

Influence of Music as a Coping Strategy during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 or coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic is an acute respiratory syndrome, the causes and the effects of which are found to be enormous while the outcome and the treatments are still being understood. To handle the unknown, every country has brought in rules and regulations to safeguard the huge human population and lockdowns in movement and creating awareness on being socially distant. The sudden situation of crisis brought into our lives has also caused uncertainty about the future and the outcomes of this have been found to be psychological trauma and fear. Music along with mankind has evolved as a way of coping strategy for stress during psychological trauma in people's lives. Music has been found to have a profound effect on the physiological, psychological, and socializing aspects of human life. World over people have been using music to connect with each other from their homes. Technological enhancements of using music can also help in self-care allowing one's emotions to be expressed even when the need to maintain social distancing is mandatory. This article hopes to bring out the mechanism of music and the different techniques that may be used as a way of coping with crisis situations such as the COVID-19.

Keywords: Coping, COVID-19, Crisis, Managing stress, Music, Music therapy, Salutogenesis, Self-care.

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COVID-19 will perhaps be a part of the ongoing process of evolution to mankind adding to the changes that have occurred over thousands of years due to climate change, natural disasters, and world wars. Nature that is presently here in the world is due to the science of survival of the fittest. Human race has been through some of the toughest eras using various coping strategies.

The year 2020 and COVID-19 brought with them dramatic changes in normal day-to-day life as well as working processes. The current situation has been a lifestyle-changing experience for everyone globally, bringing them together to handle the stresses and survive nature's emotions. The world has come to a standstill and is in a very stressful period as a whole due to lockdowns causing a wave of fear toward the future. The fear of the unknown and the future looking bleak for answers have made everyday life difficult and filled everyone with a sense of anxiety. With sporadic information being passed onto every household through various sources of media on the loss of human life in large numbers has caused panic to become a force toward various behavioral patterns. The sudden halt in movement has made it difficult for many who have been separated from their family and children who are in different parts of a country or in other countries. Working from home has become a part of life for many others, and living a life within four walls has been very frustrating, causing emotional turmoil and general health issues.

Turning toward support or coping mechanisms, to handle fear and anxiety of the unknown, during times of trauma, crisis, or difficulty, is a way of survival. Amidst the inner fight of our physiological responses to the pressures from the society and the sea of information being floated, the systems within our body are activated as a way of survival to perceived threats.¹ The effects of trauma or stress after a crisis can have lasting effects and can lead to emotional and physical problems like chronic pain, depression, anxiety disorders, cardiovascular diseases, burnout, and addictions. Stress in a prolonged situation is perceived as too threatening, expressing a somatic or psychological dysfunction of emotions such as anger, anxiety, panic, fright, sadness, shame, depression, and guilt.²

Music as a universal concept has been there way before mankind. Music and its elements, such as melody and rhythm, are present even before we are born and it is a part of our lives

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notwithstanding the need for it. Music with its intricate structure and intrinsic patterns can bring about a sense of meaning, making it a part of a healing process.³

There are various methods and techniques of using music. However, when it has to lead to therapeutic effects, it is distinguished as music medicine or music therapy (MT).

Music therapy is defined as an intervention where "the therapist helps the client to promote health, using music experiences and the relationships developing through them."⁴ The most likely difference between MT and music medicine would be a qualified music therapist being a part of the intervention. The element of therapeutic communication is added when a qualified therapist guides the client toward using music for various nonmusical or health-related goals. Methods and techniques that music therapists use with clients/patients include passive music listening to active and/or recreative experiences, song writing, improvisation, use of musical instruments untuned and tuned, as well as methods that involve verbal discussion. The sessions vary with therapists singing or playing and also slowly getting the clients to engage in different techniques of singing or playing together.⁵ The use of baseline, prompted, collaborative, and independent musical tasks in singing, moving, rhythmic techniques and playing of musical instruments helps the client and therapist relations grow and makes the process of therapy easier.⁶

Music has an effect contextually on psychological, physiological, social, and spiritual aspects of people. Music acts as a powerful sensory stimulus by activating the brain and retraining the neural

mechanism. This can be used for nonmusical aspects of our lives therapeutically. Music resonates memory and emotions with the brain, increases attention spans and/or focus, helps to sustain moods, relieves tension that build from within, and facilitates self-expression.⁷

