



The Psychology of Music Listening for Health and Wellbeing Professionals

Katrina Skewes McFerran
Carol Barbara Lotter

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Introduction

This is an ambitious book that canvases a vast terrain of research about music listening. It stems from our deep commitment to the value of listening to music for people as they navigate the complexity of life. From listening to nursery rhymes or memorising the alphabet, to identifying with significant music and musicians during adolescence and into adulthood, and then managing emotions, motivation, performance, and thinking during easy and difficult times, right through to the end of life, where music might be the only experience that is still accessible. This book recognises that the role of music listening changes through these different stages and moments in life. It also acknowledges that there are some times where we listen to music autonomously, and other times where we need support to find the best ways of listening to support our health and wellbeing needs.

As music therapists, we think about this constantly. It is core to our professional practice, research, theorising, and teaching. Training in music therapy usually only takes two years, most often as a postgraduate coursework degree (although Bachelor-level programmes have historically been the norm). But as any professional knows, that is just the beginning. From the basic competencies of understanding how to use music to meet the needs of individuals and groups, music therapists then work in the real world of hospitals, schools, and community organisations and in private practice. This is similar to our colleagues in allied

health and wellbeing professions, and we are often employed under the same contracts and placed in the same departments. Like our colleagues, we have learned much more about how to use music in the real world than in our training, but it is true that the profession is research-based and decision-making is guided by theoretical frameworks similar to other professionals working in the same environments. Developmental theories, neurological theories, psychoanalytic theories, humanistic theories, critical theories, and many more shape our discourse. This book brings together real-life experiences and all the research and theory we could find to explain it.

Since there are not that many music therapists in the world—for example, approximately 100 in Lotter’s country of South Africa, 880 in McFerran’s home country of Australia, around 2000 in Japan, and more than 25,000 in the USA—we spend a lot of time consulting with others about how to use music, as well as delivering services directly. After all, music is a part of the fabric of many cultures and often described as being ubiquitous—meaning it is present in all known cultures. In addition, music is integral to many indigenous healing traditions of First Nations communities around the globe, so there is a long history of knowing that music can be helpful. But beyond this instinctive, inherited knowing, things tend to become more complicated. For every story of music being helpful to someone, there is a concerning tale of a time where someone else experienced listening to music as being unhelpful. The connection between music and emotions is not simple, nor is it always positive.

Why Is It Difficult to Choose Helpful Music for People?

This book is designed to provide reliable guidance about the ways music listening can be helpful, and how to manage situations when it is unhelpful. We have written the chapters based on the assumption that any reader will already have some experience in sharing music with people. A personal experience of music listening may have been wonderful, and yet difficult to replicate with other people. We know that everyone responds

differently to music, but that is what takes a long time to understand. In fact, that is the core learning in music therapy training: How to tailor musical experiences in ways that meet the needs of each individual. Before being taught this important lesson, most of us assume that it must be something about the effect of the music that has resulted in a response. Someone is activated by music, and we assume that the song is activating. Someone else finds music soothing when they have pain, and we want to know what music it was so we can recommend it to others. Another person describes how they regulate their mood using music, and when we ask how, they tell us about the music they chose to listen to. The way we talk about music seems to confirm that it is the subjectively magical effect of the music that makes a difference.

The problem with music is that it doesn't affect everyone in the same way. It sounds simple when we say it like that. You can see the words typed in front of you, and you know that is true from your own experience. In your family, people have different ways of listening to music and different music that they prefer. The same in your workplace. Remember back to school. So many passionate views about music, most of which have changed after ten years, or twenty. You might still love the music from your teenage years (it's called a 'reminiscence bump', which we describe in Chap. 7) and if you do end up losing your memory, the significant music from your youth is what you will be able to recall even when you can't remember your children's names (called MEAMS—Music-Evoked Autobiographical Memories, which we describe in Chap. 1). But even though you know that the songs which soothe you are different from the songs which soothe someone else, it still seems as though there must be something in the music that does the soothing. How else can it be explained?

The answer is that the ways in which music listening helps are personal. A better way of saying it might be that your intersectional identity influences the music you respond to. Your age, gender, culture, life experiences (both inspiring and challenging), all influence the kind of music you resonate with and the ways you can use music to work for you. Music sociologists have the most accurate words for this. They talk about the ways individuals appropriate the affordances of music. In sociological language, 'appropriate' means use or leverage, in simple terms (not

