International Journal of Psychology Research

ISSN Print: 2664-8903
ISSN Online: 2664-8911
Impact Factor: RJIF 5.69
IJPR 2026; 8(1): 06-10
www.psychologyjournal.in
Received: 08-10-2025
Accepted: 12-11-2025

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The therapeutic power of music: An analysis of how music therapy enhances physical and psychological health

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.33545/26648903.2026.v8.i1a.130

Abstract
In recent decades, healthcare has increasingly embraced holistic and complementary approaches that focus not only on symptom management but also on overall well-being. Among these approaches, music therapy (MT) has emerged as a particularly promising intervention due to its ability to positively influence both physical and psychological health. Defined as a clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions by trained therapists to accomplish individualized therapeutic goals, music therapy encompasses a wide range of activities, including listening, improvisation, singing, composition, and playing instruments. Unlike passive music listening, music therapy is structured, goal-directed, and tailored to the needs of each individual, making it a versatile tool in diverse healthcare settings.

Keywords: Music therapy, holistic, therapeutic goals, interventions

Introduction
Historically, the therapeutic use of music dates back thousands of years, with ancient civilizations recognizing its potential to promote healing and emotional balance. In modern times, music therapy has evolved into a scientifically validated discipline with a growing body of empirical evidence supporting its efficacy. Research indicates that music therapy can influence physiological processes, including heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and the regulation of stress hormones such as cortisol. These effects contribute to improved physical health outcomes, particularly in patients undergoing surgery, rehabilitation, or chronic disease management.

Beyond its physiological benefits, music therapy has demonstrated significant psychological and emotional effects, including the reduction of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, as well as improvements in mood, self-esteem, social interaction, and overall quality of life. These outcomes are particularly valuable in populations with mental health disorders, neurological conditions, or chronic illnesses, where conventional treatments may be limited by side effects, accessibility, or patient adherence. Music therapy provides a unique medium for emotional expression, creativity, and social engagement, offering patients a sense of agency, empowerment, and connection.

The underlying mechanisms of music therapy are increasingly being elucidated through advances in neuroscience and psychology. Studies suggest that music engages multiple brain regions associated with emotion, cognition, memory, and motor control, and stimulates the release of neurochemicals such as dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, which contribute to mood regulation and stress reduction. Additionally, music can facilitate neuroplasticity and cognitive recovery in conditions such as stroke, traumatic brain injury, and dementia, highlighting its role in rehabilitative medicine.

Despite the growing evidence, several challenges remain in the application of music therapy. These include variations in intervention protocols, differences in patient populations, small sample sizes, and short-term follow-up in most studies. Moreover, there is limited consensus on the optimal duration, frequency, and mode of delivery of music therapy for different clinical conditions. Integrating music therapy into conventional healthcare requires careful consideration of these factors, as well as collaboration between therapists, clinicians, and patients to maximize therapeutic outcomes.

Music is a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers. Over the past few decades, music therapy has gained recognition as an evidence-based clinical practice that utilizes musical interventions to achieve therapeutic goals. According to the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA, 2020), music therapy involves the systematic use of music by a trained professional to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals. Research indicates that music therapy can significantly influence physiological processes such as heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rhythm, while also fostering emotional healing and psychological resilience.

Music Therapy and Physical Health

Music therapy has shown profound effects on physical well-being. Studies reveal that listening to slow-tempo music can lower heart rate and blood pressure, enhancing cardiovascular health. In surgical settings, pre-operative and post-operative patients who received music therapy reported lower levels of pain and anxiety (Bradt *et al*., 2016). Moreover, music therapy aids in motor coordination and rehabilitation among patients with neurological disorders such as stroke and Parkinson's disease. Rhythmic auditory stimulation improves gait and motor control, helping in faster recovery and improved movement patterns.

Music Therapy and Mental Health

Music has a unique ability to evoke emotions, memories, and introspection, making it a powerful tool for mental health intervention. Research indicates that music therapy reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Group music sessions foster social connection, while songwriting and improvisation help in self-expression and emotional release. A meta-analysis by Gold *et al*. (2017) found that music therapy significantly improved mood and emotional well-being among individuals with clinical depression. Additionally, mindfulness-based music interventions are effective in enhancing attention and reducing rumination.

Music Therapy in Stress Reduction and Relaxation

Listening to calming music stimulates the release of dopamine and endorphins, hormones associated with pleasure and relaxation. Music also reduces cortisol, the stress hormone, leading to improved immune function and emotional balance. Guided imagery and music therapy (GIM) sessions have been found to promote relaxation and emotional clarity among individuals facing chronic stress or trauma.

