

The Use of Music Videos in the Treatment of Complex Trauma

Abstract

A single case study is presented of an 11-year-old Hispanic female residing in foster care. The client was referred for a history of pervasive and complex developmental trauma and was serviced in the context of community-based psychological services for approximately one year. In addition to the provision of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), the utilization of music videos proved uniquely effective in the delivery of psychoeducation, emotion identification and regulation, and ultimate creation of the trauma narrative. As trauma-informed arts-based therapies rise in popularity, this case study examines some advantages and special considerations for the use of music videos in the treatment of complex developmental trauma.

Introduction

Young survivors of trauma often experience difficulties processing the pain of their experience and finding the words to communicate their emotions and needs (Van der Kolk, 2015). These challenges can prove particularly troublesome for culturally-diverse adolescents in foster care due to the heightened prevalence of abuse, neglect, and other psychological risk factors (Austin, 2007). As youth who develop complex trauma experience dysregulation across several domains, they may require modifications in TF-CBT timing and application (Cohen, Mannarino, Kliethermes, & Murray, 2012). Music serves as a practical way of incorporating unifying trauma themes across coping skills, gradual exposure, and trauma narration and processing phases.

Case Presentation

The client was referred for continuing treatment for addressing adjustment to multiple stressors including distress from family separation, history of abuse and neglect, and preparing for the pending adoption. Presenting problems included sadness and anxiety, school refusal, academic problems, ongoing peer conflict, and subclinical features of Reactive Attachment Disorder. Client was provisionally diagnosed with F43.8 Other Specified Trauma- and Trauma-Related Disorder, persistent response to trauma with PTSD-like symptoms and F93.0 Separation Anxiety Disorder.

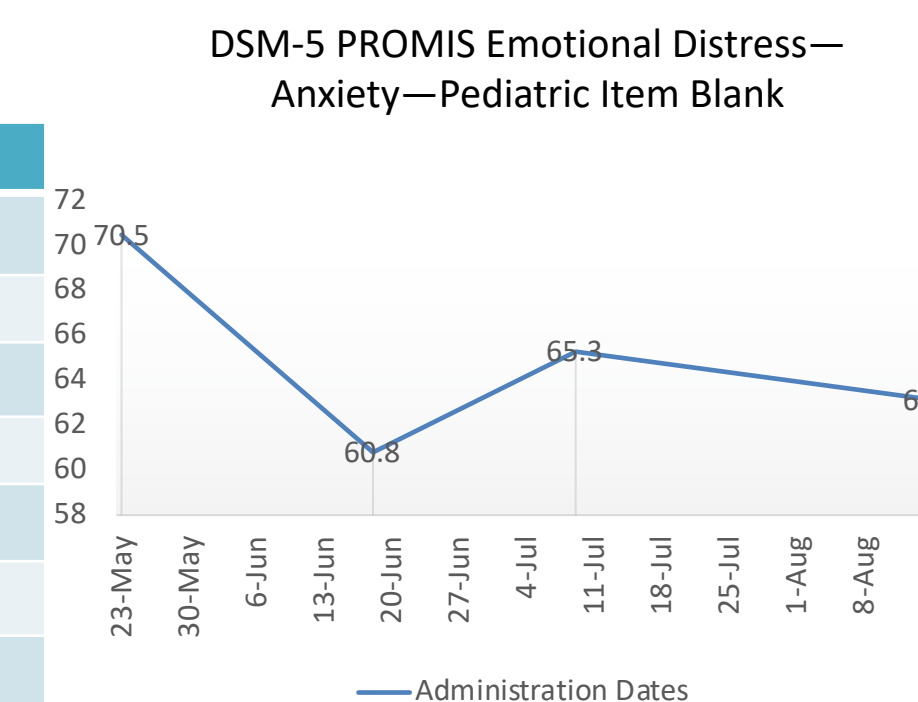
Interventions included Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to reduce symptoms of sadness and anxiety and process prior trauma. Psychoeducation and exercises in emotion identification and regulation were integral, utilizing music to enhance emotion identification, cognitive processing, and formation of the trauma narrative. Upon recognition of the client's ability to perceive emotion in music and her subsequent desire to begin communicating her experience vicariously, the implementation of client and therapist-chosen* music videos served as a mode of superficial exposure and reenactment of trauma memories paired with a relaxed state.

