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A Curing Melody to Depression in College Students

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Abstract

Depression is a widely prevalent mental disorder, having a shockingly high prevalence among college students. Depression has an abundance of symptoms that can greatly decrease the quality of life in many individuals. Depression is one of the more treatable mental disorders; however, the stigma of pursuing psychotherapy may hinder many individuals from getting the help that they need. In light of the many problems surrounding depression, music therapy can be an alternative form of treatment that can address these issues. Researchers have found that music therapy can be more effective in treating depression in comparison to the current standard treatment consisting of psychotherapy and medication. It has also been found that music therapy is able to help individuals feel less stigmatized when pursuing therapy. This review will further investigate the symptoms and possible factors for the unusually high prevalence of depression in college students. It will also look at the implications that music therapy can have in the lives of individuals who struggle with depression.

A Curing Melody to Depression in College Students

Depression is considered one of the most common mental disorders in the United States, especially among college students. Yzer and Gilasevitch (2018) found that 37% of college students struggled with depression. Also, Moreno et al. (2012) reported that 56% of college students have experienced some of the symptoms of depression while not meeting the diagnostic criteria for depression. The surprisingly high prevalence of depression among college students is especially concerning, considering that 30% to 70% of suicides have been connected to depression, making suicide the second leading cause of death among college students (P. Strom & R. Strom, 2014, Granello, & Fleming, 2011). Not only is the plague of depression becoming more common, by some it even considered the “worst disease” that an individual can have (Sapolsky, 2014).

Considering the wide prevalence of depression, this particular mental disorder can be especially destructive in the light of the significant number of crippling symptoms. Such a decrease in quality of life, especially in college students, can be a result of the following symptoms: loss of meaningfulness, fatigue or loss of energy, diminished ability to concentrate, loss of or increase in sleep, and feelings of hopelessness that persist throughout the day (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Consequently, a variety of treatments have been used to treat depression, including medications and psychotherapies. However, there may be an underlying stigma behind pursuing psychotherapy that could cause individuals to shy away from getting the help that they need (Corrigan, 2004). This may be very detrimental, considering the positive correlation between suicide and depression (Friedman & Leon, 2007).

Bearing in mind the crippling symptoms and reluctance to seek treatment by some individuals, alternative or adjunct therapies may warrant a more in-depth exploration. In efforts

to address these issues, researchers have found that music therapy has been an effective treatment for depression (Montanez, Juarez, Martinez, Alonzo, & Torres, 2016). Music therapy has been shown to help patients who struggle with depression find relief from many of the symptoms they face, increasing the quality of their lives (Silverman, Baker, & MacDonald, 2016). Greater success in treating depression has also been found from treatments using music therapy as an adjunct to standard care (Erkkilä et al., 2011). This literature review will look into how individuals who struggle with depression are better able to overcome their mental illness from music therapy.

The Prevalence and Symptoms of Depression in College Students

Depression is one of the most common and toxic mental disorders in college students, having a prevalence of 37%, meaning that more than 1 in every 3 college students will struggle with depression (Yzer & Gilasevitch, 2018). One of the challenges in treating depression is the problematic symptoms. These symptoms can become widely prevalent considering the knowledge that depression can be caused by any major event that occurs in life, including the death of a love one, getting a new job, or even moving to a new city. College students are especially at risk considering the vast number of changes and stress a student can experience, and maladaptive cognition in these new situations may lead to the occurrence or relapse of depression (Skritskaya et al., 2017). Many individuals are at risk for this mental illness, and a closer look at the symptoms of depression will show just how detrimental depression is in the lives of people.

An Investigation of the Symptoms of Depression

There are many notable symptoms of depression; however, this review will focus on the following: loss of meaningfulness, fatigue, diminished ability to focus, and feelings of

hopelessness. In addressing meaningfulness, individuals tend to seek for the assurance that they matter (Williams & Gantt, 2013). In fact, college age individuals who struggle with depression may lose the motivation to find that assurance in their lives and may find themselves wandering purposelessly in this crucial part of their lives (Friedson, 2016). Without the proper motivation to search for meaning, the individual with depression may continue to aimlessly live their life with no way to escape this condition.

A loss of meaningfulness is often maintained because of fatigue. Fatigue often accompanies depression and can be defined as a lack or loss of energy, which can lead to a decrease in the ability to function normally (Pae et al., 2007). The presence of fatigue leads to a high probability that an individual's depression will most likely not go into remission without intervention (Fava et al., 2014). Also, fatigue was rated one of the most impairing symptoms of depression, which may cause individuals to be less productive, have fewer social interactions, and be generally absent from everyday activities (Lam et al., 2013). This impairing symptom can be a potential reason for the chronic duration of depression.