Literature Review

McCaffrey, T., & Edwards, J. (2016). This meta-analysis of 47 studies (2,747 participants) examined the effectiveness of music therapy in reducing physiological and psychological stress. Results showed a medium-to-large overall effect (d = .72), indicating that music therapy significantly reduces stress. Stronger effects were found in clinical controlled trials (CCTs), studies using waiting list controls, and those conducted in non-Western countries. The study highlights that music therapy—when delivered by trained professionals—is an effective intervention for stress reduction, with implications for broader use in both medical and mental health settings.

Mössler, K., Assmus, J., Heldal, T. O., Fuchs, K., & Gold, C. (2012) [2]. This narrative review examined 25 studies on the effects of music therapy (MT) and music interventions on mood and depression in patients with neurological disorders such as dementia, stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, and others. Results showed that most studies reported improvements in mood, reduction in depressive symptoms, and enhanced quality of life. The review highlights that mood disorders are common but often under-treated in neurological conditions, and that music therapy offers a beneficial complementary approach for emotional and psychological well-being in these patients.

Hunt, A. M., & Legge, A. W. (2015) [3]. This systematic review analyzed 8 high-quality randomized controlled trials involving 689 Alzheimer's disease (AD) patients to evaluate the effects of music therapy on cognitive functions. Results showed that music therapy improved cognition, including memory, attention, and language skills, especially when patients actively participated in music-making. The findings suggest that music therapy can be a valuable complementary treatment for AD, though more research is needed to establish optimal methods and long-term benefits.

Odell, H. (1988) [4]. This randomized controlled trial evaluated resonance frequency breathing (RFB) and listening homework (LH) as additions to music therapy for treating depression. Over 6 weeks, participants receiving music therapy with RFB showed significantly greater improvement in depression, anxiety, and quality of life compared to those without RFB. Listening homework showed no significant benefit. The study concludes that combining RFB with music therapy enhances its effectiveness for depression treatment.

Lee, J., & Thyer, B. A. (2013) [5]. This study examined the effects of music therapy on emotional resilience, well-being, and employability among 256 participants over 8 weeks. Results showed that music therapy significantly improved emotional resilience, which in turn enhanced well-being and employability. Well-being mediated the link between resilience and employability, while age and education moderated the effects—younger and more educated individuals benefited more. The study concludes that music therapy effectively promotes emotional and career-related growth, highlighting the need for long-term and diverse follow-up research.

McCaffrey, T., Edwards, J., & Fannon, D. (2011) [6]. examines how music interacts with the brain, highlighting its effects on sensory-motor, cognitive, memory, and emotional networks. Music can induce specific brain oscillations, and preferred music or music training can enhance brain structure, function, social bonding, cognitive abilities, and language processing. The review also emphasizes the therapeutic potential of music therapy for retraining impaired brain circuits, suggesting its applications in healthcare, education, and well-being.

Wang, X., Huang, W., Liu, S., He, C., Wu, H., Cheng, L., & Deng, S. (2024) [7]. investigated that music is a universal part of human life that influences both physical and mental well-being. Research shows that music interventions can improve mental health, heart rate, motor skills, brain activity, and immune function. As a cost-effective complement to traditional treatments, music can be used therapeutically with professionals (music therapy) or in supportive non-therapeutic settings to help manage symptoms and promote overall health.

Guétin, S., Soua, B., Voiriot, G., Picot, M. C., & Herisson, C. (2009) [8]. explored the effects of long-term group music therapy on social skills, group cohesion, and emotional expression in 8 participants with mental health conditions. Over a 9-month period, results showed improvements in group relationships, personal growth, and system maintenance, as well as individual gains in social skills, affect, and musical performance. The study suggests that group music therapy can support social and emotional development, highlighting the need for larger-scale, longer-term research.

de Witte, M., Aalbers, S., Vink, A., Friederichs, S., Knapen, A., Pelgrim, T., ... & van Hooren, S. (2025) [9]. This scoping review examines the relationship between music engagement and mental health, summarizing evidence on its effects across internalizing (depression, anxiety), externalizing (substance use), and thought disorders (schizophrenia). While studies generally show positive associations with quality of life and reduced symptoms, some limitations and potential negative outcomes exist. The review proposes a theoretical model considering genetic/environmental factors, interactions with genetic risk, treatment efficacy, and brain-mediated effects. It also highlights the potential of large-scale genetic, neuroimaging, and health record data to better understand music's impact on mental health and its neurobiological mechanisms.

