

Music Therapy With a Woman Who Was Hurt By a Cowboy

La musicothérapie avec une femme blessée par un cowboy : étude de cas

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Abstract

This case study describes the use of songwriting in music therapy with a woman in her thirties living with multiple sclerosis in a care home and involved in a relationship with a verbally and physically abusive partner. Over the course of ten individual songwriting sessions with a music therapy student, she was able to explore some of her personal issues and develop some insight into her situation.

Key words: music therapy, songwriting, lyrics, autobiography, multiple sclerosis, long-term care, physical abuse, case study, self-esteem

Résumé

Cette étude de cas décrit l'utilisation de l'écriture de chanson en musicothérapie avec une femme dans la trentaine souffrant de sclérose en plaques, résidant dans une maison de convalescence et vivant une relation amoureuse avec un conjoint violent (violence verbale et physique). Au cours d'une série de dix séances individuelles d'écriture de chanson, elle a pu explorer certaines de ses difficultés personnelles et développer une meilleure compréhension de sa situation.

Mots clés : musicothérapie, écriture de chansons, paroles, autobiographie, sclérose en plaques, soins prolongés, violence physique, étude de cas, estime de soi

Introduction

This article presents the work I did while a music therapy student at my first practicum placement. During my third year of studies in the music therapy program at Capilano College, I was assigned to apply what I learned through

classroom lectures and textbooks into practical use at a local long-term facility. I held 10 weekly, one-to-one music therapy sessions with a young client living with multiple sclerosis (MS). O'Connor (2005, p. 117) says of the person living with the illness:

MS has the potential to diminish your self-esteem, as you lose the sense of being a healthy person and begin to see yourself as an ill person who has to work at regaining good health and the positive self-image that goes with it.

Songwriting is revealing itself as a primary modality in more and more of the music therapy literature (Baker & Wigram, 2005; Hatcher, in press; Smith, in press; Jones, (2006). Songwriting enabled this resident to share her thoughts, feelings, and stories through a means of expression that was both meaningful and accessible to her. Writing and singing original lyrics can provide a person with nontraditional opportunities for empowerment and catharsis like no other medium can (MacIntosh, 2003). A song can "come from the deepest roots of our being ... it is in a sense both a container and transformer of feelings, whereby new meanings may be forged" (Robarts, 2003, p. 142). Informed consent was obtained in order to share Bridget's story, whose name has been changed in this article to protect her anonymity.

The Setting

The setting of this case study was a long-term care facility that provides support and housing for seniors. Bridget was in her thirties, differing considerably in age from the majority of the elderly residents. The facility is run under a philosophy that counters resident loneliness, boredom and helplessness, and offers music and art therapies as well as a variety of recreational and religious activities.

The Client

Bridget is a bright, witty and gregarious woman who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her early adolescence. Prior to institutionalization, she lived in several Canadian cities and held a variety of people-oriented jobs that were well suited to her outgoing personality. Always having an opinion and never hesitating to share it, Bridget is quite the conversationalist and carries a good sense of humour mixed with light touches of cynicism. She was referred to music therapy because of her high affinity to music.

She Was Hurt By a Cowboy

On the afternoon of the second week of my practicum, I happened to see Bridget by herself in the hallway of the extended care unit. "Hi Bridget, would you like to do some music?" I asked. She cheerfully agreed without any hesitation. With my guitar strapped to my back, I helped transport Bridget to her room in her wheelchair. From having attended two morning group music therapy sessions in which she participated, I had already observed that Bridget identified herself as a songwriter. In both sessions, she spontaneously volunteered to sing a song that she had written when it was her turn to talk about her week during a discussion activity. At this point she had only written the lyrics for a verse and a chorus which she recited to me with a great sense of pride:

*She was young and scared, being played a fool
Knowing what the cards read, knowing all the rules
A one night stand, "Thank you ma'am, it was good and I had fun
See you around in a year or so, right now I'm on the run"*