Music in Mood Regulation & Course of Treatment

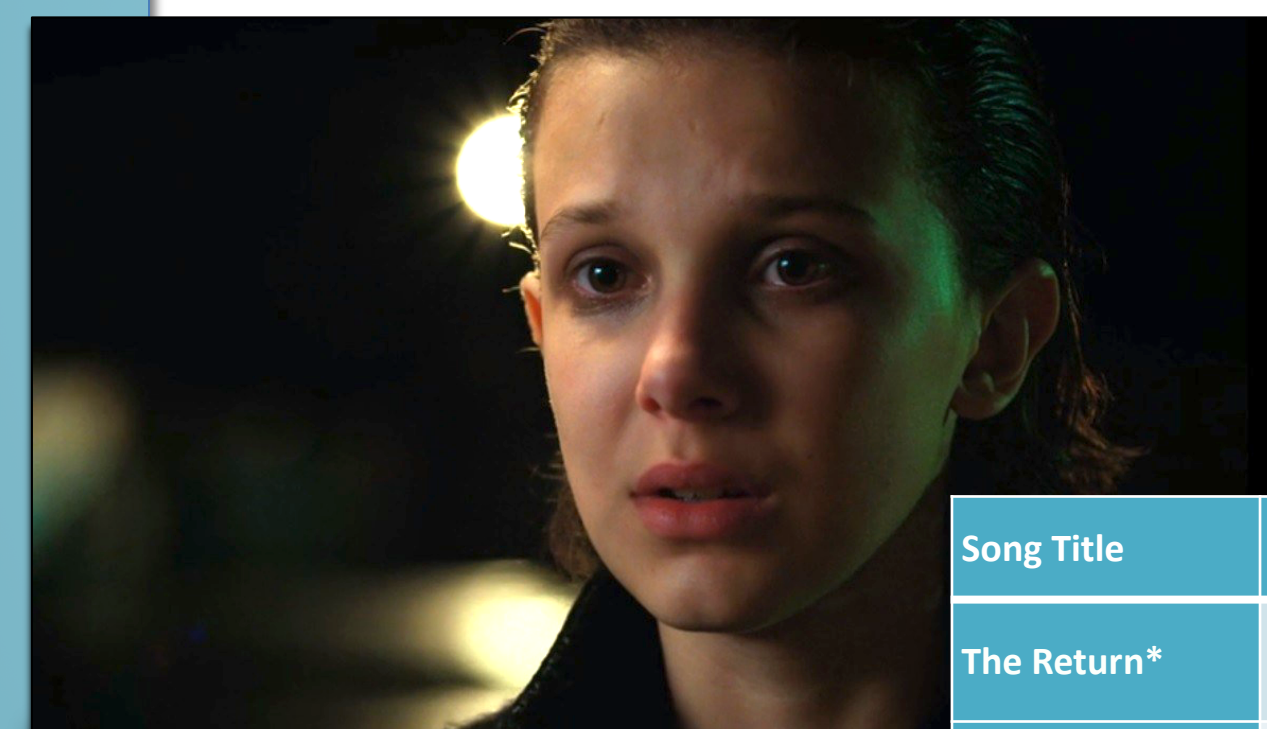
Though the client was initially unable to list affective descriptors beyond "good" or "happy" nor endorse the experience of negatively-valenced emotions, over the course of treatment she became progressively capable and amenable to identifying specific feeling states, both perceived in musical narrative and reflected in her own life. She further showed an increased understanding of the connection between her core beliefs, compensatory strategies, emotions, and behaviors. As treatment progressed, coping skills for modulating her emotions through music (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007) were introduced and implemented.