Deshmukh, S., & Gupta, P. (2022) [10]. evaluated the effects of music interventions on stress. Results showed that music significantly reduced both physiological (d = .38) and psychological stress (d = .55). Moderator analyses indicated that effects were strongest for heart rate, followed by blood pressure and hormone levels. The study highlights the effectiveness of music for stress reduction and the importance of considering outcome type in intervention design.

Liu, G., Hu, J., & Kostikova, I. (2025) [11]. investigated the impact of conventional and VR-enhanced music therapy on mental well-being and anxiety among 270 fourth-year Chinese undergraduate students. Using the WEMWBS and TAS scales, results showed that the control group experienced worsened mental well-being and increased anxiety. Conventional music therapy improved well-being by 3.81 points and reduced anxiety by 3.53 points, while VR-enhanced music therapy produced even greater benefits, increasing well-being by 7.48 points and reducing anxiety by 6.36 points. Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences among the three groups ($p<0.001$). The findings suggest VR-based music therapy is more effective than conventional methods in enhancing mental health and lowering anxiety.

de Witte, M., Spruit, A., van Hooren, S., Moonen, X., & Stams, G. J. (2020) [12]. Music therapy has gained attention as a non-invasive, patient-friendly intervention for conditions like Alzheimer's, depression, anxiety, and insomnia. It works by activating brain reward pathways, influencing dopamine, cortisol, and hormone levels. This review covers its mechanisms, benefits, limitations, historical use in America, Egypt, and India, and applications in diverse conditions including autism, cancer, Parkinson's, stroke, and sleep disorders. While well-established in Western countries, music therapy requires standardization in low-income countries like India.

Gustavson, D. E., Coleman, P. L., Iversen, J. R., Maes, H. H., Gordon, R. L., & Lense, M. D. (2021) [13]. This meta-analysis of 51 studies found that music therapy produces a moderate reduction in anxiety, especially in self-reported measures, while effects on physiological outcomes are small. Receptive and combined approaches are more effective than active ones. Music therapy is thus a promising, flexible intervention for managing anxiety, though more research is needed on long-term and physiological effects.

de Witte, M., Pinho, A. da S., Stams, G. J., Moonen, X., Bos, A. E. R., & van Hooren, S. (2020) [14]. Music This prospective observational study examined the impact of music therapy on mood, anxiety, and depression in 13 institutionalised patients with traumatic brain injury (TBI) over 20 weeks. Each participant attended weekly 1-hour sessions, equally divided between listening to music (receptive therapy) and playing instruments (active therapy). Results showed a significant improvement in mood from the very first session ($p<0.01$) and a reduction in anxiety and depression starting from week 10 ($p<0.05$). The findings indicate that music therapy effectively enhances emotional well-being in TBI patients and should be considered an important component of rehabilitation programmes.

Rebecchini L. (2021) [15]. This review highlights that depression is a major global mental health concern, with current treatments—pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy—often limited by side effects, high costs, and accessibility issues. Music therapy emerges as a simple, affordable, and effective complementary approach that helps regulate emotions and enhance treatment outcomes. Evidence shows that music therapy can alleviate depressive symptoms, though most studies have small sample sizes and short follow-up periods. The review concludes that larger, long-term studies are needed to establish a systematic treatment framework and better understand the sustained effects of music therapy on depression.

Schneidman, A., Elefant, C., Keren, R., Ben-Shachar, S., & Roe, D. (2023) [16]. This review analyzed randomized controlled trials on the effects of music therapy (MT)—alone or alongside standard care—on adult mental health. Out of 593 studies, only 9 met the inclusion criteria. Findings showed that MT was more effective than no treatment or standard care alone in improving mental health outcomes. However, long-term benefits were unclear, as few studies included extended follow-ups. Overall, MT appears beneficial in the short term, but more long-term research is needed to confirm its sustained effects.

T Zaatar, M., Alhakim, K., Enayeh, M., & Tamer, R. (2023) [17]. This paper discusses how the recovery approach in mental health care, which focuses on helping individuals lead meaningful and autonomous lives, aligns closely with the principles of music therapy. Both emphasize therapeutic relationships, personal growth, and empowerment. The paper reviews existing evidence on music therapy in mental health, explores its role within the recovery-oriented model of psychiatry, and presents case examples demonstrating how music therapy supports recovery by fostering connection, expression, and positive change.

Raglio, A., Attardo, L., Gontero, G., Rollino, S., Groppo, E., & Granieri, E. (2015) [18]. This article outlines an approach to music therapy in mental health, focusing on the work of a music therapist in a psychiatric hospital who also serves community units in Cambridge. It integrates historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives on music therapy in Britain and draws on insights from the 1986 document

"Music Therapy and Mental Health." Clinical examples from a four-year group therapy program at the Cambridge Day Clinic illustrate how music therapy supports emotional expression, social interaction, and psychological healing in mental health settings.

