

Music Therapy in Atopic Eczema

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Music therapy is one of the oldest modalities of medical treatment and is a psychodynamically orientated psychotherapeutic procedure in which the experience of sound and rhythm permits contact to areas of internal experience that are otherwise not easily accessible. Music therapy is closely connected to the history of music and of medicine. Continuous scientific exchange with other disciplines such as psychology, medicine, musical ethnology, and the humanities has led to a well-founded psychotherapeutic procedure.

Music therapy is often used in psychiatric, geriatric, and psychosomatic departments and in schools. Its use in dermatology is rather rare.

In the context of music therapy, the term “music” includes any activity making a sound. Depending on the situation, improvisation, songs, or musical compositions may be used and are regarded as equal in value. Each note counts at the moment when it arises and is an expression of personality.

The room for music therapy should include a selection of musical instruments from different cultures. These are meant to encourage patients to experiment and they offer a spectrum of as many sounds and experiences as possible.

61.1

When Is It Reasonable to Use Music Therapy?

Interpersonal perception is influenced by physical expression. Thus our experience of relationships is reflected in posture, gestures, facial and physical expression, the voice, the rate of speech, and spontaneous sequences of actions and motions. This body language is the first thing that a baby experiences and learns in contact with his social environment. The potential for speech is maintained, but is pushed into

the background during development and socialization. If there are initial abnormalities in the interaction between mother and child in this preverbal period, the affected individual will not be able to describe them as an adult, as they took place during his preverbal developmental period and are therefore unconscious.

“In the first phase of development, perception is purely physical and is only incorporated as part of the psychic organisation, together with its emotional and cognitive concomitants, if the maternal environment is adequately supportive. If this is not the case, defence reactions occur, which may be more or less severe, and gaps arise in the psychic organisation.” (Johnen, 2003, p 202) [7].

Music therapy makes it possible for the patient to relieve abnormalities in early communication and interaction by means of musical improvisation. The associated emotions are resuscitated and are then accessible for transformation by speech. Emotions can be expressed by musical improvisation. Representing these emotions helps the patient to recognize the pattern of his social relationships and to develop them. Music not only facilitates the expression of emotions and communication, but also can be helpful in diagnosis. The therapist works with a variety of musical elements, including silence, noise, sound, rhythm, melody, dynamics, and musical form.

Music can essentially be freely interpreted and this is the very reason why it allows a creative chain of thought or the development of imagination – a prerequisite for work in music therapy.

61.2 Forms of Music Therapy

Music therapy is based on a holistic view of illness, including the biological, psychic, and social aspects, and involves the development of a therapeutic relationship. The efficacy is evident in the patient's perceptions, experience, understanding, and actions. Three methods may be used:

- Receptive music therapy is used for relaxation and sedation.
- Active music therapy aims to use musical improvisation to help the patient to carry out an internal debate or to initiate a discussion with the therapist.
- Drawing to music can achieve either extreme – relaxation or activity.

61.2.1 Receptive Music Therapy

Patients suffering from atopic eczema often have an abnormal perception of their body. Receptive Music Therapy can help these patients by training their self-perception.

Many studies in experimental psychology have shown that physical changes occur as a result of music, including changes in pulse rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, electrical skin resistance, digestive activity, and electrical activity in the brain.

According to Hörmann [6], the essential aims of receptive music therapy are to provide emotional stimuli, achieving openness, thus promoting internal and external perception and introspection. This allows the expression of emotions that can then be developed in the subsequent therapeutic discussion. It is possible to enhance communication or drive, or to control drive, as in hyperactive eczema patients, or to cause sedation or a change in emotions. Confidence and hope can be revived.

Many eczema patients feel that itch, the indicating sign, is agonizing. This may be accompanied by restlessness, bad temper and sleeplessness. Receptive music therapy can help to avoid these consequences of the illness.

On the basis of a holistic view of the individual, the music therapy patient is regarded as having mutual interactions with his environment. Unfavorable effects can trigger exacerbation of the disease, if they are not

processed over an extended period they cannot be passed back to the social environment and therefore remain with the patient. Processes of this type can become evident during receptive music therapy and can then be worked on by musical improvisation during active music therapy.