Chorus:

*She was hurt by a cowboy
A stranger she thought she loved
He was there and then he left her
Right now, he's on the run*

Bridget spoke with great enthusiasm when answering my questions regarding her song. She explained that she had been working on it for many years and desired to complete it with her lyrics set to music. I felt an instant connection with Bridget—perhaps it was her sense of humour or nonchalance that I identified with—and selected her to be my first ever one-to-one music therapy client. After reviewing documentation done by the interdisciplinary team and discussion with my on-site supervisor about Bridget's needs, I established my goal to be for Bridget to develop a greater sense of self-worth and self-love. Through working together on writing lyrics and engaging in conversation over the next few weeks, a strong therapeutic relationship developed between us. We often discussed titles from her extensive movie collection, many of which were released in the 80's. Bridget spoke fondly about country music from her record collection and together we sang the very limited number of country songs that I knew. As time went by, Bridget started to trust me enough to disclose some very personal details about her life. She spoke about grieving the death of her father and about having a rocky relationship with her mother who had always

told her that she was “no good at everything” including singing and songwriting. She shared about being involved in a car accident many years ago that she believed was somehow connected to her multiple sclerosis and damage to the function in one of her legs. She vented her frustrations about relationships, which included mention of a former husband and of a current boyfriend who had been denied visitation to the facility due to his aggressive tendencies and history of abuse. Although Bridget often reported being unable to think of subsequent lyrics for her song, she was usually able to produce material by answering questions regarding the female protagonist of her song whom she firmly asserted was not herself nor a friend, but an imagined character. Bridget dwelled on woeful themes and lyrics that seemed to reflect the self-pity and self-defeating attitudes with which she had always been familiar. I sought out any opportunities wherein Bridget spoke about positive qualities that the female protagonist possessed, and suggested incorporating these into the song. By the fifth session, Bridget had written two additional verses, selected chord progressions and made choices regarding tempo and style, bringing *She Was Hurt By A Cowboy* to completion:

*She hasn't seen her cowboy or the love she thought she'd found
All she has is a memory of a road leading out of town
She's better than that, she's more alive
She needs to live to be let down*

*And now she's a mother, a mother and her son
Stuck right there in the middle, she has no place to run
But her son has a life and a future
And she knows she has to grow up and move on*

If She Just Believed

On the afternoon of the sixth session, Bridget told me with great excitement that she had started working on a new song and handed me a crumpled piece of paper with lyrics jotted down on it by a friend who had visited during the week. The lyrics seemed to be appropriate to serve as a verse and pre-chorus and carried the same woeful nature of the lyrics that Bridget had written in the past:

*He was older and more tame
But she loved him just the same
Even though they started out as strangers
Somehow they knew the dangers of the game*

*But she knew that he might be back
If she just believed in that*

I asked Bridget several questions regarding her lyrics. Although she again asserted that the lyrics were not based on her own life experiences, the discussion led to her sharing of many personal accounts to the point where she admitted that it was too difficult to continue. She reverted to discussing *She Was Hurt By A Cowboy* as a means of deterring the subject. Again, through answering questions regarding her female protagonist, Bridget was able to produce the lyrics for a chorus:

Chorus:

*Is she losing him?
Can somebody tell her that it's over?
Can somebody tell her that it's not the same?
As it was before he came?*

The following week, I asked Bridget specific questions regarding the male character portrayed in both of her songs: the “cowboy” who hurt and left her female protagonist. We discussed the way he treated her, why she would stay with him and whether it was healthy for her to remain in such an abusive relationship. Bridget explained that her female protagonist “just stands the abuse [and] has been there so long that she doesn’t want to leave,” but “at the end pulls away from it.” The following lyrics for a second verse were produced as a result:

*She was younger and still more tame
But his words were hurtful all the same
Even though she's been there for so long
She doesn't seem to realize that it's all wrong*

