

The Lyrics of Our Emotions

Exploring Music in Non-Medical Counseling Sessions

Music has a long history within the military as a method of addressing morale. The consistently positive response to music has led to research seeking to determine if it can be used in a therapeutic approach for Service members. (Gooding & Langston, 2019) Although music exploration is often associated with soothing melodies and uplifting lyrics, it also provides a valuable opportunity to explore and address negative emotions through music. This is because the exploration of negative emotions via music helps normalize and transform them into something healthier. Service members often train themselves to compartmentalize negative emotions in intense situations and can sometimes have difficulty engaging with emotions. This can lead to a sense of emotional blunting where the individual is aware that they have emotional discomfort but are unable to express the depth of their emotion or engage it in a way that allows effective processing. Listening to music is an activity that can assist individuals with emotional expression and establish coping skills. From creative expressions to the increasing availability of “rage rooms,” we are seeing an increase in techniques that utilize external expression, not just internal dialogue. Here are a few reasons why you may want to incorporate music in your next non-medical counseling session.

Music Can Facilitate Emotional Expression

An “emotion” playlist can be an example of this outward expression. Encouraging an individual to develop a list of songs they associate with certain feelings can assist in

creating a safe space for them to experience said emotions. Studies have shown a correlation between music and brain activation in regions associated with emotion, reward, and cognitive processes (Fuentes-Sanchez, 2021). By utilizing a format that is designed to evoke specific emotions, we can provide clients with a way to feel more comfortable in emotional engagement. This method can be effective in situations where the individual states difficulty describing their emotions, feels that they have difficulty feeling emotions to the same extent as others, or describes an emotional numbness that feels inappropriate to them. By providing a structure or atmosphere where a specific emotion is being portrayed, it gives an experiential example that can limit some of the risks that accompany vulnerability.

Music Encourages Introspection

Listening to music in a safe space allows people to, in effect, practice their emotions. A recent study with the U.S. military utilizing a phased music exploration included lyric analysis as a prompt for introspection of life circumstances. Participant comments included “moving forward emotionally,” “I found something in me that was lost.” (Vetro-Kalseth, 2021, p.449) While this study included a focus on songwriting, it does provide an illustration of how we connect emotionally with music. Hartman and Conklin (2009) state that songs can be “a medium where feelings, emotions, values, dreams, fears, and hopes are expressed” and can assist those who are unable to express “eloquently and succinctly to discover and express something about their true self through the use of that music’s lyrics” (p.50).

Music Opens Lines of Communication

Music can facilitate communication by allowing individuals to process their feelings, become comfortable with emotional expression, and learn to recognize their own emotions more

clearly. Writing lyrics is a unique expression of emotion that allows the Service member to creatively capture thoughts or feelings, which can be cathartic.

Additional benefits of incorporating music into a non-medical counseling session include being able to limit the time of a playlist, being able to arrange an appropriately supportive environment, and being able to have more say in when those emotions can be addressed safely. This can help prevent emotional overflow in situations that would be damaging or dangerous to the client. Music exploration is not a solution for everyone, but it's a great alternative to try for Service members and military families.

References

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