

BRIEF REPORT OPEN ACCESS

# Shared Music Listening: Walking Alongside Adolescents With Experiences of Trauma

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Shared listening of music has been widely explored in the field of music therapy, with some application to working with adolescents with experiences of trauma. However, there is a paucity of research investigating its potential application in school counselling settings.

**Aims:** This article therefore presents the findings of a hermeneutic phenomenological pilot study exploring the viability of integrating shared listening of music into guidance officer (school counsellor) practice.

**Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with music therapists and a school counsellor who had utilised this intervention extensively in their practice.

**Results:** The thematic analysis of findings revealed that shared listening of music represents an accessible and flexible intervention that can aid in developing emotional resilience and mood regulation for adolescents with experiences of trauma.

**Conclusion:** The discussion highlights the importance of openness and authenticity on behalf of the therapist, and places emphasis on letting the young person lead the process, making for impactful and meaningful therapeutic engagement.

## 1 | Introduction and Purpose of Study

Music therapy has been recognised as a research-based profession offering supportive mediation for individuals with experiences of trauma (Australian Music Therapy Association 2023; Garrido et al. 2015; Landis-Shack et al. 2017; van Westrhenen and Fritz 2014). One practice used within this discipline is shared listening of music (SLM), in which clients choose a song they relate to and listen to it with the music therapist (MT) to encourage discussion of their feelings, symptoms, personal history and processing of strong emotions (Mount 2018; Silverman 2011).

### 1.1 | Aims

Whilst SLM is utilised in music therapy settings, a review of the literature indicates a paucity of research regarding the possibility of using SLM practices in school-based settings and guidance officer (GO)<sup>1</sup> practice to assist trauma-affected adolescents (TAAs). As such, this small-scale study focuses on addressing the following aims guided by the research question: *How can school guidance officers utilise shared listening of music as an intervention with adolescents who have experience of trauma?*

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## Summary

- The findings of this small-scale pilot study have opened a conversation supporting continued exploration into what is known about shared listening of music (SLM) and what is yet to be understood about using this intervention with trauma-affected adolescents (TAAs).
- The fusion of horizons is widening for SLM, and this study has extended a hand to guidance officers (GOs) and future researchers to delve deeper into determining the essence of this phenomenon and its application with TAAs in a school counselling setting.

1. Explore direct experiences of utilising SLM with both practising music therapists and school-based counsellors to investigate the compatibility and transferability of SLM.
2. Raise awareness of the value of this intervention in providing support to TAAs in a school counselling context and investigate the potential for its application as part of GO counselling practice.
3. Deliver evidence and recommendations for the value of further investigations into SLM integration in GO practice, building the field of literature and research to inform larger, more comprehensive research projects.

## 2 | Literature Review

The period of adolescence presents many challenges for the developing individual, with the prevalence of mental health issues caused by the experience of trauma within this age group demanding a need for efficient and responsive interventions (Darnell et al. 2019; Lawrence et al. 2015; Reay et al. 2015). In an Australian context, mental illness is common, affecting approximately 14% of adolescents, and almost two in five people aged 16–24 years have had a 12-month mental disorder (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Trauma symptoms, particularly during adolescence, can quickly compound and cause further socio-emotional distress, including behavioural and academic challenges at school.

The prevalence of mental health issues amongst the student population and epidemiological studies indicate that many individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder have comorbid mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression (Flory and Yehuda 2022; Price et al. 2019; Rytwinski et al. 2013). Hence, there is an urgent need to investigate potential therapies that are responsive and effective in application for GOs working with TAAs. Since adolescents spend significant time in schools, school-based GOs are well positioned to play a fundamental role in the implementation, early detection and initiation of therapeutic and counselling interventions.

### 2.1 | Music Based Therapeutic Opportunities for Treating Trauma

The literature within the discipline of music therapy presents SLM as an intervention worthy of further investigation, with

empirical and theoretical evidence acknowledging how it can address the needs of clients who have experienced trauma by fostering coping behaviours, resilience and acknowledgement of painful memories (Ahonen 2016; Bruscia 2012; Burland 2020; Krüger and Stige 2015; van Westrhenen and Fritz 2014).