Music in Mood Regulation Strategies

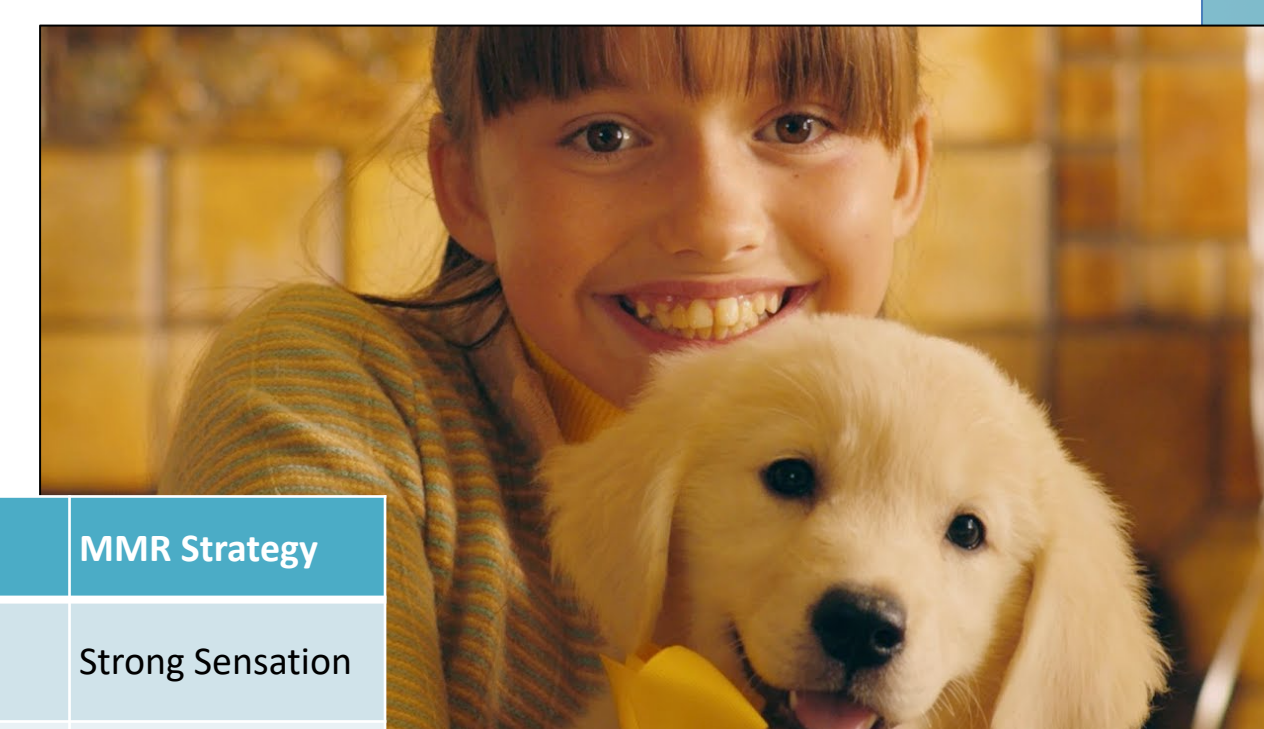
| MMR Strategy | Function | Example |
|------------------|---|---|
| Entertainment | Create atmosphere to maintain or enhance positive mood | Playing a liked song in background |
| Revival | Create new energy or renewal when feeling stressed or tired | Listening during exercise |
| Strong Sensation | Induce or strengthen intense emotional experiences | Aiming to elicit chills or <i>frisson</i> |
| Diversion | Distract from unwanted thoughts or feelings; improve mood | Playing upbeat or pleasant music |
| Discharge | Vicarious release of anger or sadness through congruent music | Listening at high volume |
| Mental Work | Promote mental contemplation or emotional reappraisal | Analyzing lyrics or associated memories |
| Solace | Foster comfort, acceptance and understanding | Empathizing with artist's experience |