appropriate, which is spelled the same, but sounds different when you say it out loud and means suitable or proper). The word appropriation points to the idea that music does not have an influence without human agency. It can't trick you or affect you from behind. You have to actively engage music for it to have any power. When you appropriate music, it is a verb: something you do. Affordances relate to the inherent possibilities of the music. If it's fast and loud, it affords activities that are well-matched—things that benefit from heightened arousal, like exercise or housework or some kind of activity. If the music is gentle and restrained, the affordances are more likely to be peaceful and relaxing—like sleep, mental down time or something that requires low arousal. It's the combination of these two things (appropriating the affordances) that results in possible benefits from music listening. It's how you perceive the qualities of the music (affordances) and the ways you use those qualities (appropriation). Maybe it sounds simple. But for most of us it is astoundingly difficult to understand why one single piece of music might be considered aesthetically gorgeous and transcendent by one person (leading to bliss and peace), but incredibly strange and off-putting by another person (leading to frustration and agitation). Many of us try to convince others to perceive a piece of music the way we do—“[Y]ou'll love this! Oh, you don't. Listen again, and this time focus on the bass line.” It's hard to escape the reality that we all hear things differently and therefore experience things differently.

How Can We Help People Benefit from Listening to Music?

Our training has taught us that we need to approach every person uniquely when it comes to music. Even though it seems to act like a drug, you cannot prescribe it, and neither is there any guaranteed outcome. You have to tailor it to what is needed by an individual or group in a particular set of conditions. One part of those conditions may be the challenges they are facing right now. Another might be their internal resources, or perhaps the lack thereof. Since we are therapists, we are

interested in using music to help deal with the difficult stuff. We know that people listen to music intuitively when everything is going well. They don't need our help. But when things get tough, music can make a difference.

In this book we focus on a range of difficult conditions that people encounter in life and gather together the research that has been done about music listening during that time. We summarise the research so that you don't have to go and search for it all and we condense it in a way that might be useful as a beginning point to helping someone (or yourself) decide how you are going to appropriate the affordances of music. Every chapter is prefaced by a set of connections to other chapters. Life is not simple, and there is usually more than one thing going on at once. You might be thinking about using music to optimise your team's performance in the workplace (Chap. 9) but also recognise that some people are struggling with anxiety (Chap. 5) and stress (Chap. 3) and these things need to be considered together. Or you might be caring for someone who has dementia (Chap. 7) and at the same time concerned about your own ability to sustain your care (Chap. 1) whilst watching your child go through a significant life transition, like having a baby (Chap. 2). The interactions are endless. But there are many key themes. You will also note that across the book, when referring to the interactions between these different chapters, we have placed the chapter title in capitals, for example, FLOURISHING or MENTAL ILL HEALTH.

There is a lot of detail to be found in these chapters, so it may be useful for you to have some brief guiding principles for using music listening before we begin.

- Find out what kind of music is meaningful to that person (not you, unless it's for you).
- Trial the ways you are thinking of using music and evaluate if it has been successful. Make adjustments and trial again.
- Activate the placebo effect—if people think it will help, it is more likely to. That's how humans work.
- Be attentive to music that makes people unhappy. It's hard to predict, but it can happen. If it does, provide tissues and let people cry. Music does that sometimes.

The remainder of this book goes into a lot more detail about how to consider the use of music under different conditions. We have tried to access research from all around the world instead of unconsciously privileging the work of white Europeans. We have searched wider and named the diverse regions of the world where this research is being done.

Our selection of chapter headings may not be consistent with the way you might have categorised things. We apologise for any moments you have to flick between chapters when you would prefer it was all gathered together. We promise it is not random. We spent a week in the hinterlands of South Africa moving small pieces of paper into groups to see what the most sensible categories might be (see picture below). It was an iterative and inductive process of debate and dialogue based on our experiences in practice, research, teaching, and literature searching. As the writing progressed, some things changed but we are satisfied that the chapters are thoughtful and considered, if not perfect.



We are thrilled that you are interested in using music listening as a part of your care for people, whether it is professionally or with loving care for yourself or another. We know from experience and research that it can make a difference and that attention to details matters. We welcome your feedback and communications and wish you well with reading further.



1

Music Listening for Flourishing

Flourishing is described by leaders of the positive psychology movement as finding fulfilment in our lives, accomplishing meaningful and worthwhile tasks, and connecting with others at a deeper level (Seligman 2011). Music listening is a good friend of flourishing, because of its accessibility, aesthetic appeal and capacity to connect to self and others and is therefore prominent in the literature. In this chapter, we are also informed by the idea of flourishing as it has been used on a mental health continuum proposed by Corey Keyes (Keyes 2002). In his analysis of data from the *Midlife in the United States Survey*, Keyes identified an important distinction between flourishing and mental health, as well as distinctions between languishing and mental ill health. Namely, that people can languish even in the absence of ill health and can flourish even in the presence of mental and/or physical ill health. Flourishing, therefore, is an achievable aspiration for people facing significant challenges, and languishing is something that is experienced as palpably as serious episodes of depression. The difference is critical when it comes to the role of music listening, because people might benefit most from using music independently as a resource for flourishing, whereas they might benefit from greater guidance and support when languishing. This independence of music listening for health and wellbeing is the focus throughout this chapter.