However, an important gap that emerged after examination of the literature applied to the selection of an intervention that could be utilised regardless of the musical training and experience of the GO. While there appears to be no universal definition for SLM, there are some guiding principles that shed light on its function that may be accessible by counsellors without music-specific training. Common descriptions of SLM include music listening for constructing interactions, organising social actions, mood regulation, providing cues for activity structuring, creating atmosphere, evoking memories and encouraging self-expression (Brown and Sellen 2006). In the context of assisting TAAs, recent research by Fosha (2018) and Skean (2019) suggests that individuals experienced a significant reduction in feelings of depression and anxiety after experiencing SLM. However, despite the substantial body of evidence that has confirmed the value of SLM, it was still uncertain if it would be accessible for GOs in a school counselling context.

## 3 | Methodology, Theoretical Framework and Method

The study adopted a phenomenological approach relying on an interpretivist ontological and epistemological view of reality as residing within lived experience. Thus, this study seeks to embody the perspective that access to reality occurs through multiple social constructions as experienced by the individual, such as consciousness and shared meanings (Myers 2008). This qualitative methodological choice led by the research question aims to emphasise the production of meaning to build understanding, specifically positioning the study within the hermeneutic phenomenology tradition with pragmatic implications.

### 3.1 | Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave informed written consent having been provided with participant information sheets outlining details of participation requirements. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participant anonymity, ensuring that the data collected and reported is represented in an ethical manner.

### 3.2 | Participants

Two music therapists and one school counsellor (SC) were recruited through professional network contacts and selected using purposive sampling. Given that the use of SLM in practice was a requirement of participation, this precluded the involvement of several GOs who were approached. A summary of participant backgrounds is provided in Table 1.

**TABLE 1** | List of participants (pseudonyms have code ‘M’ for music therapist participant and code ‘S’ for school counsellor participant).

Name	Background
Miley	Miley is a registered Neurologic Music Therapist (NMT) based in Australia and internationally. She is also qualified as a clinical psychologist. Miley has extensive experience working dually as an NMT and clinical psychologist with clients of all ages. She has worked with children, adolescents and families from many cultures, including refugees and neurodivergent populations.
Marilyn	Marilyn has been a primary school teacher for over 20 years and has been successfully employed with various organisations and populations as a Registered MT since 2009. These include early intervention, specifically Sing n Grow, rehabilitation for clients with Acquired Brain Injury, and youth and adolescents requiring strategies for managing emotional regulation and building resilience.
Sonya	Sonya is working as an SC in an independent Christian school for Prep-Year 12 students. She has a background as a school chaplain for over 10 years and has recently started a new role as an SC. Sonya uses SLM in her practice every day.

### 3.3 | Data Generation Method

The data generation method consisted of one semi-structured interview with each participant. Participants were given the opportunity to revise transcripts before analysis took place to encapsulate a hermeneutic emphasis on the co-creation of the interview text before analysis (Morse 1994). The interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person, each lasting approximately 45 min.

### 3.4 | Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis methods were based on a four-step procedure described by van Manen (2014). Individual data texts were viewed as a whole, generating a phenomenological text that expressed the overall meaning (van Manen 2014). This process documented the description of experiences of the phenomena of SLM and its related actions and intentions as a textual reminder. To ensure rigour and quality in the analysis of understandings, robust cyclic engagement with the data was required alongside the process of bracketing (Neubauer et al. 2019; Tufford and Newman 2012).

A reflexive diary was used to document reflective thinking and initial interpretations of meaning directly after the interviews and was revisited at various points as the project progressed to consolidate understandings in relation to answering the research question. Thus, as Gadamer (2008) illustrated, understanding

could appear through reflexive analysis and interpretation of multiple dialogues, representing a fusion of horizons and perspectives leading to the discovery of meanings that are depicted in the findings and discussion.