Fatigue may not only cause a lack of energy but can also play a role in creating a lack of focus. Depression can also create a cognitive dissonance that can interfere with attention, learning, and also memory (Gotlib, Roberts, & Gilboa, 1996). This impairment can also contribute to the likelihood of lower performances in classes, which could negatively reinforce the symptoms associated with depression. Also, the impaired ability to focus can be a result of too much self-focus. A kind of self-focus called *ruminatio*n can be characterized by repetitive and persistent negative thinking that is targeted at the self, which is highly correlated with the occurrence of depression (Brockmeyer et al., 2015). The presence of rumination may make the individual have a constant confrontation with their depressive symptoms, which may affect the

ability of these individuals to focus on other tasks like work, hindering their ability to be productive.

As if lack of focus and rumination was not bad enough, hopelessness is also characteristic of depression. Hopelessness is future orientated and can be described as an expectation for negative outcomes in the future (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974). If an individual finds themselves in a damaging situation that they believe will never change, the symptom of hopelessness can often lead individuals to attempt to commit suicide (Beck, 1963; Lamis et al., 2014; Chang, 2017). For those who do seek help by pursuing therapy, some may discontinue therapy and medication because they do not have hope that it will work and that they can change. Individuals who discontinue therapy or medication may have a higher probability to relapse later in their life (Andrews, Kornstein, Halberstadt, Gardner, & Neale, 2011). Hopelessness in individuals who have depression has been shown to greatly diminish their quality of life, which could lead to attempts of suicide (Heisel, Flett, & Hewitt, 2003; Hirsch, Visser, Chang, & Jeglic, 2012; Miranda, Tsypes, Gallagher, & Rajappa, 2013).

The Susceptibility of Students, and Stigmatization of Mental Illness

The prevalence of depression among college students is unnervingly high, and there are many potential reasons behind this phenomenon. Due to the advent of technology, many students have a decreased amount of social interaction, poor health, a decreased amount of physical activity, and also less exposure to sunlight which could be one of the many reasons for the increase in depression (Hidaka, 2012). Also, stress can be a multiplying factor of all of the above. The fact that some people will let their depression go untreated is concerning in light of the high rate of depression among college students (Whiteford et al., 2013). Possible explanations for this phenomenon can be a result of stigmas surrounding pursuing

psychotherapy. Demyttenaere (2003) reported that those with depression have a high risk of noncompliance to different treatment regimens. The high susceptibility of students and the current stigmatization of therapy can be found to be two problematic factors that contribute to the great epidemic of depression today.

Potential Factors for Depression in College Students

Within the last decade, we have seen great advances in technology. These advances in technology have made many things about life more comfortable and convenient, however, these advances in technology do come with a price. These changes have resulted in many individuals feeling more isolated, having less exposure sunlight, and sleeping less (Hidaka, 2012). The use of the internet and social media has been correlated with less family communication, smaller social circles, an increase in depressive symptoms, and an increased feeling of loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998). These negative results can be due to a lack of meaningful communication.

Expression of meaningful communication has been shown to help people cope better with stressful situations and grief (Otani et al., 2017). People tend to put their best face forward on social media, which can create superficial relationships with many individuals. Consequently, the expression of meaningful communication can be lost.

Social isolation can make people feel that they are in darkness, isolated from society and from meaningful expression, and being in literal darkness can have a similar effect on depression. As a result of modernization, many jobs and hobbies have moved indoors, resulting in a decrease of exposure to sunlight. Sunlight can be very beneficial to the individual, helping individuals maintain a healthy circadian rhythm, and providing vitamin D. Holick (2005) has found that depression can be correlated with low vitamin D levels and a dysregulation of our circadian rhythm. Additionally, studies regarding light therapy have found that exposure to light

can release serotonin (Lambert, Reid, Kaye, Jennings, & Esler, 2002). It is clear to see that sunlight can have a plethora of benefits on mental health, however these benefits tend to be lost in today's modern society.

Alterations in the circadian rhythm due to decreased exposure to sunlight can also have effects on sleep. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) (2009) has reported that the average American gets about 6 hours and 40 minutes of sleep during the weekdays, which is below the recommended amount of 7 to 9 hours of sleep. Furthermore, one third of the population in the US show at least one symptom of insomnia, potentially doubling the risk of depression (Baglioni et al., 2011). Because of advances in technology and ease of accessibility, one possible explanation for sleep deprivation is entertainment. Many individuals stay up late watching TV, playing video games, or surfing the internet and consequently they are getting less sleep, making them more at risk for depression.

