

RESEARCH REPORT

# *Songs for Life: Group Music Therapy for Serious Mental Illness—A Randomised Control Trial*

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The *Songs for Life* study is funded by an ARC Discovery Grant, over three years (2008–2010). It will investigate the effect of group music therapy on the quality of life, self-esteem and social interaction of people with severe mental illness, who often face isolated and uncertain futures, frequently separated from family supports, and unable to secure regular employment.<sup>1</sup> Integration in the mainstream community can be an enormous challenge for people with mental illness, and is exacerbated by a stigma that is still evident in society.

Despite serious restrictions that impact on quality of life, people living with mental illness are often very creative. The Psychiatric Art collection at the University of Melbourne, for example,<sup>2</sup> is testimony to the creative and imaginative mind of people with mental illness, and confirms the importance of creative expression as a form of therapy and rehabilitation for those who are coming to terms with the life-long challenge of coping with fluctuations of mood and health of mind. Although the creative capacity of individuals with mental illness is well documented,<sup>3</sup> access to creative endeavours in the current political climate is limited. With the decommissioning of the major psychiatric hospitals in Victoria during the 1980s,

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<sup>1</sup> D. Elisha, B. Hocking and D. Castle, 'Reducing Social Isolation in People with a Mental Illness: The Role of the Psychiatrist,' *Australasian Psychiatry* 14 (2006): 281–4; A. Jablensky, J. McGrath and H. Herman, *People Living with Psychotic Illness: An Australian Study 1997–1998* (Canberra: Australian Mental Health Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See <[www.daxcollection.org.au](http://www.daxcollection.org.au)>.

<sup>3</sup> A. Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (London: Penguin, 1972).

services for people with mental illness have been placed within the community, in supported housing and clinic-based care. While this provides a more normalised pattern of life, access to therapeutic services is severely limited.

The *Songs for Life* study is being conducted in partnership with Professors Sidney Bloch and David Castle, from St Vincent's Hospital Mental Health Unit in Melbourne, and will build on results from our feasibility study into the effect of group music therapy on quality of life, social interaction and mood of people with mental illness, living in community settings. The specific hypothesis to be tested is that participation in group music therapy will lead to significant improvement in quality of life. Secondary measures will capture data on social interaction, self esteem and spirituality. We will also measure psychotic symptoms to control for the effects of change in symptoms, which may occur due to changes in medication.

The participants will be 160 individuals with mental illness who reside in the community in supervised care settings, or with their families. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of two groups: group 1 will receive group music therapy immediately after randomisation, and group 2 will receive group music therapy after a six-month waiting period. The intervention is a weekly group music therapy session lasting one hour, over a twelve-week period, conducted by Registered Music Therapists who are additionally trained to provide consistency in the interventions.

The specific method used in music therapy sessions is song-writing, a creative process whereby clients engage in writing original lyrics that, with the guidance of the music therapist, can be set to melody with harmonic accompaniment. Analysis of lyrical themes in songs written by patients indicates that they often express messages to loved ones, self-reflections, memories, reflections on significant others (including pets), self-expression of adversity, imagery and prayers.<sup>4</sup>

Song-writing is recognised as an effective and compelling form of music therapy, whether applied to individual sessions with clients, or with groups.<sup>5</sup> Within the group context a song-writing intervention calls on the music therapist's skill to harness ideas for themes and lyrical content and to facilitate decisions about the music structure of the song (including stylistic features, and elements of melody, harmony and rhythm), alongside therapeutic skill required to make the group experience rehabilitative.

A previous study conducted by the research team found significant results on aspects of social engagement and quality of life for five groups of participants (n=29),<sup>6</sup> when measured on the WHOQoLBREF scale and the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D.E. Grocke and T. Wigram, *Receptive Methods in Music Therapy: Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007); C. O'Callaghan, 'Lyrical Themes in Songs Written by Palliative Care Patients,' *Journal of Music Therapy* 33.2 (1996): 74–92.

<sup>5</sup> F. Baker and T. Wigram, *Songwriting: Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> D. Grocke, S. Bloch and D. Castle, 'Is there a Role for Music Therapy in the Care of the Severely Mentally Ill?,' *Australasian Psychiatry* 16.6 (2008): 442–5.

<sup>7</sup> B. Murphy, H. Herrman, G. Hawthorne, T. Pinzone and H. Evert, *Australian WHOQOL Instruments: User's Manual and Interpretation Guide* (Melbourne: Australian WHOQOL Field Study Centre, 2000); R.P. Mattick and J.C. Clarke, 'Development and Validation of Measures of Social Phobia, Scrutiny, Fear and Social Interaction Anxiety,' *Behaviour Research & Therapy* 36 (1998): 455–70.

Qualitative data were gathered through focus group interviews and lyric analysis of the song themes. Principal themes from the focus groups interviews were:

1. being involved in song-writing gave pleasure and joy;
2. it was a relaxing experience;
3. surprise that the group could produce a positive outcome such as the song;
4. the song/s were seen as belonging to the group, as 'our' song;
5. surprise that even if not musically gifted, a person could be creative and write a song; and
6. a sense of achievement in being able to produce a CD that could be shared with friends and family.

Seven songs were written across the five groups, and the thematic analysis generated six themes:

1. concern for the world, world peace and the future of the environment;
2. living with mental illness is difficult;
3. coping with mental illness requires strength;
4. religion and spirituality are sources of support;
5. living in the present is healing; and
6. working in a team is enjoyable.

We anticipate that the study will contribute to an expanding body of research indicating that music therapy is beneficial for those with severe and enduring mental illness, by providing a creative means of expression and enjoyment which enables group members to feel a sense of achievement and belonging.