## 4 | Findings

The findings illuminate the potential of how SLM can facilitate connection in the therapeutic relationship and help TAAs to process intense emotions and difficult memories derived from various traumatic experiences. All the participants support and acknowledge the value of using SLM as a flexible intervention that can be tailored to fit individual student needs, while concurrently fostering emotional resilience. Key themes from the analysis suggest that SLM also requires openness, authenticity and flexibility on behalf of the therapist in accepting the music choice of the adolescent and valuing their input in the process. From these foundations, the participants illustrate how therapeutic relationships can evolve through the use of SLM, providing TAAs with a sense of safety in the form of a coping mechanism that can be accessed at any time when needed, in and out of the counselling space. Furthermore, conversations with the participants support the transferability of SLM in a music therapy context to other counselling settings, such as school-based GO work.

## 5 | Discussion

### 5.1 | Requirements, Advocacy and Resourcing

The participants discussed that, while useful, having a music background is not a prerequisite for using SLM. Miley explained:

It is for me a natural bridge to the person, and it kind of extends onto other interventions ...You've got the tools because you know the beauty of music, you are a performer but you're taking yourself out of performing and teaching. You are using that language of music to walk alongside someone ... find out their musical language and do their dance with them.

Marilyn said that GOs should be able to integrate SLM into their practice due to their knowledge of counselling, ‘GOs would have that skill set or learn that skill set’. Sonya’s experiences of using SLM in her counselling practice have led her to highly recommend it to other practitioners, ‘Do it. Just do it. It’s actually really fun and it’s not scary’.

All the practitioners interviewed said they would like to raise awareness around the benefits and accessibility of SLM for counsellors outside the music therapy tradition. Marilyn said, ‘I couldn’t imagine not [using SLM]. Yeah, I think the different levels, the impact that shared listening has, is what I would love people to know’. Sonya had similar views of using SLM in her counselling, encouraging others to give it a go by expressing her positive feelings associated with her experiences, ‘it’s a really useful tool to just enhance your practice’.

Based on her personal experiences, Sonya said that education about how to utilise SLM in practice would be useful, 'I think that people would benefit from a master class. To go, okay, this is how you can use it'. She suggested it may be beneficial to show practitioners how they can utilise something that is present in everyday life, 'I think a lot of practitioners would actually go for it to be honest'.

In a practical sense, Marilyn emphasised the need for practitioners to be prepared for the session with all necessary equipment ready to go. This includes having internet access, or having songs downloaded in advance, especially if designing a playlist with the student. She said, 'anyone can access Spotify. And I don't know many people who don't use Spotify or iTunes as adults and across all aspects and ages of life'.

## 5.2 | Structuring SLM Sessions

As one participant asked, 'it begs the question as to what actually is shared listening? It could be many things... understanding that might be freeing for a guidance counsellor'. Miley went on to say:

It doesn't necessarily have to be exactly one way. And then because you can't get a definition, it's hard to get a standard protocol of how it should be implemented, which is then going to be hard, because then how do you help these guidance counsellors that want to implement it but don't really know where to start?

The overriding message the participants spoke about when considering how to structure SLM, was that the format must be influenced by the needs of the client/student and the therapist's counselling style. Miley spoke of the importance of modelling the experience to a new client by bringing an offering of music from herself:

We all listen to music, but we don't actually explicitly understand why or what that connection is that we have. So, it's kind of like making the inexplicit explicit ... I'm modelling to the person, okay, I listen to this music, and it helps me with this, or I really connect to this piece of music. Is there a piece of music that you have?

Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2010) support the importance of building routine into sessions when working with TAAs. Interpretation of this in correlation with the findings of the current study suggest that the development of a guideline would be useful for GOs and counsellors who have not used SLM in their practice. However, as the participants highlighted, there is always room for adjustment depending on the situation at hand. Marilyn said, 'there's a rough structure that can be changed'. Sonya went on to explain, 'then I guess the caveat to that is then having the structure but then having the flexibility to kind of wander from that'. Consequently, essential elements should be considered when applying a structure to SLM but differentiating and adjusting to the needs of the client should always be recognised (Oosthuizen and McFerran 2021; Wheeler 2015).