Another potential reason for decreasing amounts of sleep can be because of stress. Researchers found that a survey of 95,761 college students reported that 91% of students had an average or overly high amount of stress (Yzer, & Gilasevitch, 2018). Students are thrown into world of competition and pressure that can affect almost every aspect of their lives. Students must compete for entrance into a desired program, compete for jobs, make money to support themselves financially, all while grappling with life's major questions of "what do I want to do with the rest of my life?", and "how will I support myself and future family?". The pressures of college life can be crippling and paralyzing and if one cannot cope well, then their risk of depression can skyrocket (Barker, Howard, Villemaire-Krajden, & Galambos, 2018).

The Stigmatization of Mental Illness and Therapy

Depression is one of the most prevalent mental disorders in the world, but many individuals may not be getting the help they need because of the stigma surrounding therapy. Researchers have found that 42% of Americans aged 18–24 believe people with mental illness can be successful at work (Fox, Earnshaw, Taverna, & Vogt, 2017). Also, only 25% of people from the study above believe that people with mental illness can recover from their illness. These are a few of the many negative ideas behind mental illness. Thoughts and ideas like these have most likely been an effective deterrent to those who need therapy. Regier et al. (1993) found that as a result of the stigmas surrounding mental illness, only 30% of individuals with psychiatric disorders seek treatment. In light of the data presented, it is clear to see that the majority of individuals with mental disorders are needlessly suffering, possibly because of these stigmas.

It is clear to see that stigmas can deter individuals from therapy, which then requires further exploration into what prompts the stigmas experienced. Corrigan (2004) expressed that stigmas can be divided up into two parts: the public stigma, and the self-stigma. The public stigma can consist of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination that are shared by the public. Thoughts like “people with mental illness are dangerous”, “if they are dangerous, I should be afraid of them”, and “I do not want to associate with anyone who has a mental illness” are examples of negative cognitions surrounding mental illness. Self-stigma consists of internalization of the public stigmas. Thoughts like “all people with mental illness are incompetent, therefore I must be incompetent because I have a mental illness” are examples of rumination that can decrease the likelihood of seeking treatment. The presence of these maladaptive cognitions may increase the shame and perceived vulnerability of the individual, which can provoke individuals to hide their symptoms in hopes that their problem will go away

and never be discovered (Hasan, & Musleh, 2017). It is unfortunate that these ideas have emerged, considering that the ideas are founded upon ignorance and misunderstanding.

Discussion

Considering the stigmatization of mental illness, advances in technology and subsequent susceptibility of college students to depression, alternative forms of treatment should be considered in efforts to address these critical issues. Music therapy has been shown to be an effective and legitimate treatment method that can alleviate the symptoms of depression (Erkkilä et al., 2011). Additionally, patients who pursue music therapy find that they feel less stigmatized in comparison to standardized treatment, which can result in a greater likelihood to seek treatment and adhere to the recommended treatment schedule (Silverman, 2013). Furthermore, as society continues to progress and become more technologically advanced, therapy should also follow suit. The advances that are happening in technology cannot be ignored, and instead of fighting against the rising tide of technology, technology should be used to enhance the accessibility and efficiency of current treatment methods.

A Soothing Melody to the Symptoms and Stigmatization of Depression

Music therapy is able to address the symptoms of depression, including the following that were previously reviewed: loss of meaningfulness, fatigue, diminished ability to focus, feelings of hopelessness, and also the issue of stigmatization. Meaning can be brought back into the lives of individuals with depression through many methods including song and lyric writing, and improvisation. For example, song/lyric writing and improvisation can provide a way for individuals to express their own personal stories through music (Silverman, Baker, & MacDonald, 2016). The process of creating, sharing, and listening to a piece of music that expresses an individual's personal feelings and story can help individuals bring meaning and

purpose back into their lives. Individuals have often found themselves engulfed by this meaningful form of communication, finding great gratification and joy in this experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Just as music therapy has been able to address the symptom of loss of meaningfulness, it can also have a significant effect on alleviating feelings of fatigue. Lim, Miller, & Fabian (2011) found that after treatments of music therapy, research participants felt a decreased amount of self-perceived fatigue. Not a lot of research has been done regarding the etiology behind this phenomenon, however some have postulated that the presence of the pleasing stimulus of music have helped reduce the feelings and perception of fatigue (Choi, 2010). Other researchers have theorized the action of playing an instrument could have a snowball effect, helping the individual feel less fatigued mentally and physically (Lee et al., 2015). Despite the lack of knowledge regarding the cause, research has shown that it can be effective in remedying this symptom.