In this chapter, to explore how people have used music listening for flourishing, we privilege the ways that people who have had challenging

experiences describe using music listening while they are in physical or mental pain and distress. Music is positioned as a resource in people's lives that they are able to select, access, and use with intention (Rolvsjord 2010). Sometimes this is suggested initially by health and wellbeing professionals, but in this chapter, autonomy is critical to the freedom of using music in one's own life, without the requirement for professional help. This does not always happen alone, and support groups provide one example of a shared context in which music listening can empower people to flourish whilst they struggle.

In other chapters we focus on the times that people seek professional support and guidance for their music listening in order to cope with challenges. People choose to access professional expertise when they want to be accompanied in the management of their challenges and have not been successful in finding solutions on their own. That is the focus of the chapter on music listening for STRESS in everyday life and is for those who wish to benefit from evidence-based techniques that will bring more immediate and measurable benefits.

The concept of flourishing is usually distinguished from the kind of personal identity work that is helpful when the structure of one's life is changing. Flourishing focuses on the internal, whereas we focus on LIFE TRANSITIONS, such as adolescence, pregnancy and birthing, older age and moving countries, in the next chapter. There can be a great deal of overlap between these moments in life, and they may benefit from being read in conjunction. Autonomy is more strongly emphasised in the current chapter because of the emphasis on self-care and adjusting to a life that might be different from what was intended.

In addition, this chapter is not about using music listening for achieving excellence as described in the chapter on OPTIMISING PERFORMANCE. That chapter focuses on people who are seeking to improve their performance, whether they are elite athletes, musicians, successful professionals or those seeking to influence workplace and academic efficiency. The ways that music listening can motivate and arouse are explored across the optimising performance chapter, as well as to modulate moods in organisational structures.

To illustrate the ways that many people have used music listening as a resource despite facing challenges or being marginalised, this chapter

provides examples of people who are depressed and anxious, grieving, struggling in response to an external stressor such as a natural disaster or struggling with chronic pain. At the end of the chapter we also provide suggestions about how to think about music listening in this context, particularly with an emphasis on autonomy and resources.

Music Listening and Complex Mental Health

Trinika hails from Jamaica where she spent her formative years until the end of high school. The next chapter of life took her to the UK where she embarked on her education studies. This was a time of cultural adjustment, profound financial pressure, and being away from her family whom she had always experienced as her support network. Trinika found herself working two jobs in order to sustain herself and pay for her studies. Upon completion of her degree, Trinika began teaching in an inner-city school which she loved. She gave herself wholeheartedly to the job and the learners grew to love her warm-hearted, generous, creative spirit. About three years after she started working at the school, life changed dramatically. Trinika suffered a mental breakdown. She had not been feeling herself for a while. Not sleeping, forcing herself to face each day, and feeling depressed and anxious most of the time. This is hardly surprising given the many adjustments and demands she has navigated since relocating to the UK. Multiple admissions to a mental health clinic, ongoing visits to a therapist, dealing with her family's stigmatization and lack of understanding of her condition, and trying to pick up the pieces of her life comprised her new reality. She knew this would be a long process but was resolute about finding ways of managing her recovery and learning to live as optimally as possible.

After doing some reading about self-management strategies, Trinika decided to include an exercise regime and meditation practice into her daily routine. She tried walking a few times a week but found it very difficult to motivate herself to keep it up. A friend suggested that she try listening to music while she walked and with music, time didn't seem to drag as much as with previous walks. Trinika also found herself not merely walking while the music was playing but walking with the rhythm and groove of the music. Trinika had also found meditation difficult as her mind wandered and she often ended up ruminating on destructive thoughts. She recalled having attended a retreat once where music listening was incorporated with the drawing of a mandala, an exercise she found most helpful. Trinika decided to replace the evening meditation with 10 minutes of music listening while she drew or journaled. The music was varied and often included the music from her childhood years, which nurtured and strengthened her. Gradually Trinika began to experience brief moments of vitality and renewed inner resourcefulness.

The appreciation of personal recovery represents a global shift in mental health policy and practice away from only focusing on cure and symptom control, towards focusing on flourishing in spite of mental ill health (Slade 2009). Anthony's (1993) explanation continues to resonate with people who have lived experience of mental ill health and provides a useful context for the potential of music listening.