## 5.3 | Counsellor Openness to SLM

The participants had practical ideas about how counsellors and non-music therapists should approach SLM, particularly that GOs need to be willing to accept the music that students choose to share and show curiosity about their choice to open deeper conversations. Miley commented:

I guess knowing that there is no right or wrong for people. And I think it's more on the terms of the therapist ... it's okay to accept the music choice of the adolescent because if you want to make a connection with them, it's kind of like you have to just have to accept what they bring. And that can be really challenging because we have this idea of what is relaxing and what is energising and what helps us focus. And so that I think potentially is an issue.

Marilyn further emphasised the importance of putting your own musical tastes aside:

You have to put your preference of music out the window and take on board rappers with swearing and grunge music, or whatever floats their boat is what you love, because they are key. So, you have to learn very quickly and be professional and learn the songs, be that playing them or the sharing, listening, using Spotify or iTunes and break it down ... just get in there 100% as a professional because that's their language.

Sonya's experience correlates with the MT perspectives by indicating that accepting the adolescent's choice of musical artist is vital, 'when you really listen in shared listening, you just need to acknowledge, yeah, they're actually really cool'. Hence, it can be deduced that the preferred music genre of the adolescent is often the most suitable to use, with SLM functioning as an icebreaker in the therapeutic relationship (Grocke and Wigram 2007; McFerran 2010).

## 5.4 | Allowing the Young Person to Lead the Process

The participants also reinforced the importance of openness on the part of the counsellor, by indicating that SLM should be led by the young person. Marilyn explained, 'the mere fact that you are both sitting listening to something that they've [the adolescent] chosen, makes them feel pretty special. And sometimes they're just crying out to be heard, to be seen, to be noticed. That they matter'.

This assertion by the participants is likewise reflected in the literature that promotes the idea of recognising the client as an active participant in the therapeutic relationship (Fairchild 2018). When it comes to SLM, neuroscience evidence further supports the value of using this technique to connect people through shared experiences of feelings and emotions (Gebhardt et al. 2014; Howard 2019; Skean 2019). As Miley stated:

The connection that you build with people through shared listening and acknowledgement of what's happening is much greater, it is much richer. The validation is there. It's kind of like people connecting in that space because of the music ... it's definitely a rich tool.

## 5.5 | Limitations and Recommendations

The obvious limitation of the study pertains to the small sample of participants and the difficulty in recruiting practising GOs who currently use SLM. With this in mind, the study is declared to be a small-scale pilot study aiming to establish the feasibility of future research into SLM application beyond music therapy contexts. Alternate methodological approaches to the same topic would also provide further insight.

Given the demonstrated potential of this field worth mining, it is recommended that future studies include more participants, especially GOs in the state school system. It would also be valuable to include TAAs in future research to gain a clearer understanding of their perception of the value and benefits of SLM.

## 6 | Conclusion

In sum, the findings of this small-scale pilot study have opened a conversation supporting continued exploration into what is known about SLM and what is yet to be understood about using this intervention with TAAs. The fusion of horizons is widening for SLM, and this study has extended a hand to GOs and future researchers to delve deeper into determining the essence of this phenomenon and its application with TAAs in a school counselling setting.

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### Ethics Statement

This research was conducted with the approval of the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (UniSQ HREC; Project ID ETH2023-0300) and complies with requirements pertaining to the written and verbal consent of participants. The authors take complete responsibility for the generation, maintenance and accuracy of data analysis.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

De-identified data is available for reasonable use. Contact the corresponding author to access this data.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Guidance officers are school-based counsellors in Australian public and private schools. They are fully registered teachers who have undertaken additional study, usually a Master of Education (Guidance and Counselling), to take up this specialised position. In Australia, functions of a GO include psychoeducational assessment; career counselling; preliminary identification of learning difficulties, disability and making recommendations for educational adjustments and interventions; recommending referral to allied health; and delivering a broad range of therapeutic services and psychological counselling.

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