Music has been widely used for its calming effects and to reduce stress.^{8,9} Research using music recorded in its various forms of singing or music making, music listening, or live MT by music therapists for specific groups of patients as interventions has been used for alleviating stress.^{10,11} The potential effects of research with music on the stress-inducing cortisol hormone release have been found to be beneficial, which is potentially part of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (HPA).¹² Listening to music in the context of a stressful situation increases coping abilities and reduces levels of perceived psychological stress. Studies have recorded reduced cortisol levels in patients undergoing stressful procedures in the hospital with the use of music. The effects of music through listening to music or active music making such as singing or playing instruments have been found to have perceived benefits in the literature, which include physical relaxation and alleviation of physical tension, release of suppressed emotional feelings of reduced stress that brings about a feeling of happiness, positivity, and a greater sense of physical and emotional well-being.¹³⁻¹⁶

Emotions play an important role with our psychological, physiological, social well-being, and general functioning for our everyday functioning. Researchers have reviewed the use of music in emotions and in the search for the mechanism of music on emotions studied the effects of music on emotions, which has become more and more important.^{17,18} The effect of music composed to evoke emotions such as happiness and sadness was found to evoke the desired emotional outcome with appropriate music in a particular study.¹⁹ Studies that evaluated the changes on brain have brought out the mechanism on the use of music on emotions. The effect of music with relaxing properties was found to have an effect on the alpha wave and in the deep sleep state the theta waves are affected, which proved that brain waves (EEG) can be altered with music relaxation. Studies have found that brain waves (EEG) can be altered by music while another study found the alpha and theta brain waves increased with the use of relaxing music or other relaxation techniques.²⁰⁻²²

The present COVID-19 pandemic requires social isolation be adhered to with no contacts physically and socially. Humans seek social contact as a basic need while isolation from social interaction may pose as a risk factor, leading to morbidity and or mortality.^{23,24} Meeting the needs of being a part of the society, to be connected to similar groups, and to engage and maintain lasting relationships makes for a healthier life and longer life expectancy in human beings.²³⁻²⁵ Maintaining social relationships increases the confidence to handle oneself and also be able to reciprocate to another in a similar state of mind²⁶ and in that context it has been found that the effects of regenerative musical engagement can only happen in an environment without conflicts.²⁷

The use of music connects with social cognitions by default, and may help understand emotions, intentions, and desires, which is also referred to as mentalizing and adopting an intentional stance.⁹ In this context, it would be appropriate to say that the term "salutogenesis" plays an important role. Salutogenesis may be defined as all those factors that include the involvement and sustenance to the sense of wholesome well-being. It describes the sense of coherence (SOC), which comprises of comprehension,

meaningfulness, and manageability.²⁸ When a person has the belief that their life is understandable (comprehension), there is a meaning to (meaningfulness) it, and lastly there is motivation to cope (manageability), it brings about a wholesome well-being in a holistic manner.²⁹ Sense of coherence process is a necessity during a situation of stress or crisis that the world is going through at present, which may help find meaning as well as ways to cope with the problems during a crisis.³⁰

Music during the COVID pandemic can be used to cope with the stress of social distancing, being isolated, or away from family and friends. Musical activities like music making or listening to music may lead to coopathy, which equals the social function of empathy, i.e., emotional states of an individual can be affected empathetically when there are a group of people in a similar state of mind.³¹ This leads to increased cohesiveness in social groups. Positive thoughts can be imbibed with the use of music that evokes happy thoughts and hope for a better future. The automatic synchronization of physical movement, heart rate, respiratory rate, and neural activity with rhythmic cues in music is known as entrainment.^{32,33} Training the mind to be positive with the use of music and to be able to do the same with others who are going through the same state of mind is a way of coping with stress during a crisis period such as the current pandemic, which has the globe caught in the clutches of fear of the unknown future.

The use of social media and ability to connect to others virtually has brought many to use music in various ways, either bringing out their interest in music or by giving themselves a feeling of being around others. Groups of musicians are getting back and making music from their own homes. Webinars are being conducted all over the world, making it easy to bring music and the need for and the effects of music to everyone's homes. MT sessions are being taken over face-to-face web media such as Zoom, Google room, Skype, and other platforms. News and media too are bringing together information about the positivity of people connecting in many ways, playing music in their balconies, playing instrument, and clapping hands together, which only make it even more true that there is a lot more musical connection taking place around the world with this current COVID pandemic. Coping strategies are discovered as and when needs arise and with whatever facilities are present at that time. Music experiences are most often than not positive as an outcome. Use of appropriate music used according to needs of specific times of stress and isolation could bring about a sense of identity, making the experience positive and therapeutic to the persons involved.³⁴

The use of music to entrain positive thoughts and create hope in the minds of people will help them to cope with the sense of isolation, negativity, and a feeling of hopelessness during COVID-19, making them more able and strong to survive whatever may come.

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