It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even within the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness. (p. 527)

The idea of music listening offering hope is prominent in the literature, as illustrated in the case of Trinika. One British study described music as mobilising hope, providing “some light at the end of a tunnel” (Ansdell and Meehan 2010). This resonates with other descriptions of using music as part of recovery, where people rely on music listening to provide a cocoon within which they feel held and understood and which can help to transform their emotional state (Cheong-Clinch and McFerran 2016). Hope is a complex phenomenon, and has been difficult to capture with quantitative data, but some improvements in states of hope have been demonstrated from music listening (Silvermann 2016). On the other hand, many people intuitively understand that choosing to listen to music as part of their recovery is an act of hope. Anderson (2002) theorises that this is because music listening simultaneously offers opportunities to feel something better and also to forget.

Meaning making is another dimension of recovery that has been associated with music listening and some prominent authors (Clarke 2005) claim that music listening is fundamentally a meaning making experience, connected to what people perceive in the music itself. There are two levels of this meaning making endeavour—meanings inspired by the inherent qualities of the music and those which are associated with personal life experiences. For example, Trinika's connection to happy childhood memories can be explained through the phenomenon of MEAMs (Music-Evoked Autobiographical Memories) that are spontaneously triggered by hearing pieces of music from the individual's past (Janata et al. 2007). It is worth noting that whilst these can be positive memories, the ability of music to

trigger unexpected and unhappy memories has also been noted and is a topic of interest to music providers in the recovery context that will be described further in the chapter on PROBLEMATIC listening (Bibb and McFerran 2018). On the other hand, Gibson (1977) has described how the inherent qualities of art afford certain meanings (such as slow music suggesting sadness or peace) and that that meaning is made when people appropriate those affordances in their own unique circumstances. This can be seen when people connect to something beyond themselves that they hear in the music, which helps in transcending the present moment through a heightening of attention to the music itself (Diaz 2013).

One way of explaining how music listening works to support recovery is as a ‘resource’. This language is congruent with a focus on utilising people’s personal and social resources instead of ameliorating deficits (Priebe et al. 2014). Music listening as a resource has many benefits because it focuses attention on how people can use music to flourish, rather than being a more passive recipient of the direct effects of music (an idea that is more prominent in medical settings) (Güsewell et al. 2019). The active status of the listener is highlighted in this perspective of music as a resource and the emphasis on the ways that people ‘appropriate’ the potential meanings, or affordances of certain types of music (DeNora 2000). This perspective is better connected to the dynamic ways that people engage with music listening and allows for the fact that their connection to preferred music can evolve over time (Bhattacharya et al. 2023). Using music as a resource has been prominent in descriptions of how music therapists support recovery (Rolvjord 2010), but is just as likely to be utilised independently by people with lived experience (Skånland 2011), and correlated with positive health outcomes in population studies (Bonde et al. 2018).

Intentionality is evident in Trinika’s example and connects hope and meaning making with the idea of music as a resource. Supporting people to consider the healthy affordances of music listening is an important role for health and wellbeing professionals. A conversation may be sufficient to this end, or a brief intervention to kickstart helpful appropriation of music can be effective and has been shown to lead to sustained and positive uses of music listening, in the USA (2019) and with youth in Australia using playlist construction (McFerran et al. 2018). Further considerations for how health professionals, carers and individuals can use music listening are detailed at the end of this chapter.

Music Listening and Chronic Pain

Jack has been employed as a construction worker for most of his career. He is nearing retirement age and is now experiencing the toll of the years on his body. Minor work-related injuries that were overlooked, plus the sheer physical nature of the work, have rendered him low to moderate levels of chronic pain most of the time. The result is that Jack tires easily. He has always been a strong, determined individual, not easily surrendering to pain or discomfort. He is known to push through and give his best in all contexts. But some days are harder than others. Harder to keep up with the physical tasks of the job. Harder to sustain that level of activity for a full day, and then harder to deal with the pain and resultant fatigue which worsens towards the end of each day.

Jack has always enjoyed music, most especially Rock and Jazz. Out of the blue within the context of a social event, Jack experienced music in a different way. It was a farewell lunch for one of the engineers. A prominent feature of the event was good music (the music Jack loved). It relaxed the crowd and promoted a jovial, sociable atmosphere. Going back to work after the function, Jack felt energised, he was in a better mood and was less aware of his aching body as he completed the day's tasks. As a result of this experience, Jack decided to try a personal experiment. He bought himself a good pair of earphones, downloaded a number of his favourite albums onto his phone, and resolved to take some time during each lunch hour to switch off from the sounds of the construction site, eat his lunch in a different space and listen to music that held pleasurable and energising associations for him. Jack had never previously listened to music in his immediate work environment because he grew irritated when music was played generally on site amidst the noise of machinery and construction tasks. At most he would listen to music very peripherally in the car on the way home, but usually didn't take much notice of it. This was different. Jack was experiencing music in a new way, and he was directly benefiting from the intention of incorporating music into his personal coping arsenal. While he did not necessarily follow this routine every day, Jack grew to trust over time that, on days when the pain and fatigue were harder to manage, he could use his lunchtime music-listening ritual to help him get through the rest of the day.

