

A Personalized, Telehealth Music Therapy Intervention for Lonely Older Adults: A Feasibility Study

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Introduction

- Music listening interventions, facilitated by a qualified music therapist, can reduce late-life depression and anxiety
- Their impact on loneliness has not been well-studied
- Risks associated with loneliness in older adults include depression, cognitive decline, poorer disease outcomes and premature mortality
- This study evaluated the feasibility of a remotely delivered, personalized music therapy intervention for older adults living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic, and assessed measures of socioemotional well-being before, during, and after the intervention

Methods

Inclusion criteria: community-dwelling, cognitively unimpaired older adults who live alone, endorse loneliness and able to use Zoom video conferencing

Exclusion criteria: Individuals with cognitive impairment (TICS < 31), moderate-severe depression (GDS > 10), or hearing impairment

- 8 weekly, individual music therapy sessions were conducted with a board-certified music therapist via Zoom
- Subjects developed personalized music playlists (listened daily) and learned specific music listening techniques
- Subjects completed a daily journal, and answered questionnaires at weeks 0 (pre), 4 (mid), and 8 (post)

Methods (Cont.)

Primary outcome:

- PROMIS Social Isolation Scale [PROMS]

Secondary outcomes:

- Behavioral Activation for Depression Scale [BADS]
- Positive Affect and Well-Being Scale [PAWB]
- Perceived Stress Scale [PSS]
- Brief Symptom Inventory [BSI]
- Snaith-Hamilton Pleasure Scale [SHAPS]

Qualitative data were collected at week 8 for thematic analysis.

Results

- From March to August 2021, 11 participants were enrolled (**mean age 74.82 [66-85], 88% women**), 5 completed the study, and 1 dropped out, leaving **5 actively enrolled**

Table 1. Pre- & post-study means, t-scores, and p-values:

Measure	Pre-study mean	Post-study mean	SD	T-score	P-value
PROMS	19.8	15.2	6.72	1.47	0.21
BADS	35.6	42.8	12.09	-0.99	0.35
PAWB	32.4	38.6	8.14	-1.45	0.19
PSS	11	11.4	7.18	0.42	0.69
BSI	0.64	0.49	0.57	0.48	0.65
SHAPS	48.8	52.2	5.17	-1.13	0.29

Among those who completed, numerical scores for loneliness and all other outcomes **changed in an improved direction**, except for the mean PSS score, which was unchanged.

Results (Cont.)

Qualitative interviews notable for themes of...

- Joy and improvements in sleep, health, focus, and physical pain
- Increased connectedness to culture, country of origin, loved ones, and the music therapist

"It brings back memories and gives me a new perspective: normalcy. These songs bring me back to when my life was not so restrictive."

"When I am connecting to memories, music is the wire that helps me connect. Just like an electrical circuit, when you are listening to a piece of music, it places a bookmark in that memory. It drops you there into that experience vs. washing dishes when memory can come and go, but with music it puts me there and I stay there for a period. I think of place, people, food, what I was wearing where my family was."

"I feel cuddled and feel cared for, the voice of the artist is comforting."

Discussion

- Recruitment and participant acceptability of a virtual, personalized music therapy intervention have been positive.
- Interim data analysis points to a possible improvement in loneliness and other outcome measures, though limited by low statistical power.
- Music therapy appears to be a novel and feasible approach to address loneliness and emotional wellbeing in at-risk community-dwelling older adults.