Fatigue has also been known to play a role in a lack of focus, possibly resulting in rumination. Multiple studies have shown that learning to play an instrument can increase attention, and concentration (Beavers, 1969; Weiss, 2016; Huang, & Shih, 2011). Learning to play a piece of music or an instrument requires great attention, and as people strengthen their ability to focus in a musical setting, then that practice is able to be applied in different settings. Music can also be a form of distraction that can interfere with unhealthy rumination (E. Mahon, & Mahon, 2011). In fact, high levels of intentional distraction have been correlated with lower measures of depression and unhealthy rumination. As individuals lose themselves in music, they are also able to lose the disturbing effects of rumination.

As focus increases and rumination decreases, individuals with depression are able to have hope restored to their lives. As people have participated in song writing, improvisation, or

learning a new instrument, many individuals have found a new excitement to learn, and an excitement for the future (Park, 2014). This new excitement can allow individuals with depression to look past the present and find potential for good in the future (Dileo, & Zanders, 2005). Many have found success and joy in learning and playing music. Consequently, this new-found success and joy can increase an individual's self-esteem and perceived self-worth, while instilling within the individual a new hope.

Many individuals have found a greater hope for the future through song writing and other applications of music therapy, which have debunked many of the stigmas behind mental illness. Silverman (2013) found that after individuals had completed sessions of music therapy, many felt a significant decrease in self-stigmatization. These results are not surprising considering the reality of what music therapy entails. In fact, many individuals have shown to be more comfortable sharing their personal stories through song rather than speaking about it. The musical environment has created a safe place for these individuals to escape from the stigmas created from ignorance and enjoy meaning and joy in ways that they have not experienced before (Silverman, 2016).

A Practical Approach with Great Benefits

In efforts to combat the rising tide of depression as a result of technology, positive uses of technology should be implicated. Music therapy was previously discussed as an alternative treatment method to remedy the symptoms of depression; additionally, music can also play a role in preventing depression (Gold, Saarikallio, Dale Crooke, & McFerran, 2017). Some of the potential risk factors for depression can be insomnia and or exposure and maladaptive cognition in stressful circumstances (Chen et al., 2017). Application of therapeutic music listening in these adverse situations can be very beneficial in reducing the risk of depression. In our modern

society, music can be easily accessible. Clearly then, application of this proposal can be done with great ease.

Insomnia has become increasingly common in our society, but in spite of this, music therapy can be an effective and cost-efficient treatment to cure this ailment. Listening to relaxing music with a low number of beats per minutes before going to sleep has been shown to improve sleep by reducing anxiety (Ziv, Rotem, Arnon, & Haimov, 2008). Many hypotheses have been formulated in attempts to explain this correlation. Some have believed that the body's heartbeat and breathing will tune itself to the low beats per minute, while others have thought that listening to relaxing music can be compared to meditation (Gadberry, 2011). The known etiology may still be unknown, but the positive effects have been clearly stated, and application of this practice can be very beneficial and done with little effort.

Taking time to listen to relaxing music can help people sleep better, and it can also help people relieve stress when placed in difficult situations. Music has been used as a stress relieving tool in intensive care units to help patients keep calm in stressful circumstances (Faight, & Bhagat, 2016). Calming music can also be used to lower blood pressure, heart rate, and normalize breathing patterns which are often elevated when an individual feels anxious or stressed (Dileo, & Bradt, 2007). After encountering a stressful experience, individuals can take some time to listen to some relaxing music which can help individuals better cope with their specific circumstance and think clearly through the situation. This practice of listening to music to aid in insomnia and stress is a small and simple thing that can have a great impact on preventing the risk of depression.

As discussed in this review, music therapy can effectively treat depression. Music therapy was able to be used to address the symptoms of loss of meaningfulness, fatigue, diminished

ability to focus, feelings of hopelessness, and also the issue of stigmatization. Not only has music been shown to effectively treat depression, music can also be used as to prevent the onset of depression. Therapeutic music listening has been shown to help individuals who struggle with insomnia as well as help relieve stress, which are two risk factors of depression. Application of music therapy in the clinical and non-clinical setting can be very beneficial to the many college students that struggle with depression.

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