Chronic pain is frequently referenced as the most disabling experience for people around the globe, with measurable impacts on years lived with disability resulting from lower back pain, headaches, neck pain and other musculoskeletal disorders (Kohrt et al. 2018). Issues related to pharmacological treatments can be even more problematic in the context of chronic pain, with side effects and addictions ultimately leading to deteriorating quality of life (Hadi et al. 2019; Katz 2002). The use of music

as an adjuvant is therefore popular since it is non-invasive, inexpensive, and often associated with positive experiences for people with both acute and chronic pain (Garza-Villarreal et al. 2017; McCaffery 1992; Zimmerman et al. 1989). Whilst music listening as a treatment for post-surgical and acute pain is addressed in the chapter on ACUTE HOSPITAL SETTINGS, this chapter focuses on independent strategies used by people struggling with chronic pain, such as Jack.

In some of the research, there is a consistent emphasis on how music listening might modulate the perception of pain, which is similar to the mechanisms of action emphasised in the acute pain literature. For example, a group of Finnish researchers (Sihvonen et al. 2022) emphasised the ‘analgesic’ effects of music listening, and provided neurobiological explanations about how music engages people’s emotions, which results in a different perception of the pain experience. Other authors also use the language of analgesia, such as a group of Mexican researchers who conducted a meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials of music listening with people who had Fibromyalgia, Osteoarthritis, Multiple Sclerosis, chronic non-malignant pain, and cancer related pain in medical and palliative care contexts. They concluded that music did reduce self-reported pain, as well as anxiety and depression, and also identified a small effect for preferred music (Garza-Villarreal et al. 2017). This is echoed in other studies of the audio analgesic effects of music (Mitchell and MacDonald 2006), but these do not always gather data in real world circumstances.

The nature of chronic pain suggests that it would be better understood through research methods that capture people’s everyday uses of music. It is important to consider whether people with chronic pain are listening to music for analgesic purposes in their daily lives or are there other perceived benefits. One British survey study found that respondents reported a wide array of benefits, from enjoyment, to relieving tension and feeling relaxed, whereas helping with pain was rated 11th out of 13 possibilities (Mitchell et al. 2007). Interview studies have also been utilised for this purpose, with another study conducted in the UK asking participants with chronic pain about the importance of music in their lives (Gold and Clare 2013). These researchers interpreted one of the most powerful uses of music listening was to move away from the pain, with most people describing it as a distraction that they often used to intentionally take

their mind off things by focusing on the performance or other qualities of the music. Another study of women with chronic illness elicited similar descriptions (Nicol 2010), where music listening time was treasured because it was not about illness, but was an embodied, pleasurable, and encompassing experience that was both freeing and comforting. This suggests an alternative function to an analgesic, in fact, if a drug reference was required it would be more narcotic.

More than operating as a drug however, highly contextualised, and personally meaningful connections with music seem to best capture why people use music when experiencing chronic pain. The idea of vitality was proposed by two Irish authors to describe this essence, following a scoping review of the literature on music and pain (Howlin and Rooney 2020). They found that a sense of agency was central to people's experiences, and that a sense of control over their musical choices allowed them to benefit from music listening through the processes of meaning-making, enjoyment, and integrating music into their lives. Although personally preferred music might not be essential for managing pain in an analgesic sense (Martin-Saavedra et al. 2018), most of the research that positions music in everyday life suggests that the individual's personal connection with the music is critical. This was supported in a survey study which showed a significant positive correlation between the importance of music to the respondent and their likelihood of using it to manage their pain (Mitchell et al. 2007). Prioritising people's personal connections with music is particularly important since many lose their connection with music (Gold and Clare 2013), as seen in the case of Jack, but can be prompted to reintroduce it into their lives for managing their pain perception. In fact, women who consider music as important in their life describe using their body as a musical compass to identify the right music for that moment, based on their own preferences (Nicol 2010).

Distinguishing between ways of using music listening for acute pain management as distinct from living with chronic pain may be important. A significant study of 22 Norwegians with long term illness and disease (Batt-Rawden et al. 2005) proposed strategies for using music listening as an empowering self-care strategy for enhancing wellbeing and generating resources for recovery and quality of life in the face of illness. Although people are well placed to use music independently in their daily lives, it

can be useful to provide suggestions and guidance about techniques that directly enhance naturally occurring benefits. In the considerations below, we will explore this selection of music more carefully, and support carers and care-workers to develop strategies for finding the right music.

