

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

Music and Mandala:

A Self-Reflective Method to Identify a Helping Professional's Needs for Self-Care, Supervision, and Personal Therapy

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Abstract

It is recommended that music therapists engage in self-care, supervision, and personal therapy to cope with professional stressors. As a result, it is important that they can determine when one or more are needed. The purpose of this paper is to describe a self-administered, seven-step music and mandala method that can be used to determine those needs. Music therapists' understanding of the purpose of each step will support successful use of the method. Therefore, the description of each step is accompanied by an explanation of the key concept(s) related to it, and a case example. The desired outcome of participation is for music therapists to increase self-awareness and identify their needs for self-care, supervision, and/or personal therapy.

Keywords: music and mandala; self-reflection; therapist's needs; receptive music therapy method

Introduction

Music therapists can experience multiple workplace stressors. These may include burn out, financial uncertainty, and job insecurity. Other stressors may relate to countertransference, personal issues, and challenging work environments (Bibb et al., 2021; Clements-Cortes, 2013; Gooding, 2019). To cope with workplace stressors, music therapists recommend participating in self-care, supervision, and personal therapy (K. Chang, 2014; Clements-Cortez, 2013; Hearn, 2017; Loewy & Hara, 2002). Additionally, the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA; 2013a, 2013b) and the Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT; 2022) delineate the responsibilities of music therapists to participate

in supervision. Further information on self-care, supervision, and personal therapy is provided below.

Carter and Barnett (2014) defined *self-care* as “the ongoing practice of self-awareness and self-regulation for the purpose of balancing psychological, physical, and spiritual needs of the individual” (p. xiii). Lack of self-care can inhibit the ability to “deliver quality and empathic care to patients (Shapiro & Burnam, 2011, p. 243) and “can drain the enthusiasm, joy, resilience, caring, and meaning out of a career” (Pope & Vasquez, 2005, p. 13). Engagement in self-care, however, can help counter therapist stress, distress, and emotional depletion (Baker, 2003; Lederer, 2007; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). It can also allow for greater professional longevity (Fowler, 2006) and wellbeing (N. Chang, 2009). Self-care practices can involve maintaining healthy boundaries, expressing oneself creatively (Hearns, 2017), and participating in enjoyable activities (Fowler, 2006). They can involve tending to one’s needs for sleep, nutrition, and exercise (K. Chang, 2014). Self-care practice can be about entering personal therapy and maintaining strong support systems (Hearns, 2017). Lastly, self-care practice can call for increased self-awareness and self-reflection (K. Chang, 2014; Clements-Cortez, 2013; Hearns, 2017). Both K. Chang (2014) and Loewy and Hara (2002) recommend that music therapists self-reflect to identify their personal needs for self-care.

Forinash (2019) stated that “the focus of the *supervision* relationship is to address the complexities involved in helping supervisees in their ongoing, and never ending, development as compassionate and knowledgeable professionals” (p. 40). Supervision may be entered into with a professional supervisor or with peers. Music therapists may participate in one-on-one or group supervision. The process of supervision can be useful in multiple ways. It can support music therapists through the transitions from student to professional to supervisor. It can provide exposure to multiple perspectives and new ideas. It can create a sense of community. Additionally, it can provide a place for being musical, for exploring the music in music therapy processes, and for exploring reactions to the workplace (Forinash, 2019).

Personal therapy has been defined as “participation in a therapeutic modality with a trained clinician for the purposes of personal development and personal growth” (Fox & McKinney, 2016, p. 91). Music therapists have participated in personal therapy for some of the following reasons: to manage mental illness, to develop insight, and to work with personal issues (Kendrick, 2021). They have sought out personal therapy through verbal counseling, naturopathy, massage therapy, and music therapy (K. Chang, 2014). Music therapists can benefit personally from seeing a therapist through increased self-awareness, increased self-acceptance, and increased ability to move through psychological struggles (Dileo, 2001; Fox & McKinney, 2016). They can benefit professionally from seeing a therapist through exploring their countertransference issues (Bruscia, 1998) and deepening their understanding of therapeutic processes (Dileo, 2001; Fox & McKinney, 2016).

Self-care, supervision, and personal therapy are three different approaches to managing workplace stressors. Music therapists may find that there is a time and place for one or more of these approaches at different points in their personal lives and careers. It is important that they can determine which it is that they need. The purpose of the present paper is to describe a self-administered music and mandala method that music therapists can use to increase their self-awareness and to determine their needs for self-care, supervision, and/or personal therapy.

