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Music Therapy: What to Listen for when Selecting a Music Therapist

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The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) is the single most important organization to help anyone in the United States, and elsewhere in the world, connect with music therapy. The AMTA can be reached on the Internet, through e-mail, and post [see page 12 for contact information]. They will provide you with a list of names of therapists working and/or living in your vicinity, and advise you on issues such as including music therapy in a person's Individual Education Plan (IEP), or obtaining insurance reimbursement. Once you receive the list, you may ask yourself what you should do or what to ask for when selecting a music therapist?

First of all, locate a fully credentialed music therapist. Music therapy is a specialized, credentialed training involving many credit hours of learning in music, psychology, physiology, and clinical work in the way of fieldwork and internships. Training is intensive, the major goal of which is to learn how to apply music, in all its forms, as a clinical treatment for anyone. Credentials in the field currently include not only various degrees from bachelors through doctorates, but identified stages of professional standards.

- M.T.-B.C. (Music Therapist-Board Certified) certification is awarded by a National Board for Music Therapy Certification, and requires successful completion of an extensive national examination. In addition, National Certification requires renewal every 5 years, demanding either continuing education credits or the passing of the exam again. The rigors of National Certification assume active, up-to-date knowledge and experience in Music Therapy and related areas.
- CMT (Certified Music Therapist) was awarded initially by the organization called American Association for Music Therapy (AAMT). That organization represented a specific curriculum and learning track for which, upon graduation, the credential of CMT was awarded following completion of certain credits and hours of internship.
- RMT (Registered Music Therapist) was awarded by the National Association for Music Therapy (NAMT), representing different curricular and internship requirements (although as intensive and often similar to AAMT), after which the RMT credential was awarded.
- The BC (board certification) was in addition to the RMT and CMT. In 1998, the two organizations merged and became the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA), with credentials now being awarded solely by the National Board (the MT-BC).

Unless a music therapist identifies as an RMT, CMT, or MT-BC, that music therapist may not be a fully certified, credentialed music therapist. There are other types of degrees awarded, including degrees in Creative Arts Therapies (MCAT refers to a Master's in Creative Arts Therapies), some with music therapy minors, or occasional music therapy courses. These



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areas of training may or may not include the same rigorous musical skills training, length of internship experience devoted exclusively to music therapy, or in-depth musical training as outlined by the AMTA and required by the music therapy profession.

Not to draw comparisons, this information may help you identify the therapist you are dealing with in terms of training and skills. The bottom line is, you need to know what/who they are, their backgrounds, how much and what kind of knowledge they have, and what do they know about your needs. Background on music therapy training requirements can be obtained from AMTA.

Many boards of education and/or health insurance companies require appropriate credentials, so this is an important factor in selecting a therapist. You do want someone with extensive, broad knowledge of music as well as physiology and psychology, and how music can be applied as treatment. You also want someone who is at least familiar with the age group and problem(s) seeking service. Above all, you want someone who is flexible, spontaneous and creative in drawing from a wide world of knowledge.

Some therapists are oriented more toward, and prefer to work in the realm of psychological therapy (psycho-dynamic music therapy); others are physiologically based; and still others can flow easily from one to another, depending on requirements. Inquire about therapy approaches, preferences of styles in therapeutic relationships, background in related therapies (speech, OT, Play, ABA, etc.) and knowledge of physiologic aspects.

Keep in mind that anyone who happens to play guitar and sing songs is not a therapist, nor is providing therapy. Indeed music is always therapeutic, but as a therapy over the long term, it takes much clinical insight and assessment in order to appropriately apply music resources as a clinical treatment. Foremost, it requires knowing how to look, see and hear correctly. Unfortunately, there are many people who play piano, guitar, or sing who mean well but have very little knowledge of the difference between music therapy, education and entertainment. So, ask questions, ask for detailed written assessments, types of goals for the population being addressed, approaches to therapy, and if available, references from other clients. (Wouldn't you do this when selecting a doctor?)

Because music is so much a part of our human lifestyle, it is easy to accept it simply as something that makes us "feel good," while overlooking the fact that therapy is a treatment aimed at adding to, and making changes in, human behavior over the long term. While music will not necessarily cure certain physiologic givens, it will address those things that work in human beings. In the ideal world, one would hope we could concentrate on the things that work in human beings overshadowing those things that fail. Your therapists — whether music, language, occupational, physical, art, play, psychological — espouse this attitude if they are effective clinicians.

Finally, as with everything else, you are in charge. Take inventory on what your goals are for yourself as well as the person receiving services. Be prepared to inform the therapist what it

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is that you are hoping for (realistically). Chances are, music therapy will far surpass your goals.