraine O’Rourke and **Monica Cooper** are BACP registered counsellors working in the NHS and private practice. Together, they set up L&M Wellbeing Consultancy, a community interest company (CIC) offering a range of services, including their bespoke therapeutic music group.

References

- 1** Gerry Cinnamon. Belter. https://youtu.be/jqAAd_mJhL0 (accessed 4 July 2021).
- 2** Shawn Mendes. In my blood. <https://youtu.be/36tggrpRoTl> (accessed 4 July 2021).
- 3** Chord Overstreet. Hold on. <https://youtu.be/8ofCZObsn0o> (accessed 4 July 2021).