Sequence of Music Video Integration

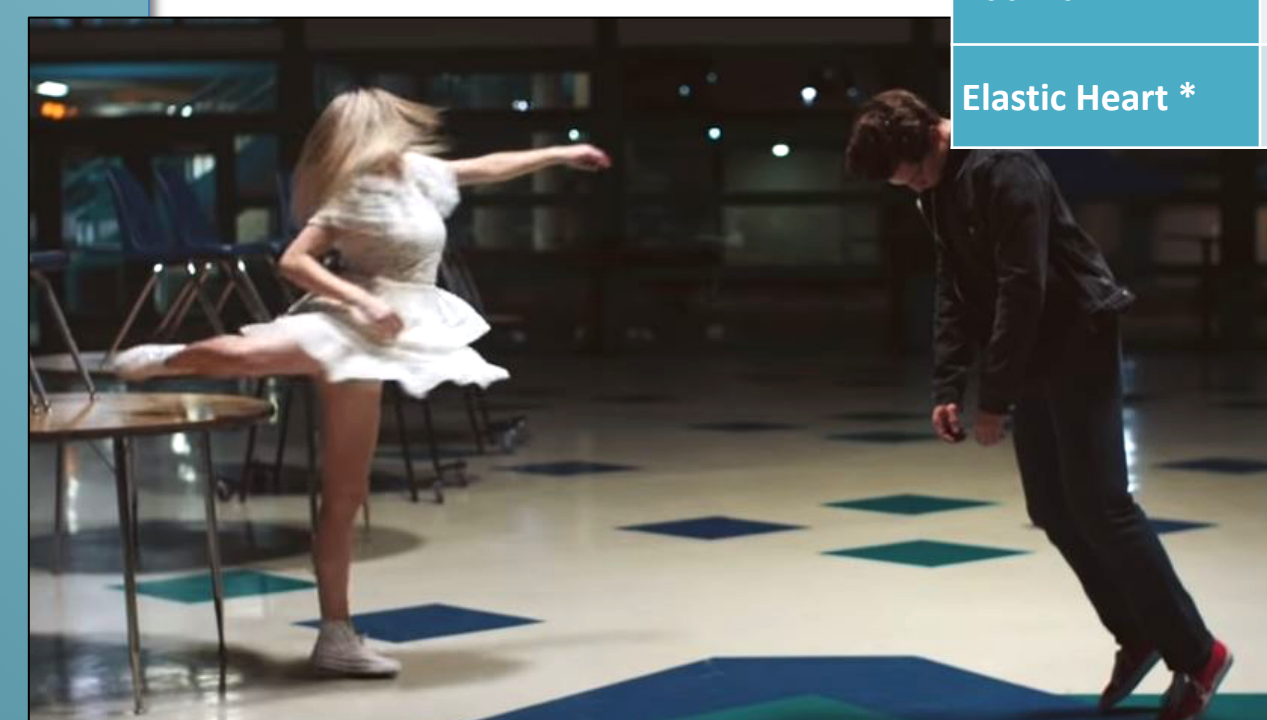


1. The Return – Stranger Things

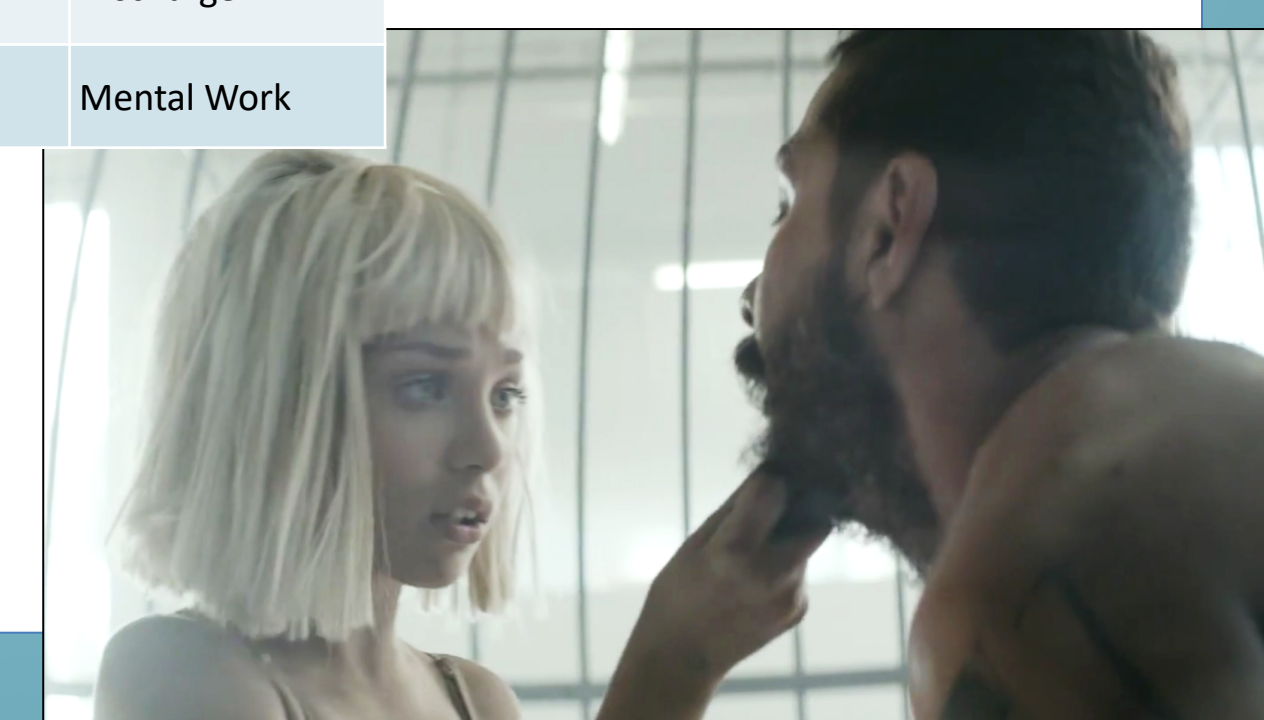


2. Happier – Marshmello feat. Bastille

| Song Title | Themes | Emotion/Feeling | MMR Strategy |
|----------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| The Return* | Separation from loved ones | Longing | Strong Sensation |
| Happier | Social anxiety, loss, bullying | Surprise, sadness, happiness | Solace; Strong Sensation |
| Together | Cultural diversity, belonging | Sadness, Loneliness | Solace |
| Alone | Isolation, Acceptance | Loneliness, Happiness | Solace |
| Wake Me Up | Belonging, acceptance | Hope | Diversion |
| Demons | Pushing people away | Anger | Mental Work |
| Move Along* | Perseverance | Excitement | Revival |
| Bad Liar | Dread, Distrust, Resilience | Regret, Sadness, Happiness | Discharge |
| Elastic Heart* | Forgiveness, Trust | Scared, Vulnerable | Mental Work |



3. Bad Liar – Imagine Dragons



4. Elastic Heart – Sia

Outcomes

Self-report scores on the PROMIS Emotional Distress—Anxiety—Pediatric Item Bank showed a reduction in symptoms from Severe (t=70.5) to Moderate (t=63.1). Treatment outcomes included meeting each of her clinical goals, a reduction in anxiety and distress, and an improved capacity for metacognition. Furthermore, the client developed a mature understanding of music's function as a positive coping tool evidenced by her conceptualization of the seven discrete music and mood regulation strategies (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007), accompanied by meaningful personal examples of each.

Discussion

This study illustrates a thematically-relevant and advantageous client-selection of appropriate media which worked in tandem with treatment goals. As with any intervention, the integration of client or therapist-chosen media should be deliberate, intentional, and weighed in context of prospective benefits and consequences. If possible, music videos should be screened in advance for potentially obstructive content not in agreement with clinical objectives, with a plan prepared for management of potential complications should they arise. Further cause for advance screening includes the possibility for clinician activation, providing the opportunity to prepare to initiate discussion normalizing the expression of emotional experiences.

Conclusion

The nonverbal and often familiar nature of music can provide a safe and non-threatening entry point into the therapeutic process, especially in the presence of resistance to treatment, dissociation, and disorganized attachment. The discerning use of thematically-relevant and clinically-informed music videos is a promising complement to evidence-based treatments like TF-CBT for youth with complex trauma.

References

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For online link to poster, full musical references, and other information, visit www.pathwaysinmusic.com