

# Safe haven

Australia's network of crisis facilities such as homeless shelters and women's refuges provides safe haven to people whose immediate histories are marked by homelessness and domestic violence. When traumatised youngsters are involved, music therapy can play a pivotal role in strengthening the bond between a mum and her children and helping to regulate hyperactive and withdrawn behaviours.

"Exposure to trauma can alter the chemistry and structures of the brain," says music therapist, Minky van der Walt, who coordinated a year-long music therapy program at Hobart Women's Shelter, "so that a child who has experienced trauma may scan the environment for signs of real or potential threat, including cues that may re-trigger memories of trauma. These children are often living with high levels of anxiety and worry.

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"With so much of their attention absorbed in unconsciously looking out for threats, children typically become either hyperactive or withdrawn and disengaged and they find it very difficult to participate in the here and now. Music therapy can be really beneficial because the brain processes music in ways that can bypass this circuitry, enabling therapeutic change to take place."



As anyone who sings or plays a musical instrument will tell you, making music, especially with others, is great for the mind, body and soul. And the benefits flow whether you are an accomplished musician or an enthusiastic amateur. In music therapy trained health professionals - registered music therapists - draw on the benefits of music to help people

of all ages and abilities to attain and maintain good health and wellbeing, delivering tailor-made programs to meet specific needs. Music therapists work in a range of places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools and within community organisations such as agencies providing social justice or crisis care services.

When it is delivered as part of a community support service, music therapy can create opportunities for people to give voice to experiences that have been silenced by fear, disability, illness and marginalisation. It can help reduce stigma and promote community acceptance.

How? Music Therapists design sessions that help people share musical experiences such as singing and song choice, instrument playing and improvisation, movement to music, listening to music, reflection, and songwriting. Music therapists can also use 'play' to model things such as appropriate social interaction, effective communication and taking turns. Sometimes music therapists use community-based performance opportunities to help their clients increase connections to resources and social networks. Whether it's one-on-one or in a group, individuals are provided a creative outlet which helps their physical, sensory and cognitive skills and overall wellbeing. Music also encourages the expression of feelings, and may help motivate someone to try new things and develop new skills, which in turn builds self-esteem and a sense of empowerment with which to face the future.

As crisis facilities, shelters are generally not resourced to provide therapeutic interventions to families. The priority is to help families find accommodation and to link them in with support services. Under the music therapy program at Hobart Women's Shelter, children were able to participate in a playful and non-threatening group program designed to help build their shaken social skills and reduce the sense of isolation experienced by many children in shelters.

"After a brief greeting, we'd always start our sessions with instrumental improvisation," says Minky, "to engage the children and help them regulate their

mood, for example calming them down if they were hyperactive or engaging them if they were withdrawn. Once they were playing music, they were able to focus their attention, release energy, express themselves and connect with each other."

There were many instances of music-induced change.

"One boy was initially very withdrawn and reluctant to participate but when he played - drums, especially - he became animated and very expressive. He loved 'conducting', where children and staff had to copy his playing and stop when he indicated. He would build up slowly and then release a loud torrent of drumming, often accompanied by lots of shouting and moving. The energy was often so intense that his whole head and face would turn red and tremble. When he finally gave the signal to stop, he was able to engage in eye contact with others - something he found difficult to do at other times - and would then flop down with a smile, relaxed.

"Another little boy who had been very withdrawn and uncommunicative literally found his voice in the group: surprising us all by singing a song by himself in front of everyone."

Music comes into its own as a form of wordless support, too.

"There was one session where a girl arrived feeling troubled and sad as she remembered something distressing. As she was crying during the session, the other children were encouraged to play some music to comfort and support her. The children played some quiet music, which evolved from freely playing percussion instruments into an improvised song story about some animals. This music offered the young girl some space to release her grief and emotion in a supported environment, and it also helped the other children to respond to her and show their feelings."

A strong mother/child connection is one of the most important factors in ensuring a child thrives and succeeds, but the stress of homelessness can interfere here. Minky's program also gave mums and babies lots of opportunities to reconnect through singing, with children benefiting by having a regular, predictable environment in which they could learn and play.



"Singing songs that involved rocking, bouncing, tickling or massage, and encouraging mums to make lots of eye contact with their babies really enhanced the interaction between them. That might seem like such a basic and carefree thing for most new mums to do but these women had just left very stressful situations without opportunity to safely play with their babies and share a musical experience. It felt good to see them have the time and space in which to enjoy their children."

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### music in community support services

"When people make music together, the brain releases a chemical - oxytocin - that builds trust. This is partially because music is repetitive - think of a continuing drum beat, or cycling through verses and choruses - and this makes it possible to predict what other people will do. Other chemicals are also released in the brain as a result of music making that induce a sense of happiness that can counter the impact of trauma.

In addition to brain processes, the social experience of sharing music with others who have had a similar experience can create sense of belonging. A creative and supportive environment is conducive to positive experiences where emotions can be controlled and even expressed without fear of reprisal. In these ways music can help traumatised children to learn and grow as they feel liked by their peers and build trust with the adults that support them."

Dr Katrina McFerran, University of Melbourne



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