



Music therapy online

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Edited by Cameron Smith

April 2021

Abstract

This article explores how music therapy can be adapted to be conducted online and how it can best be facilitated. People Know How has adapted its Arts Therapies project online after the March 2020 lockdown and is moving toward a blended model of support in line with COVID-19 restrictions. The project provides support through both music therapy and art therapy, both of which necessitate differing considerations in their adaptation online. This article finds that online music therapy brings with it many challenges and new ways of working, but its convenience and the connection it provides during a time of isolation can be beneficial. However, music therapy online requires a different mindset about what music therapy is and how it can be conducted. New approaches to instruments, playing together, and even using composition and new technologies are needed to adapt music making to the virtual world. Technology poses practical problems as well as increasing mental exhaustion. Boundaries between home life and therapy, and between therapist and service user, may in some ways be blurred by online sessions. However, through active communication and repeated checking in, therapists and service users can collaboratively adapt sessions to build spaces “to be, create, feel, think and connect” (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020, 8:55). This article includes suggestions to People Know How and other organisations to help improve the efficacy music therapy online for both therapists and service users.

Keywords

Music therapy, online, COVID-19, young people, wellbeing, mental health, safeguarding

Key points

- Adapting music therapy online means a change in mindset about what music therapy is and how it can be conducted.
- Music therapy online requires using more active communication and collaborative feedback to best tailor the session to the service user.
- Technology poses practical problems in access and technological breakdown.
- Boundaries are more blurred with online sessions, but by replicating the normal journey to and from sessions therapists and service user can relieve Zoom fatigue.

Introduction

People Know How has adapted its Arts Therapies project online after the March 2020 lockdown and is moving toward a blended model of support in line with COVID-19 restrictions. The project provides support through both music therapy and art therapy, both of which necessitate differing considerations in their adaptation online.

Music therapy brings unique obstacles to online support, as access to instruments is uncertain and playing together over video call can be challenging. Yet, music therapy can be conducted in various forms and so can be adapted to the service user's needs online. Music can be used in therapy by being actively played, passively listened to, or written, and instruments can be both tuned and untuned, while also involving verbal discussion (Ramesh, 2020). Although, fundamentally, music therapy places "an emphasis on the therapeutic relationship between the client and the therapist, using music as a primary means of establishing and maintaining this relationship and producing positive benefit for the client" (MacDonald et al., 2012, p. 7). Thus, many have found that music therapy has been useful during lockdown to "cope with the stress of social distancing, being isolated, or away from family and friends" (Ramesh, 2020, p.129). By building resilience service users may gain the tools they need to cope with feelings of isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness during the pandemic and beyond (Ramesh, 2020).

This article will consider the various challenges in conducting music therapy online. It will examine the difficulties that moving online has had for therapists before exploring the positive experiences some service users have gained. This article will then assess key considerations, such as communication, using instruments, using technology, the effects of zoom fatigue, establishing boundaries and confidentiality. In each section it will identify key considerations and suggestions that People Know How and other organisations can take into account, to help improve the efficacy music therapy online for both therapists and service users.

Moving online

Adapting music therapy to be conducted online has been a new way of working for many therapists and service users. Given the nature of music therapy, playing instruments online can be a difficult task. Most service users do not have access to instruments of their own and providing them may risk spreading the virus. Technology also impacts the sound and timing of the music played, making improvisation, and playing in larger groups much more difficult (Talmage, 2020). Some client groups have experienced more difficulty than others, especially those who are non-verbal or who have difficulty speaking because video calling often relies on verbal communication. A study of music therapists found that the unpredictability of the pandemic has caused heightened levels of stress for many therapists (Gaddy et al., 2020). There is frustration at the new difficulties related to online therapy and the barriers that prevent clients' access to technology (Gaddy et al., 2020). The personal mental health of therapists was the second-most frequent concern in the study, with therapists concerned about their health, burnout, and work-family balance (Gaddy et al., 2020).