By the eighth week, the only part of the song that remained unwritten was the bridge. After reviewing the song several times, Bridget reported “drawing a complete blank” as to what lyrics were to come next. To facilitate the creative process, I asked Bridget what were some things that she would say to her female protagonist if she were able to talk to her. In response, Bridget produced the following bridge section and agreed that the lyrics seemed like what might be spoken by her female protagonist’s own inner voice:

*Just work it out
It's not working, just start it all over
Just stop it and start it all over
Start it all over again*

Bridget specified that she wanted this song to be upbeat and to carry a more hopeful and uplifting mood than her previous song; she chose to begin and end the song using major chords as opposed to the minor chords used in *She Was Hurt By A Cowboy*. Bridget selected chord progressions that she liked for each of the verse, pre-chorus, chorus, and bridge sections, thus completing *If She Just Believed*.

The CD Release Party

The following week, my colleague and I recorded Bridget singing *She Was Hurt By A Cowboy* and *If She Just Believed* to be made into a CD. I felt that Bridget needed to make creative decisions surrounding the project as much as possible so that she could take ownership of it. She had specified in the past that she wanted her photograph to be included on the cover of the CD, so we spent the afternoon taking pictures around the facility. After viewing the pictures, Bridget selected one that depicted her smiling brightly with her arm thrown up in the air to be the cover shot. Bridget and I also discussed what other images were to be used in the CD artwork, which included pictures of certain animals, and movies she liked and of cities in which she used to live. With some prompting, Bridget wrote a thank you section to be included in the liner notes in which she thanked her parents and her boyfriend for believing in her. When I suggested she include a message to fans or to people who might happen to come across her songs, Bridget requested that I write one on her behalf. However, in response to being asked what she wanted to tell people about being a singer-songwriter living with multiple sclerosis, Bridget was able to come up with the following dedication:

This CD is dedicated to all of the dreamers out there. Living with a disease makes you a big dreamer. Just keep going...

On the morning of the twelfth and final day of my practicum, Bridget performed her two songs during the weekly group music therapy session that was referred to that day as a CD release party. It took place around a large table. A few copies of her album in both CD and cassette formats were made available. Bridget's performance was met with tremendous applause and praise from

group participants, some of whom requested copies of her CD and lyrics. That afternoon, Bridget and I went around the facility putting up posters promoting the release of her CD on bulletin boards and in elevators. We returned to her room to sing her songs together one final time before we bid each other goodbye and good luck.

Discussion

Although Bridget asserted that her songs were not autobiographical in nature, it seemed very likely that many of the lyrics and themes related to aspects of her own life. Upon analysis of her lyrics, it is evident that a shift in thought occurred between the two songs. While Bridget describes the female protagonist in *She Was Hurt By A Cowboy* as being “stuck right there in the middle [with] no place to run”, she recognizes that the female protagonist needs to take control of her situation in *If She Just Believed*, urging her to “just work it out” and “start it all over”. The succession of the two songs tell the story of a person who developed strength, resilience, hope, and insight - positive affirmations that can be grounded and reinforced through future repetitions of the song (Harris, 1999).

Although Bridget is quite capable of writing lyrics independently, she requires the intervention of a music therapist to organize, articulate and focus her thoughts; to set her words to music while offering an array of musical elements to choose from; to be an active and supportive listener as well as an ally in her introspective process. I observed a great sense of accomplishment in Bridget that resulted from having completed this small yet very personally meaningful project. She undoubtedly enjoyed all of the well-deserved attention and praise she received at the CD release party and even made sure that I mailed a copy of her CD to her mother before I left that day.

Conclusion

Through songwriting, Bridget was able to examine some of her personal issues in a creative way that allowed for indirect expression and self-disclosure. I feel very honoured that Bridget bestowed the trust in me to share her life experiences, to voice such personal thoughts and feelings in the music that we created together, and to give me permission to share her story with others who might be inspired by it as much as I have been.

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