



Expressive THERAPY

BY BETH JOHNSON

While most people have heard of or experienced firsthand the benefits of physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), or speech therapy (ST), they may not be as familiar with expressive therapy.

Expressive therapy, also known as the expressive therapies, expressive arts therapy, or creative arts therapy, is the use of the creative arts as a form of therapy. It differs from traditional art expression in that the process of creation is emphasized rather than the final product. Expressive arts therapies encompass the use of music, art, drama, poetry, creative writing, dance, and movement within the context of psychotherapy, rehabilitation, education, and medicine.

At both Oakwood Village campuses—University Woods off Mineral Point Road and Prairie Ridge near American Parkway—Melissa Cole, MT-BC, is at the forefront of all things music therapy related. “In a nutshell, I use music to help people. It’s a great tool. It taps emotions, connects us to other people, brings memories of childhood to life, helps us to move, and helps to coordinate and time our movements,” Melissa says. “It can relax us and help us sleep. It

can distract us from pain...music therapy is used to stimulate social engagement, energize physical movement, and activate many, many areas of the brain simultaneously for a healthy cognitive workout.”

One of the groups Melissa leads is called Refresh and Relax. She says, “The idea of chaining together music that starts in an upbeat fashion and gradually gets slower to calm us. This can be especially helpful during the end of the day for people who sundown.”

One of Melissa’s primary goals in each music therapy session is to create an opportunity for residents and families to express emotions within an atmosphere of comfort and relaxation. Individuals may join in the making of music, choose to listen, or both.

Music therapy is an evidence-based health profession with a strong research foundation, and its practitioners require knowledge in psychology, medicine, and music. Music interventions are used to accomplish individual goals. Examples of what a music therapist does include working with residents to reduce pain and improve motor function, such as with people who

have Parkinson’s disease. Whereas using music in a medical setting, such as a piano player in the lobby of a hospital and nurses playing background music for patients, are noteworthy, they aren’t clinical music therapy.

After a recent music therapy session, Melissa says, “There were a lot of things from a music therapist standpoint that you may not have noticed unless pointed out to you. Just some of what was going on during the session included controlling the tempo in order to avoid agitation. We are trained to watch for the signs of engagement, agitation, and relaxation. We validate emotionally significant comments. We use music to stimulate cognition and to reminisce with residents.”

Music therapists must have a bachelor’s degree or higher in music therapy from one of the American Music Therapy Association’s (AMTA) 72 approved colleges and universities and 1,200 hours of clinical training. Music therapists must hold a MT-BC credential, issued through the Certification Board for Music Therapists, which protects the public by ensuring competent practice and requiring



continuing education. Currently 7,494 music therapists maintain an MT-BC credential and participate in a program of recertification designed to measure or enhance competence in the profession of music therapy.¹

Melissa is a strong advocate for her profession. “Music therapy has been a profession requiring a college degree for 70 years now, and our body of evidence is always growing!”

For more information on AMTA, visit musictherapy.org. For more information on the Wisconsin Chapter for Music Therapy, visit musictherapywisconsin.org.

Photographs provided by Oakwood Lutheran Senior Ministries.

Oakwood Lutheran Senior Ministries has two campuses in the Madison area: University Woods on the west side and Prairie Ridge on the east side. Beth Johnson has helped hundreds of families transition to Oakwood Village. She can be reached at (608) 230-4487.

¹The Certification Board for Music Therapists. cbmt.org.



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