Music Listening and Grief

The local church which Michaela attends encourages lay members to initiate small supportive groups around a common goal. Having recently lost her partner, Helen, of many years, Michaela thought it might be valuable to create a weekly space open to any individuals who were walking the path of grief. This was not a support group facilitated by a pastoral counsellor or health professional. Rather, it was a space where the everyday stories of coping with grief could be heard and where members might serve as a resource for one another.

Michaela has served as an active musician within her church and the local community for many years. Her assumption at the start of her grief journey was that music would be an automatic 'go-to' for her as she began processing daily life without Helen. That was not the case at all. In fact, she found it very painful to listen to music at first, especially the music they shared over many years. She gradually came to realise, however, that even though the tears flowed, and the pain sat very close, she was able to allow the music to release the emotions she was feeling. After some time, Michaela experienced listening to music in this way as a spiritual gift of solace.

One evening she shared this part of her story with the group and invited others to share whether and how music had played a personal role in their everyday coping with grief. For some individuals, this did not apply, whereas for others there was a range of creative, very personal ways in which music served as a means of coping. Mary, a fine artist, shared that she listened to classical music while painting and drawing each morning. The music elicited images capturing memories of her mother. In this way, she could very personally document her story of closure and acceptance. Nelson deeply missed their partner, Chad, and was learning to redefine their place in the world as a single, bereaved individual. Their great love had been listening to live jazz together at every given opportunity. Nelson very bravely shared that they had embarked on a personal pilgrimage by visiting each jazz venue that had become special to them as a couple. Nelson allowed the music and venue to remind them of deeply significant moments shared with Chad, as well as to give them the courage to venture back into the world of jazz when the time was right. Priscilla had previously shared that she had very recently lost her daughter, Bella. She bravely attended the group space each week, with the pain still so raw.

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Priscilla listened quietly to these and other stories. She had not previously considered using music as part of her journey which is quite understandable with this tragic loss being so recent. In a subsequent gathering, however, she shared about listening to the music that her daughter enjoyed, which she laughingly said she did not know or really understand. Priscilla nonetheless listened to Bella's favourite music which had been sent to her by Bella's close friends. As she listened to the music, Priscilla compiled a set of letters written personally to her beloved Bella. This enabled her to say the things she still longed to say, and somehow the music gave her strength, allowing the range of emotions that show up during bereavement to be expressed, and helped her feel connected to Bella in a very special way.

As the personal stories were shared of how music was accompanying individuals in their personal journey of grief, so too did group members experience being inspired and strengthened by one another.

Grief and loss are a natural part of being human and perhaps surprisingly, around half the people in most studies of bereavement are described as resilient, in that they experience relatively brief moderate levels of distress and return to effective everyday functioning within two weeks to six months (Bonanno 2004). Another large group of people have more prolonged grief initially but return to pre-bereavement levels within one to two years, labelled as 'recovery' (Mancini et al. 2015). Authors have therefore argued that professional bereavement interventions should be reserved for those whose pre-existing mental health make them vulnerable to the loss of someone significant in their life and should not focus solely on the loss itself. Despite these findings being based on prospective and retrospective data that is difficult to disagree with, many grieving people do enjoy bereavement support, whether they access this through professionals or peers. In that context, music listening has been used in a range of bodily, orientational, emotional, and interpersonal ways (Higgins 2022).

Incorporating music into grief-related rituals is one way of leveraging the multi-levelled affordances of music, seen in the ways that both Mary and Nelson used music to open up opportunities for action. They used music to accompany and support actions that connected them to their loved ones who had died (DeNora 2012). Similarly, the presence of music

can afford comfort and beauty as part of grieving rituals such as farewell ceremonies for families (Viper et al. 2022). Others have described the value of music as part of remembrance ceremonies for staff, particularly those who work in palliative and medical contexts where death is common (Popkin et al. 2011). These types of rituals can strengthen the connection with the deceased in positive ways, often described as *continuing bonds* in the literature (Klass et al. 1996), and including the use of musical memories in this process can be both beautiful and meaningful (O’Callaghan et al. 2013), as Nelson illustrates. Some authors have advised care in this regard (Flynn, unpublished PhD thesis), noting that a person’s existing memories and associations with a song can be changed by their ongoing use as a part of grieving, which may lead to the loss of the initial memories.

