

Case study: music therapy

Music Therapy: supporting recovery, independence, and community-based care

Music therapy is a clinical, evidence-based allied health profession that uses music as an intervention tool to achieve specific therapeutic goals, while reducing demand on hospitals and other high-cost services.

Music therapy is used to improve a client's communication, movement, emotional wellbeing, and social connection. Put simply, music therapy helps people walk, talk, connect, and function more independently.

Registered music therapists are highly trained clinicians who support people whose needs cannot always be met through traditional therapies. This includes individuals who may struggle to engage with talk-based therapies or conventional rehabilitation approaches, and/or individuals with complex, long-term conditions, where other interventions have had limited success.

Who music therapists work with

Music therapists work across the health, disability, education, and community sectors with a wide range of populations, including:

- People with neurological conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, traumatic brain injury, and dementia
- Individuals experiencing mental health challenges
- Children with neurodevelopmental needs, including autism and high and complex needs
- People with intellectual disabilities
- Older adults, particularly those experiencing isolation or cognitive decline

Based on available provider data, New Zealand's registered music therapists deliver between 45,000 and 65,000 music therapy sessions each year, including group sessions that support between 5 and 40 members at a time. These sessions support people with complex health, disability, rehabilitation, communication, and mental health needs in community, education, hospital, and aged-care settings.

How music therapy works in practice

Music therapy sessions may involve singing, rhythm, movement, improvisation, or listening, but always with a therapeutic purpose. For example:

- **Rehabilitation after stroke:** Music therapists use rhythm and beat to help retrain walking patterns. Because the brain processes rhythm differently, patients can regain more coordinated movement by "walking to the beat," even when verbal instructions are difficult to follow.
- **Communication after brain injury or aphasia:** Music can provide an alternative pathway for expression when speech is impaired. Patients may use melody, rhythm, or musical interaction to communicate and rebuild language skills.
- **Emotional regulation and mental health:** Music therapy provides a safe, non-verbal way to process emotions, particularly for individuals who cannot engage in traditional counselling.
- **Social connection and dementia care:** Group-based music therapy helps reduce isolation, improve mood, and maintain cognitive engagement, enabling people to remain connected to their communities.

A key strength of music therapy is its ability to address multiple needs simultaneously - physical, cognitive, emotional, and social - within a single session.

Supporting the health system

Music therapy supports a more sustainable, community-based health system. It contributes to:

- **Earlier intervention in the community:** Helping people manage conditions before they escalate.
- **Reduced pressure on GPs:** Particularly where referral pathways go beyond GP-only access.
- **Improved rehabilitation outcomes:** Supporting recovery after injury or illness, including stroke and neurological conditions.
- **Greater independence:** Enabling people to live at home for longer and participate in daily life.
- **Reduced reliance on high-cost services:** Including hospital admissions, emergency departments, and residential care

Music therapy aligns strongly with current policy directions focused on **community-led, multidisciplinary care** and prevention.

Workforce and capability

Music therapy is a small but highly skilled profession, with approximately 90 registered practitioners nationwide working in hospitals, schools, community organisations, and private practice. They are often funded via multiple streams. To practise, therapists must complete:

- An undergraduate degree
- A specialised Master's degree in music therapy

The opportunity

Music therapy is an under-recognised but high-impact component of the allied health workforce. With greater awareness, clearer referral pathways, and integration into community-based care models, music therapy can:

- Deliver better outcomes for individuals
- Reduce pressure on overstretched parts of the health system
- Contribute to a more efficient and sustainable model of care

Appendix 1. Patient story: Music therapy supporting recovery in severe mental illness

Wellington-based consultant psychiatrist, Dr Michael Doran, describes music therapy as “the source of recovery” for a high-needs mental health patient - a woman in her 30s with a severe personality disorder.

Following the death of her father, the patient experienced profound emotional dysregulation, anxiety, grief, and repeated behavioural crises. Over 18 months, she spent between 200–250 days in hospital and was repeatedly taken into police custody due to mental health-related incidents. Police were reportedly called to her situation “four or five times an evening”, while Coastguard and emergency services responded regularly to concerns for her safety.

According to Dr Doran, conventional interventions, including medication and standard therapeutic approaches, had little effect, and the patient consistently refused to engage with treatment. However, music therapy proved different.

Through two hours of music therapy a week over six-months she began using music as a non-verbal outlet to process grief, communicate distress, and regulate emotions.

Dr Doran describes the turnaround as “remarkable”. The patient’s anxiety and mood improved significantly, emergency callouts reduced dramatically, and “there have been no emergency incidents in the last three months,” he says.

The patient is now participating positively in ward life and even leads a dance group for other patients as part of an occupational therapy programme.

The savings to the health and emergency services systems have been huge. A six-month course of music therapy at two hours per week may cost between NZ\$8,000 and NZ\$10,000. By comparison, hundreds of hospital bed days, repeated emergency responses, police callouts, and Coastguard interventions are likely to have cost the health and emergency services system many hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In Dr Doran’s professional opinion, music therapy has substantially reduced pressure on hospital and emergency services while delivering meaningful recovery outcomes that other interventions had failed to achieve.