61.2.2 Active Music Therapy

Active music therapy helps the patient to achieve better access to his emotions. It is a question of perceiving feelings, becoming conscious of them, and expressing them.

One technique used in active music therapy is musical improvisation. The patient and the therapist play on musical instruments or sing together, without structural agreements or demands based on musical theory. The patient does not have any previous musical knowledge. The improvised music arises spontaneously. The patient or group of patients and the therapist play together and the music is therefore felt to be spontaneous. The improvisation may be free or thematic, depending on the course of the therapy. In thematic improvisation, a theme is selected from the therapy. Although cognitive elements tend to be dominant in therapeutic discussions, musical improvisation can help the therapist and the patient to gain access to the emotional aspects of the theme. Free improvisation does not follow a leading theme.

During musical improvisation there is an interaction as the patient's sounds influence the therapist's improvisation, and vice versa. This mutual influence can be heard in the components of the music, such as sound, rhythm, melody, dynamics, and form [5]. Within an improvisation of this sort, the patient can playfully recognize his manner of communication and patterns of relationships become clear.

In this context of a largely undirected musical happening, the patient reacts spontaneously to unexpected situations. This discloses behavioral patterns with relatively little effort and also permits trying to modify these patterns with experiments in the form of play. In addition, the patient is provoked to think about himself, which is then explored during the therapeutic discussion.

The nonverbal approach in music therapy makes it possible for the patient to express feelings that had remained hidden to overcome speechlessness, to modify excessive ambition or activism.

The patient's musical improvisation should be regarded as a symbolic scenic representation of his current internal situation. It is also a starting point for reflection and for verbal processing, from which parallels to daily life can be drawn.

61.3 Skin and Psyche

Atopic eczema is a multifactorial disease. Skin lesions may be triggered in genetically susceptible individuals by a variety of provocation factors including psychological influences such as emotional problems or stress.

Patients are often confronted with problems that may be consequences of the chronic skin disease or may have developed independently. This concerns problems connected with body perception, body image, communication, dealing with relationships (difficulties in intimacy, detachment, conflicts, and limits), self-assurance, and itch.

Active music therapy is of particular use in problems related to intimacy and detachment and can help to introduce issues into the therapeutic process that initially could not be expressed at all.

The visibility of the skin disease and the resulting experience of loss of physical attractiveness is an additional problem. This is a central source of stress and impairment of the patient's quality of life. As itch in atopic eczema is a dominant phenomenon, there is a danger that not enough attention will be paid to the phenomenon of stigmatization.

According to the study of Stangier et al. (1993, 1996), there is a marked feeling of stigmatization. The objectively measurable extent of the changes in the skin alone is not decisive for the patient's suffering, which is more dependent on the subjective feeling of being disfigured. This feeling of being disfigured and the actual stigmatization are consequences of the chronic skin disease and also stressors that can lead to further deterioration in the state of the skin.

It is important to interrupt this cycle by the process of music therapy. Once the atopic eczema patient has seen that active music therapy can influence the disease, he may feel greater self-confidence in dealing with this chronic condition.

61.4 Use of Musical Components in Music Therapy

When a person makes music, his overall state is changed. The operations of thought and evaluation occur either afterwards or under other conditions (as can be observed with military march music or with constant exposure to music in department stores).

As the emotional processing of music occurs independent of thought or conscious control, it is a suitable method for psychotherapy in atopic eczema.

As a result of the process of music therapy, unconscious patterns of behavior can become clear to the patient and provide him with insights into his medical happening. Music therapy can lead to decisive progress in the patient's perception of disease.

Although atopic eczema is one of the psychosomatic diseases, verbal therapies are usually applied in the psychotherapeutic treatment of this group of patients. What makes this more surprising is that hyperverbality has often been observed in these patients. If they use speech as a mode of defense, it cannot be used for therapy, especially in those cases where words cannot describe what is to be expressed, or if they even trigger aggressive behavior.

Verbal defense (intellectualization) or the inability to speak about feelings are found, for example, in patients with psychosomatic conditions, compulsive neuroses, and anorexia nervosa [3].