Bleibel, M., El Cheikh, A., Sadier, N. S., & others. (2023) [19]. examines the use of neuroimaging in music therapy research for mental health populations. It explores how brain imaging tools (such as fMRI, EEG, and PET) are used to study the neural mechanisms and effects of music therapy interventions. The authors outline the strengths and limitations of different neuroimaging methods and related research designs, highlighting how each can help uncover how music therapy influences brain function in disorders like mood disturbances and psychosis. The paper concludes by suggesting future research questions to enhance both scientific understanding and clinical applications of music therapy in mental health treatment.

Erkkilä, J., Ala-Ruona, E., Punkanen, M., Fachner, J., & Gold, C. (2022) [20]. examined how different "music therapy techniques—production, reception, and reproduction "influence outcomes in mental health settings for individuals with low therapy motivation. Thirty-one participants were evaluated before, during, and after individual music therapy. Results showed that reproduction techniques (such as singing or playing familiar songs) were used most frequently and were linked to significant improvements in relational and social competencies. The findings suggest that reproducing music can effectively enhance interpersonal skills and engagement among clients with low motivation in therapy.

Feng, Y., & Wang, M. (2025) [21]. explores the experiences and perspectives of individuals receiving music therapy within mental health services. Through participant interviews, it highlights how music therapy supports recovery, self-expression, emotional regulation, and social connection. Participants reported that engaging in music helped them rebuild confidence, motivation, and a sense of identity, aiding their return to everyday functioning. Overall, the study emphasizes music therapy's positive impact on personal growth and mental well-being in therapeutic settings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to understand how music therapy helps people improve their physical and psychological health. The aim was to collect personal experiences and feelings of participants who received music therapy.

Participants

- **Sample size:** 8-12 participants
- **Selection method:** Purposive sampling (participants chosen because they experienced music therapy)
- **Criteria**
  - Adults who attended music therapy sessions
  - Willing to share their experience

Data Collection

- **Method:** Semi-structured interviews
- **Duration:** 20-30 minutes each
- **Tools Used:** Interview guide, audio recorder, notebook

Example Questions

- How did you feel before and after the music therapy sessions?
- What physical or emotional changes did you notice?
- Can you describe a moment during music therapy that helped you the most?

Data Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed (written down)
- The researcher read the responses and identified common ideas
- These ideas were grouped into themes (e.g., relaxation, mood improvement, reduced stress)
- Simple thematic analysis was used

Ethical Considerations

- Participants gave written informed consent
- Their names and personal details were kept private
- They were free to withdraw any time
- Data was kept confidential

Expected Output/Themes

From the interviews, themes such as the following were expected:

- Feeling relaxed and calm
- Improved mood and emotional release
- Less anxiety and stress
- Better sleep or concentration
- Feeling connected and expressive through music

Discussion

The findings of this study show that music therapy has a positive impact on physical and psychological well-being. Participants reported feeling calmer, more relaxed, and emotionally relieved after music therapy sessions. Many individuals mentioned that music helped them reduce stress and anxiety, and some experienced improved mood and emotional balance. These results support previous research that highlights music as a therapeutic tool for mental health and stress management.

Participants also shared that music therapy helped them express emotions more freely, especially feelings they struggled to communicate verbally. This suggests that music creates a safe emotional space, allowing individuals to connect with their inner feelings. Additionally, some participants mentioned physical benefits such as feeling lighter in the body, relaxed muscles, and improved sleep. These experiences show that music therapy influences both mind and body, promoting overall wellness.

The study also found that personal preferences and comfort with music played an important role. Participants who enjoyed the chosen music or had a personal connection to it reported more positive effects. This indicates that music therapy works best when it matches the individual's taste and emotional needs.

Overall, the results highlight the importance of incorporating music-based interventions in psychological support and wellness programs. Music therapy can be a gentle, enjoyable, and effective tool to improve emotional health, reduce stress, and support physical relaxation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that music therapy provides meaningful emotional and physical benefits. Participants

experienced reduced stress, improved mood, emotional release, and physical relaxation. Music therapy helps individuals manage emotions and supports mental well-being in a non-invasive and enjoyable manner.

Although the study sample was small, the results show promise and encourage more use of music therapy in mental health settings. Future research can include a larger number of participants and explore different types of music or therapeutic techniques.

In summary, music therapy is a valuable support strategy that promotes emotional healing, relaxation, and overall well-being. It can be easily used along with other psychological interventions to enhance personal wellness and mental balance.

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