However, online working has had some positive effects. A study by the American Music Therapy Association found that 75% of their respondents say their clients are responding positively, some of them in ways they had not responded even to face-to-face therapy (Fay et al., 2020). Family members have become more involved with some, suggesting that music therapy brought "joy" to the clients' households in times of "isolation and stress" (Fay et al., 2020, para. 2). Online music therapy can provide a convenient form of social connection and interaction during lockdowns and provides an activity for clients to look forward to (British Psychological Society, 2020; Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). While there are difficulties, many organisations are recommending that online support continue after restrictions are eased in the form of a blended model of support (Rizkallah, 2020; NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Discussed below are some key considerations for music therapy online,

something which People Know How and other organisations delivering music therapy can take into consideration when delivering online sessions. .

Key considerations and suggestions

Active and directive communication

Online music therapy requires more active communication than face-to-face sessions. Because of the time lag and limits of the camera's frame, the flow of conversation is different, and non-verbal cues are much harder for both therapists and service users to identify (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). To offset this deficit, regular feedback and checking in at the beginning and throughout the session ensures that the interaction is helpful, and the service user and therapist feel understood (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Similarly, the therapist should work to maintain a sense of connection when either they or the service user moves outside of the camera frame, with the sound from instruments, verbal communication, or by using imagery if the service user is unable to be verbal (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Being as transparent as possible prevents misunderstanding and promotes more valuable communication.

Online music therapy may also need to be more directive and less spontaneous than face-to-face. Directive approaches, such as warm-up and warm-down activities with games and pre-recorded music, can create a more engaging session and avoids being stilted on screen (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Therapists may begin with a more structured or educational activity and then use this as a springboard to more spontaneous music and making this could offer more chances for self-expression and reflection. Being more directive in communication can avoid ambiguities and confusion, especially with new clients met only online. More structure and direct communication can build spaces "to be, create, feel, think and connect" (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020, 8:55).

People Know How understands active

communication to be especially important to facilitate music making and emphasises this in their Arts Therapies project. As sound quality and timing are affected by technology, bringing therapy online requires more trust in the therapeutic relationship. For example, if a client is playing along with a therapist, for the client the timing may be correct but for the therapist the timing may be wrong. In this instance, the therapist must trust that the client is hearing the music come together on their side of call. This trust can only be ensured if regular feedback and checking in are conducted throughout the session.

Instruments

Given the difficulty in accessing instruments safely, music therapy online requires a different mindset. Music playing is still possible and should be continued. However, this will depend on the pre-existing relationship with the service user which entails knowing what their preferences are and what instruments or other tools they have access to (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). With new service users or those without access at home, this may require a change in mindset over what constitutes an instrument. Experimentation with sound and exploration of household items and homemade instruments can be an effective, creative musical means of therapy (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Using different techniques online such as turn-taking may be preferred to improvising and will similarly require a more flexible approach.

As such, the British Association of Music Therapists recommends pre-warning the service user that making music is different and often harder online than in-person (Rizkallah, 2020). Because of these restrictions, sometimes a service user may prefer to talk for the whole session, which is just as valid (Rizkallah, 2020). Music composition online may be preferable to actual music playing due to the difficulties of playing over video call. This can be done by song writing, adding lyrics over instrumentals or loop, sharing playlists, or using apps to compose (Rizakllah, 2020).

People Know How's Arts Therapies project

has already taken up this new mindset with its music therapy sessions and adapted their methods of music making and use of instruments to be more open-minded, flexible, and tailored to the service user. This includes, where traditional instruments were unavailable, adapting household items to make music and using apps like BandLab and NodeBeat to play music online.