It is a structural fact that words are not enough (cf. Höge 1991). There are more psychic processes than can be expressed in words. The psyche comprehends more than the available verbal equivalents. Music has access to this nonverbalizable experience, which, among other things, may involve psychological factors and changes with time. These are parameters correlated with psychic processes, or the role which musical elements play in the very first phase of life [10]. The neurological fact that music connects processes in the left and right hemispheres may also be important, which results in switches in both directions, not only of processes that are inherent to speech, but also of symbolic processes that are inaccessible to speech (cf. Höge 1991).

The patient's emotions become audible during the process of music therapy. Detachment is also possible, as the instruments and the music are interposed. Musical improvisation and painting by music are a sort of amplifier for the patient's emotional expression.

Drawing to music is another approach in the therapeutic process to overcome speechlessness and to express spiritual injury. The music in music therapy is a bridge from the nonverbal world into the world of language. The body “stores” experiences, which can be found in our patterns of interaction.

Music and the patient’s musical improvisation in music therapy are a sort of amplifier for the patient’s emotional expression. During the process of music therapy, the patient’s emotions are expressed in improvised music and in drawing to music. The patient and therapist then translate the emotions in the subsequent discussions.

The analyst and baby researcher Daniel Stern has found that rhythms can help us organize our daily life. External and internal rhythms must then be distinguished. The external rhythms, as in a waltz, and the annual rhythms are different from the internal rhythms that take place within our body, such as the heart beat and the rhythm of sleeping and waking. The internal rhythms, such as the rhythm of sleeping and waking, can be disturbed in patients with chronic skin disease.

External rhythms from live musical performances by the therapist or recorded music can influence the internal rhythms of the patient and his mood. The subsequent therapeutic dialogue then serves to verbalize what has been experienced, both physically and psychically.

61.5 Effect of Music on Humans: Conclusion

Music and other sounds are converted into neuronal energy – electrical signals – by the sensory organs, skin and ears. These signals are then transmitted to the region of the limbic system and here it is checked whether the signals represent, for example, an opportunity or a danger. There are neuronal circuits in the limbic system that make it possible for us to experience feelings. Musical information is converted into emotions and triggers autonomic nervous reactions, such as breathing, pulse rate, blood pressure, digestion and hormonal balance. Measuring autonomic reactions can be an additional step in diagnosis and therapy.

According to Stern, the manner in which individuals can express themselves nonverbally demonstrates partial aspects of interactional experiences, which are often superimposed on each other [11].

Identification, earlier introjection, projections, and current experience are continually transported together to the level of expression and action and help to form each new communicational situation. During the process of music therapy, they become audible and move into the patient’s consciousness.

61.6 Conclusion

Music therapy in the form described above can make an independent contribution to the psychotherapeutic care of eczema patients. The different forms of music therapy available to the therapist include both relaxation techniques and active interventional techniques.

During the treatment of eczema patients using music therapy, there is confrontation with and processing of psychic conflicts by means of music and its elements. In particular, active music therapy leads to activation of the creative potential, using the available resources. This results in a feeling of empowerment, even when dealing with this chronic disease, leading to a reduction in avoidance behavior – which allows the patient to have novel experiences.

Maintaining and improving the quality of life is of primary importance during treatment. It is necessary for the patient to develop a positive attitude toward his own body and to accept this, even with the disease. Music therapy can contribute to this.

Music therapy was an integral component of the therapy program in the Clinic for Dermatology and Allergy in Davos, Switzerland. Apart from verbal forms of therapy such as analytical therapy and client-centered therapy, music therapy, which had already been applied there for 10 years in order to psychotherapeutically treat patients suffering from atopic eczema and psoriasis, had been used in more than 5,000 individual therapies over the past 5 years.

The main emphasis of the psychotherapeutic treatment involved individual therapies. An atopic eczema patient received on average eight individual sessions during his 28-day stay in the clinic.

Therefore, time is also an important factor. Yet the limitation of the patient’s short duration of stay in the clinic was not always a disadvantage. Far away from everyday private and professional life, atopic eczema patients often took this opportunity to examine their individual problems. As part of a group, a patient par-

ticularly experienced conflicts in relationships as well as conflicts related to being far from home. Everyday life within the clinic became an opportunity for training accompanied by a therapist. Through music therapy, the patient could quite quickly progress in these problems. The therapeutic setting allowed the patient to perceive changes or even resistances.

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