This highlights an important difference between music used for consolation and music used for unhealthy rumination. This is not always easy to distinguish and is discussed in more detail in the chapter on PROBLEMATIC music listening. Researchers have examined this phenomenon in some detail (Garrido and Schubert 2013; Sachs et al. 2015; Van den Tol 2016) and in many ways it parallels the findings about resilience, recovery and prolonged grieving highlighted earlier. Many people naturally listen to music when they are feeling sad, and this is often experienced as consolation (Ter Bogt et al. 2017), made more powerful in grieving because certain music is associated with the loved one who has died (Patrick DiMaio and Economos 2017). However, for those who are struggling with chronic and prolonged grief, music listening might not prove as helpful because it is not connecting to resilient or recovery behaviours and instead, reinforces unhelpful patterns. Music can still be used for the resolution of forgiveness and grief issues (Yun and Gallant 2010), but would benefit from being couched within a carefully tailored professional intervention.

As noted initially however, many people do manage grief independently, and research has even shown that the loss of a loved one can lead to greater appreciation for life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength and a richer existential and spiritual life, termed ‘post traumatic growth’ in the literature (Johnsen and Afgun 2021; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). This was illustrated by

Michaela's story above. In these circumstances, music can enhance the grieving process because of its vast emotional affordances, offering both individual and relational comfort (Bonde and Vist 2013). This includes both private experiences of music-facilitated grieving that connect the bereaved person with their loved one (Stein 2004) and shared experiences in groups that can be led by professionals (McFerran 2010), or in peer-facilitated support groups such as the example above. It might be the sounds and texture of the music that is meaningful, or it might be the attribution of personal meanings (Hanser et al. 2016), with some studies demonstrating how people such as Priscilla project new meanings onto songs that might relate to experiences they never had but had hoped for (Merrill et al. 2022). This means being guided by people's emerging needs, whether it is for continuing connections, consolation, developing rituals or relational comfort. The music may change, it may not necessarily even be sad, but it is a natural companion through the process of grieving. Considerations for navigating these differences are the focus of the concluding material at the end of this chapter.

Music Listening and Responding to Disaster

The year 2020 will long be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a time of uncertainty, fear, loss, and profound isolation for individuals the world over. It was particularly difficult for older members of the community who live on their own, as was the case for Enzo. He was accustomed to seeing his friends and children regularly and was well-loved in his town for his energetic, social personality. However, life came to a standstill during the pandemic. The town was eerily quiet, and Enzo felt shut in and cut off. What's more, news came through from time to time of friends or relatives who had fallen prey to the virus and were very ill, or worse had lost the fight. The one saving grace during the pandemic was that communication was still possible by telephone and other technology which offered the possibility of video calling. That brought some relief to Enzo as he could see his children and grandchildren when they did call. He lived for those moments.

On one such call Enzo's daughter told him about the fact that, apart from listening to his music on the radio which he loved to do throughout the day, he could watch live-streamed performances by musicians from all over the world. The musicians were keeping their music alive for fans by performing from their homes. Enzo found this fascinating and began to listen

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to music that he had never heard before. Some of these concerts invited viewers to comment, via typing, on the music or their experience of the concert. This created a sense of community with people from all over the world. Enzo began inviting his friends to watch the same concerts with him. They would swap notes and keep each other informed of upcoming concerts. Enzo felt less isolated and listening to music in this way helped him to keep his very social personality alive.

One evening as he was settling down with a glass of wine, Enzo heard loud, wonderful music coming from the apartment block opposite his. One of the residents had set up a sound system on their porch and was playing well-loved Italian folk and opera songs for the whole street to enjoy. Like ants crawling out of the woodwork, residents from the apartments in the area leaned out of their windows, went out onto their balconies and waved, with some singing and others talking as the music drew them into a moment of social connection. Enzo thrived on this and suggested that the street community introduce its own “happy hour” with music until the lockdown ended.

People’s ability to maintain a *Sense of Coherence* in the face of external challenges has been explored by many authors in the context of international and local disasters, whether created by humans or by nature. Antonovsky (1987) coined the term in the late 1970s and proposed three dimensions that are relevant to the uses of music listening for coping with disaster—comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. One Indian commentator (Ramesh 2020) made this link between music and salutogenesis explicit during the pandemic and emphasised how music can provide sustenance to the sense of wholesome wellbeing across the dimensions of Sense of Coherence.

The dimension of comprehensibility involves making sense of an unexpected situation and has been the focus of some researchers of music listening. For example, Chinese authors reporting on the use of music following the Sichuan earthquake in China that killed 70,000 citizens (Gao et al. 2013) described how listening to music performances and engaging in music activity groups supported survivors and relief workers. It reminded them of the potential beauty of existence, providing hope for improved lives after such a disaster. On the other side of the world, two authors reflected on the use of music to make sense of 20 years of ongoing internal war in Peru (Montero-Diaz and Wood 2021). They described

music as an 'unflinching outlet' when other forms of sense-making were either silenced or manipulative. Similarly, youth recovering from deadly bushfires in Australia used songwriting and music listening to make sense of their emotional reactions when they were unable or unwilling to use words (McFerran and Teggelove 2011). At least one author has emphasised the potential of music listening for comprehensibility for use in disaster risk reduction (Sutton et al. 2021), illustrating this argument through the ways the Simeulue community navigated their response to the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004. In that case, the community's natural emphasis on music sharing was co-opted to communicate risk-information about the tsunami and how to avoid predictable difficulties, which proved to be a highly effective way of optimising learning.

