

Connie Tomaino: Music Therapist

PICK A SONG—ANY SONG. PLAY IT IN YOUR HEAD. HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU feel? Are you bobbing to a groovy beat? Or do you feel like getting cozy with your pillow? Are you happy, energized, or mellow? It's pretty fascinating how music can so dramatically change your mood. So it should be no surprise that music is used to help people with all sorts of ailments feel better. In music therapy, the stimulating power of music can aid in restoring, improving, or maintaining patients' mental and/or physical functions. Realizing the powerful benefits of music, Connie Tomaino helped start the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function at Beth Abraham Family of Health Services in New York City in 1995. And she was very eager to share her 28 years of experience in the innovative field of music therapy.



BY VERONICA DOMINGUEZ

What disabilities or diseases does music therapy help treat?

The applications are very broad. It can be used for premature infants who need stimulation to develop mentally and physically. It can be used with children with autism or Down syndrome who may have trouble moving or relating to another person—they gain those skills in the music therapy sessions. It can help people with Alzheimer's remember things or even who they are. My work is with people who have a kind of neurological disease or damage, like people with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease or people who've suffered strokes or trauma from an accident.

What are some examples of how the music is used?

It can be music improvisation where both the therapist and patient make music together. If patients are anxious or can't get to sleep, they can listen to music to help them slow down and relax. If someone had a stroke and cannot walk properly, rhythmic patterns are used to help the person better coordinate movements. For people with memory problems, songs of personal importance can help them remember

key events in their lives. If people are stressed or angry, the music therapist may use some kind of improvisation to allow them to express their feelings and help the therapist understand what they're feeling.

How did you become interested in music therapy?

I entered the field when it was fairly new. It's been an organized profession only since 1950. In college, I was a pre-med student but ended up also performing on trumpet. So I double-majored in biology and music. I knew that I wanted to go into health care of some kind, but I couldn't give up music and just do the science. Luckily, I found out about music therapy and I got my masters and doctorate in music therapy from New York University.

How can someone learn more about music therapy?

The American Music Therapy Association has a Web site, musictherapy.org, with lots of information. Also, the Web site for our institute, musicaspower.org, provides information on our work, music and neuroscience, and features some interesting videos.


What makes a good music therapist?

Music therapists do need to be able to play an instrument like the keyboard or guitar, and if you sing well, that's a plus. The main requirements, though, are qualities like the desire to help other people, creativity, and the willingness to explore different types of music.

What challenges do you face?

Educating the public about the value of music therapy. The Institute is funded through grants and donations, so we coordinate seminars and lectures to educate and get financial support. We also hold a fundraising event called the "Music Has Power Awards," where great musicians who believe in the work, like Moby, Vanessa Carlton, and Chris Martin [of Coldplay], lend their name to help us raise money and awareness.

What do you like the best about your career?

I get to play my instruments on a regular basis. Most of all, I love helping people and seeing them reach their maximum ability. I like being able to contribute something that's really making a difference in people's lives. 

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