

Musical interventions in Satir's Experiential Family Therapy: From dissonance to harmony

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2016

Satir International Journal

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Original citation:

Nemesh, B. (2016). Musical interventions in Satir's Experiential Family Therapy: From dissonance to harmony. *Satir International Journal*, 4(1), 73–75.

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SATIR INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Satir Around the Globe

Musical Interventions in Satir's Experiential Family Therapy: From Dissonance to Harmony

Beth Nemesh, PhD, MT-BC, LMFT

In her work Virginia Satir endorsed the use of creative arts to access the unconscious and internal processes. The arts added a powerful non-verbal experiential element to promote awareness and change. Nonetheless, musical interventions seem to be absent or undocumented in her work. This unique workshop offered participants an opportunity to personally experience the potential of musical interventions in family therapy; a playful and easy to implement technique, for promoting individual and family congruence. The musical interventions are based on our inherent musicality and family playfulness and do not require previous musical experience.

The Family-Based Music Therapy Model

The interventions presented in the workshop are based on Satir's STST model and complemented by Juliette Alvin's free improvisation music therapy model. Alvin's model acknowledges that music is a potential space for free expression. Without restrictions or guidelines to aesthetic and prevailing cultural, musical and expressional rules, musical improvisations enable the freedom to use any musical activity, play instruments and make any sounds without previous musical training. The music is not judged by musical or aesthetic outcomes. Rather, the instruments are used as intermediary object, on which the individual projects subjective meaning and significance. The instruments are chosen according to their subjective meaning, considering the instruments' energy, sounds, dominance, size, color and shape, various materials from which they are made, the way they are played or any other quality and characteristic which resonates with our personal memory. Alvin's humanistic approach and philosophy, along with her belief in body and mind connection, closely corresponds with Satir's humanistic experiential family therapy.

In addition, the model builds on contemporary findings from neuroscience and neuromusicology research, which highlights music's impact on the brain; influencing emotional and social interactions and development. Music accesses unconscious emotions and memories of pre-verbal experiences. Music stimulates energy levels, facilitates mutual attunement, connecting and empathy towards others. Its impact on body-mind connection, behavior and growth is vast, and well beyond the scope of this brief summary.

The Primary Triad – A Musical Exploration

The initial part of the workshop focused on the *primary triad* of the family of origin. It explored the impact of early family interactions, relationships and communication using musical instruments. Musical instruments, which hold within them multifold subconscious information and impacts, were chosen to represent and characterize the participant as a young child. Additional instruments were chosen to represent the parents (or caretakers) as they were remembered from that age. Working in trios, each participant re-enacted the music of their primary triad. New information surfaced from this experience, eliciting feelings, criticisms, expectation, family rules and most of all reflecting the internal childhood yearnings and feelings of self-worth. The musical representations accurately replicated the family system. As a multi-sensory non-verbal experience it bypassed internal logic and censorship, enabling each participant to reconnect to the primary triad many times in a new, profound and emotional experience. Participants could explore the impact it had on them as children, and ways in which it may still resonate and echo in their adult life.

Family Roles and Dynamics – A Family Musical Improvisation

The second part of the workshop explored family roles, dynamics, and relationships. A participant (the *star*) volunteered to bring their family of origin to a family-based music therapy simulation. In the session the *star* assigned musical instruments to represent each family member. The *star* recreated the sound and playing mode for each instrument. Each family member/musical instrument was played by a volunteer chosen from the group. Thereafter, the family played together a family free-improvisation. The family 'concert' recreated the music of the family of origin, reflecting each family member's *internal iceberg* as well as the relationships between them. It brought up multiple messages from the past.

The family of origin is the source of the basic ingredients which impact our lives. Primary experiences with significant others (parent, siblings) impact who we are, our choices and the ways we grow. Imbedded memories are stored as sounds, energy, movement as well as silences. Many of our early memories are non-verbal, and can be accessed using non-verbal media.

Resonating with early experiences and memories, music unfolds the family story. Family music exposes family roles, coalitions, proximity and cast-outs, disputes and struggles. Overt and covert aggression is clearly sensed, along with issues of control and boundaries. Family communication can be identified along with family coping stances.

The musical representations were found to accurately recreate the family music in a fast, straightforward and precise manner. In therapy, families listen to the recorded music, and verbally reflect on what they hear, thus promoting awareness to the family experiences. The therapist uses *process questions* to help the family explore the information, access the icebergs and internal yearnings and eventually lead to making new choices and better decisions. These changes can be implemented musically, and then instilled into the family reality. Making musical changes (changing instrument, playing differently) can be much easier than changing behavior and entrenched stances. It is playful, amusing, and is emotionally relaxed. Although it might look like fun and play, musical experiences impact our brain plasticity and help create new neuronal paths in our ever-changing brain.

Adding Music to Satir's Experiential Family Therapy

Adding a musical intervention in family therapy was found to promote family cooperation and change. Family therapists who received a designated training highlighted the way music naturally bypassed habitual stances and behaviors. Musical interventions addressed multiple family challenges and goals; improved communication, mutuality and cooperation, sharing feelings, and promoting parental attunement and leadership. The also facilitated the exploration of boundaries and responsibilities. Music gave place for individual voices and challenged family problems—all in a non-threatening playful family experience. Moreover, musical interventions demonstrated valuable clinical family assessment opportunities, bringing to light and adding new information to the therapeutic processes.

The unique non-verbal features of music help create a less judgmental environment offering an opportunity for change and growth. The interventions required openness to new and unfamiliar musical experiences, curiosity, and trust in the process. The family-based music therapy model is well suited to working with families with children, teens, individuals, groups, couples and parents. Music provides a unique and valuable experience for promoting individual and family congruence, moving from musical and family dissonance to musical and family harmony.

Based on the Satir model, family-based musical interventions were developed by the author for multiple family objectives and goals. For information about the model, musical interventions in experiential family and couples therapy, and information about workshops contact the author at *bethnemesh@gmail.com*.

"Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere in which individual differences are appreciated, love is shown openly, mistakes are used for learning, communication is open, rules are flexible, responsibility (matching promise with delivery) is modeled and honesty is practiced - the kind of atmosphere found in a nurturing family"

(Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking*, p. 26)

References

Satir, V. (1988). *The new peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, Inc.