Technology

Technology likewise poses practical problems for music therapy online. Most importantly, service users require access to technology to be able to access their music therapy. Currently, People Know How are running a Computer Delivery project to refurbish donated devices and deliver them to recipients in the local community (People Know How, 2020). It has had much success and has already delivered over 1,500 devices since April 2020 (People Know How, 2020). However, access is only part of the picture. The so called 'digital divide' occurs when part of a population have a dearth of Information Technology skills and knowledge, which hinders users' ability to take advantage of technology they have access to (Edmunds, 2020). To address this, People Know How (2020) also provides set-up support and access to digital skills training through their Reconnect service. As music therapy and other activities have moved online during the pandemic, these issues are of particular importance and People Know How's work towards bridging the digital divide and providing adequate technology may mean that more people are able to continue to access music therapy.

Technology may also breakdown. Therapists and service users should create plans in case of problems with technology or breakdown. By carrying out test sessions, therapists can ensure that they are familiar with the necessary technology and that their instruments can be heard over the call (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). As this is a new way of working, it is important to seek regular feedback and ensure that technology is working as it should (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Therapists can conduct a

mini tutorial with the service user on how the technology works and what they can expect (BPS, 2020). If the client cannot access the session independently, a family member/carer may need to facilitate the session for them (Rizkallah, 2020). The therapist should have a way to contact the service user if the call breaks down, especially in the case that the therapist is concerned the service user is at risk and they need to contact their parent/carer (BPS, 2020). These plans should be made in collaborative agreement and in line with safeguarding procedures.

Zoom Fatigue

Zoom fatigue is another problem posed by online working. This feeling of exhaustion comes from repeated online meetings which require more focus than face-to-face sessions (Kinahan, 2020). As noted in another People Know How article, online meetings require maintaining Constant Partial Attention (CPA) from the brain which can lead to anxiety, fatigue and a "heightened state of stress" (Kinahan, 2020, p. 2). The lack of visual breaks during video calls and need to maintain highly focused attention is "demanding" (Burgoyne, 2020, p. 979). CPA also limits the brain's ability to interpret non-verbal cues, which are important in social interaction (Kinahan, 2020). As the brain continues the state of CPA but has less information, users experience a "sensation of working hard and achieving nothing" (Kinahan, 2020, p. 3). This contributes to a feeling of mental exhaustion which may not only limit interaction in therapy, but also may be perpetuated by music therapy online.

However, there are some practical measures which can relieve this exhaustion. Designating specific 'therapy zones', which are transitioned into and out of before and after sessions, can help to create breaks in the day and relieve fatigue. During the session, the NHS Arts Therapy Webinar (2020) suggests placing the camera at a side-on angle to relieve the pressure of constant eye contact. It also recommends using art and music to ground the client in the area outside the screen, to allow for continual visual breaks (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). This may be supported by

adding breaks during the sessions (Burgoyne, 2020). In a case study with an 11-year-old with ADHD, five-minute breaks were given throughout the session with different activities to choose from during each (Burgoyne, 2020). The transition after the break was said to be helpful since it provided an opportunity for refocusing (Burgoyne, 2020). Burgoyne (2020) suggests that “therapists often find that new strategies must be devised for each client, and sometimes at each session, to help the client stay engaged” (p.981). While some young people have responded “seamless[ly]” to online therapy, others have found it “awkward and anxiety provoking” (Burgoyne, 2020, p. 982). This relays the importance of tailoring sessions to young people’s individual needs and comfort.

Boundaries

Setting boundaries online is essential to manage stress and better maintain the therapeutic relationship. As already mentioned, therapists are experiencing heightened levels of stress working online and better creating boundaries can relieve zoom fatigue. This is because when people establish boundaries between different aspects of their life, they can manage their different roles more efficiently (Cho, 2020). Because of COVID-19 restrictions, normal physical boundaries are no longer possible, and this can cause both short-term and long-term consequences on work, family life and mental health (Cho, 2020). Though negative consequences are expected, this is also an opportunity to learn how to create and manage role boundaries more effectively (Cho, 2020). This section explores ways that boundaries can be established both in and out of music therapy.

