

Music and Other Creative Arts in Social Services – Connection and Communication

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Using music and other creative arts in different levels of education is not a new phenomenon. In social work and in other social services there is a lot of evidence how music can reach people in a way where sometimes words are not needed. Although music and other creative arts have a long history in helping and healing professions there are still many new innovations which could be introduced in social and health care. In some cases personalized music may be an alternative even to the use of medications.



Risto Järvenpää (photographer: Pertti Sillanpää)

There's no human endeavor that can't be improved with a little creativity, and social work and social services are no exception says Kate Jackson. According to Jackson the whole spectrum of arts may be used as a form of therapy or as a tool to promote the healing process. ^[1]

There is a lot of evidence about the positive effects of arts and music in hospitals, elderly care, care with the disabled people and also in the field of social services. Music in social work and social services has a long

history and several dimensions can be found starting from music as a tool creating a connection with clients to long term music therapy with deep social and psychological goals and effects.

Kate Jackson says that creative arts involve the use of the arts – visual art, music, dance and movement, drama, and poetry – to facilitate therapeutic goals. There are times when talk is not helpful or can't be summoned. In such cases, the arts can open a back door to the psyche, drawing from individuals that which they cannot yet put into words. ^[1]

There's seems to be growing interest in creative arts therapies and music among social workers also in Finland. Using arts and music is not new but "old human technology that has been used as long as there's been art," says Shelly Goebel-Parker. Indeed, the healing power of the arts has been well known already in ancient Rome and Greece, she continues. ^[2]

According to Nicholas F. Mazza the arts have a long history in the practice of social work going back to the late 19th century. "Through the years, the arts have been incorporated as adjunctive techniques in individual, family, group and community practice." ^[3]

We can ask what makes music and other creative arts so useful and special in healing process and social services. One crucial element is the way of communication. Music is not always nonverbal, we can sing and write songs, but the fact is that talking is not always the best way to communicate. Music is a very good way to encourage clients to self-expression without words and speech.

"The arts therapies provide a complement to traditional 'talk therapies' because they can address the full range of human experience – cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains," says Nicholas F. Mazza ^[3]. In social work, we often use words to reach people, but sometimes words are not needed, and the pure sound of music may take us far beyond what words can express ^[4]. Grobman ^[4] says that the arts offer the means to reach and validate clients by allowing them to, "tell their stories," in a variety of ways. And according to Mazza ^[3] this is a respectful and strengths-based approach which has become more important in the field of social services also in Finland.

Blank ^[5] quotes Christine Stevens, who says that the reason music is so effective as a tool of nonverbal communication, is that people "take an active role, even choosing the music they want". And drums and drumming seem to work particularly well because they are "very immediate, easy to play, accessible, and human," she adds. According to Blank ^[5], Stevens says that we're biologically wired to rhythm and we can't hold still when a good beat is playing. And studies have also shown, that drumming aids the immune system, counters burnout, and alleviates mood disturbances and even chronic pain.

These approaches are being increasingly used in social work practice because the evidence for their usefulness has grown and been demonstrated by clinical reports and by several qualitative and quantitative studies ^[3]. "Social workers may want to explore these approaches because they are consistent with the values and principles of the profession. There is no question about the need for scientifically validated and evidence-based approaches to practice," Mazza ^[3] says. However, it is equally important to recognize that it is imperative for social workers to recognize their clients' unique history, strengths, and culture.

Music as a tool is widely known and used in social work but also in health care. Oliver Sacks ^[6] observes that music, like scent, can not only tap long-buried memories but also help propel locomotion, thus making it an especially a valuable tool in the treatment of aphasia, Parkinson's disease, and dementia.

Still more can be done for example with new technology. Robert DeLauro ^[7] says that more client populations should have the opportunity to use the technology. For example, some nursing homes in the USA are improving the quality of life for ventilator patients with the use of personalized music. Also, personalized iPods are being introduced in hospice programs to contribute to these patients' comfort. Could personalized music with iPods in some cases be a realistic alternative to the use of antipsychotic medications, asks DeLauro. ^[7]

Music has had a long tradition in the degree program of social services in Oulu University of Applied Sciences and all those positive effects have been found also here when students have organised art, music and drumming projects in day care, elderly care, care with the disabled etc. Music and creative arts have been an important part of education giving to students a possibility to develop their own strengths which they can use in their work after graduation. And totally new program of community musician starting in 2018 is more than welcome to create new connections and communication in socio-educational care work.

In her article about music and social work, Barbara Trainin Blank points that even those social workers who are not interested in therapeutic music or music therapy in their work might benefit about such professionals who

could bring music to the clients. For children, elderly clients with dementia or people dealing with substance abuse or anxiety, the sound of music may bring both therapy and healing. ^[5]

Social work and social services have an inbuilt goal to change things and create circumstances where people can improve their life situation. As Edd Donovan ^[8] says, social services have also long needed more positive, optimistic media attention than they currently receives. Music and other creative arts in social services may bring new dimensions and give a wider perspective to the whole field of various social services and helping professions.

References

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Tiivistelmä: The aim of this article is to open the ways and possibilities how music can be involved in social work education. Using music and other creative arts in different levels of education is not a new phenomenon. In social work and in other social services there is a lot of evidence how music can reach people in a way where sometimes words are not needed. Although music and other creative arts have a long history in helping and healing professions there are still many new innovations which could be introduced in social and health care. For example new technology opens the way for personalized music with iPods. In some cases personalized music may be an alternative even to the use of medications. In Oulu University of Applied Sciences there is a long tradition of using music in education and the new program of community musicians is opening new connections.

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