However, Sense of Coherence is not just about making sense and Enzo's experience illuminates manageability and meaningfulness even more powerfully. People's need to feel that they are able to manage their lives is readily applicable to music listening and mentioned by many authors during the pandemic, albeit using diverse terminology. For example, numerous survey studies captured how music was felt to improve mood and affect, and support emotion management and regulation during the pandemic in Brazil (Ribeiro et al. 2021), Austria and Italy (Feneberg et al. 2023), Ireland (Groarke et al. 2022) and Australia (Vidas et al. 2021). Many authors suggested that music listening might be a protective factor in these situations, situating it as an emotional resource that some people already have access to (Kalustian and Ruth 2021), rather than an intervention that needs to be introduced, which is reflected in Enzo's example. This was seen in an Australian study that connected greater life satisfaction to music listening compared to watching TV / videos / movies (Krause et al. 2020). However, other investigators noted that there was actually a decrease in music streaming during the pandemic (Roese and Merrill 2021; Sim et al. 2022), when people no longer accompanied action (travel, exercise) with music. This suggests that awareness of music as a protective factor is not high, and it can be valuable for professionals and carers to advocate for increasing and expanding music listening strategies. This is evidenced in Enzo's example when he was able to develop further coping strategies for managing his isolation, as described by many researchers.

The social isolation experienced during the particular conditions of the pandemic also highlighted the value that music afforded people in coping with loneliness. Some authors described music as a social surrogate (Groarke et al. 2022) by providing company and reminders of their social networks in normal times. A German study discovered that people were relying on music as a strategy for overcoming loneliness and to compensate for missing other daily activities, which many found somewhat positive (Roese and Merrill 2021). Others described music as a proxy for social interaction (Fink et al. 2021), and in a large-scale study, identified correlations between people using music in place of personal connections and increases in positive emotions. Many of these authors suggested a correlation between listening to music for enjoyment and enhancing flourishing, as opposed to trying to reduce negative states (Feneberg et al. 2023). This is an important distinction for health and wellbeing professionals to be cognisant of. The types of strategies used to reduce problems are different from those that increase positivity, as illuminated in the considerations below.

The pandemic introduced a unique set of conditions that many researchers around the world found advantageous for exploring the relationship between music listening and flourishing. People's independent uses of music were important for coping with increased isolation and anxiety, and individuals potentially benefited from the introduction of new strategies of listening that were a better fit for their current situation. This highlights the potential role of carers and professionals during disaster response, and how expanding and enhancing people's existing ways of listening to and using music as a resource may be helpful.

Considerations

"What music is important to you?" is the most useful question in discovering music listening for flourishing. Throughout this text we will consider whether preferred music is more useful than expert prescribed music for particular needs, but in the context of autonomous music use for flourishing, there is no suggestion that any particular type of music is most helpful. It is all about appropriating the affordance of the music that has

meaning in a person's life. It is not about generalising from the music you find helpful, to the assumption that it would be helpful for others. The key here is that it is personal.

The sub-text behind this seemingly simple question is a range of questions that most people are not able to answer unless they have already developed a practice of intentional music use. If they have, the conversation can be a learning opportunity to consider expanding their existing ways of listening and working together to explore that. By asking what music people find meaningful, you open up the conversation about music use in a gentle way that orients towards further discussion, without asking impossible to answer questions like the following:

- What music can be a *resource* for **your** health and wellbeing?
- What music might *distract you* from your concerns?
- What music will *reduce your* pain?
- What music is *comforting* for **you**?
- What music might aid **you** in *making sense* of this situation?

Try responding to each of these questions for yourself and if you think they are easy enough, feel free to use them with others since they are much more specific!

The next step is to listen to the music together and ask '*What was that like for you?*' Connecting to how a particular piece of music feels, or the responses it evokes, is very different to thinking about it from a distance. This is what makes intentional music listening an embodied act that is distinct from the kind of musical analysis you may associate with 'proper' music listening, as might be the case for music appreciation. When people sit and share significant music they will suddenly notice whether or not it is suitable for the needs they have. The responses they have to the music are the information you are looking for and what you can inquire about. It's all about them. Your own experience should not become the focus and you should not expect to have the same experience. This is about making it personal.

You might be surprised that even after listening, people might not be able to explain why they had certain reactions. Their reactions to the music might connect to experiences that were not verbalised originally