One boundary to maintain is that between therapy and everyday life. Burgoyne (2020) highlights “the ritual of coming to and leaving the office [which] bakes in a transition into and out of therapy” (p. 978). Encouraging the service user to ‘journey’ to therapy, by possibly rearranging the room into a designated therapy zone, can replicate the sense of the normal journey they would take to therapy. Also, by ensuring that the service user or their carer

contacts the therapist when their session is due to start, the service user can reinforce the idea of ‘entering’ the session (Rizkallah, 2020). Similarly, the therapist should let the service user know when the session has concluded but it is left to the service user or their carer to hang up and ‘leave’ the session (Rizkallah, 2020). The therapist could then encourage the service user to ‘journey’ away from therapy again, including returning the room to its normal state, or encouraging them to go on a short walk or some other form of break in the day. This is advisable for the therapist as much as the service user so that they can relieve Zoom fatigue and maintain boundaries in their working day (Burgoyne, 2020; NHS Education for Scotland, 2020).

Another boundary to consider is between the therapist and service user. Because online sessions often require web cameras, both the therapist and service user can see into the other’s home. This creates potential breaches in privacy that would not otherwise be an issue in a face-to-face session, in an office or music therapy room. For the young person, depending on their age, they may be able take a more active role in setting boundaries (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Choosing the room to have therapy in is an important consideration given that the bedroom is a particularly personal space and may have extra significance for those with histories of trauma (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Equally, shared rooms may be more prone to distractions and interruptions (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Whichever room is chosen, it is important to consider whether the service user can be overheard, what can be seen within the frame, whether they are comfortable with this, and practically does this allow viewing both their face and music making (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020)? Privacy during sessions can be difficult for families to respect, especially parents who may interrupt sessions and overhear conversations the young person is not comfortable sharing (Burgoyne, 2020). The therapist and service user should also agree on what to do if they are disturbed and what the service user is comfortable being overheard (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). Therapists

should likewise consider all these factors as they similarly require safe, professional space without confidential information or distractions (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). During People Know How's music therapy sessions, conversations about boundaries are ongoing and are acknowledged within the session or when overhearing occurs.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality online is another concern. Issues have been raised about the safety of certain platforms which must be addressed when working with young people in therapy (NHS Education for Scotland, 2020). People Know How has created accounts for all Positive Transitions service users which have anonymous email logins. To ensure safeguarding of young people, extra settings have been used on Microsoft Teams to restrict the functions of accounts. These restrictions mean service users cannot initiate calls, cannot schedule meetings, can only conduct pre-scheduled meetings, cannot record themselves, cannot request control of a screensharing session, and only have access to apps necessary for sessions. These limitations on accounts safeguard People Know How's young service users online.

Conclusion

Overall, music therapy online has given comfort, social interaction, and a sense of connectivity during a time of crisis. While there are difficulties unique to conducting music therapy online, it continues to provide positive connection, and many services suggest integrating online therapy in a blended model post-lockdown. However, there should be further research into providing a blended model as organisations attempt to transition out of lockdowns.

This article has suggested key areas of consideration and suggestions to facilitate music therapy online. Using active communication and regular checking-in ensures that there is no miscommunication during sessions. Collaborative feedback can

tailor sessions to service users' needs and their available resources to improve sessions and allow for further reflection. Boundaries can help both therapists and service users manage their roles more efficiently, relieve Zoom fatigue, and maintain privacy. Playing instruments may be difficult online and lack of access may pose an issue, but a new mindset can allow for greater creativity and expression. Technology poses practical problems, yet these can be managed. People Know How's Computer Delivery project and adapted service user accounts ensure that young people can safely access its services.

People Know How's Arts Therapies project, which currently delivers music therapy online already incorporates many of the solutions suggested in this article and has supported clients through a time of anxiety and isolation. By continuing to create spaces "to be, create, feel, think and connect" (NHS Education for Scotland, 8:55), young people can build resilience and self-expression which will support them through further uncertainty.

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