The Foundations of the Proposed Method

The art therapist Joan Kellogg described a *mandala* as a drawing made on a sheet of 12-

inch by 18-inch white paper that has a pencil-drawn, face-sized circle in the center of it (Kellogg et al., 1977). This type of mandala drawing has been used in conjunction with the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) for many years (Bush, 1988; Kellogg et al., 1977; Ventre, 1994). It has been used to help clients concretize their music-imagery experiences and follow their therapeutic process (Bonny & Kellogg, 2002; Bruscia, 2010). GIM therapists typically engaged clients in mandala drawing *after* participation in music-imagery experiences (Körlin, 2007-08; Serna, 2011-12; Trondalen, 2010).

Authors also describe clinical processes in which clients (Paik-Maier, 2010; Summer, 2010), trainees (Abbott, 2010) or supervisees (Wagner, 2012) draw mandalas *as a part of* music-imagery experiences. The present paper invites participants to explore this type of music and mandala process in relationship to workplace stressors. The desired outcome of participation is for music therapists to increase self-awareness and identify their needs for self-care, supervision, and/or personal therapy.

The present method was developed from the author's personal experiences with drawing mandalas to music and the author's work with clients in music and imagery methods. It is an amalgamation of methods that were modeled for the author by several different music therapists both in personal therapy and in GIM training.

The method is grounded in the humanistic foundations of GIM. The core principles of humanistic psychology include the human capacity for self-actualization, self-direction, and choice. Humanists trust in the developmental nature of people to move toward growth and healing (Bonny, 2002). This method is intended to support that development through inviting music therapists to participate in a self-led process of self-exploration that acknowledges them as experts of their own human experiences and their music preferences.

Music therapists might use this method if they feel curious about their internal world, are psychologically minded, like to use music to connect with themselves, and feel curious about the method. However, they need not force anything. If the method does not spur a reader's curiosity, or if it feels overwhelming or threatening, they are invited to consider another approach. The reader may already have methods of self-reflection that work well for them, or it may be that they need to disconnect from music in their personal time. Ultimately, this paper is an invitation to a way of being in relationship with the self that the author shares because it has been helpful to them. It is offered as a possible opportunity, not as a demand to find it useful. As the literature above indicates, what is important is the process of self-reflection. The method by which the reader chooses to reflect is a personal choice.

The Self-Reflective Music and Mandala Method

The present music and mandala method engages the participant in seven steps. Understanding the purpose of the steps will support successful use of the method. The description of each step below is accompanied by an explanation of the key concept(s) related to it and a case example is provided in the related boxes. Listed in order, the names of the steps are: (a) identifying a reaction, (b) creating a holding environment, (c) bringing the experiences of the reaction into awareness, (d) re-activating the reaction, (e) naming the experiences, (f) reflecting on the experiences and, finally, (g) determining a course of action.

Step 1. Identifying a Reaction

For the purposes of this paper, a *reaction* is defined as a distressed response to an event. An event might involve, for example, disappointment in one's own actions, an interaction with another person, the discovery of another person's actions, the loss of a relationship or the experience of feeling excluded from a relationship. In more general terms, an event

may involve an interaction with another and/or the absence of interaction with another. Additionally, an event may involve interpersonal or intrapersonal interactions.

Reactions may be identified through the following types of experiences: feeling a desire to take an action that will not be useful to a particular situation (e.g., would inflame an argument or disparage another); having feelings that seem overly strong for a situation; or having thoughts that repeatedly return to an uncomfortable event (see Box 1).

Box 1. Case Example: Identifying a Reaction.

A music therapist, Mary, recognized that she was having a reaction as she watched a paraprofessional bring an alert and oriented client to a music therapy session. A therapeutic goal for the client was to make independent decisions about her session attendance and she had previously stated that she did not want to attend. In that moment, the music therapist found herself feeling furious with the paraprofessional. Her first instinct was to yell at the paraprofessional, to ask her what she thought she was doing, and to tell her to take the client back to her room. Even as the music therapist had these experiences, she realized that taking such action would not be useful to the situation and that her feelings seemed overly strong for it. Rather than say anything in the moment, she opted to return the client to her room and then lead the music therapy session. She identified this as a reaction she wanted to work with using a music and mandala method.

Step 2. Creating a Holding Environment

The word holding describes a psychological experience that is a “total environmental provision” (Winnicott, 1986, p. 240). A holding environment is constant and reliable, it is responsive to emotional expression, and it is accepting of the person (Modell, 1976). In this manner, it implies that the individual being held is protected not only from external dangers (e.g., unkind words or retaliation from others), but also from internal dangers (e.g., self-criticism or feelings of incompetence). The experience of being held also suggests an ability to stop one from acts of aggression that might prove destructive to oneself or another person (Modell, 1976). Four elements are used to create a holding environment for this music and mandala method: the adoption of an attitude of open awareness, the music, the mandala, and the physical environment.

Attitude of Open Awareness

An attitude of open awareness is a non-judgmental state in which permission is given to the self to allow any subjective experience to come into consciousness. Like in mindfulness meditation, having an attitude of open awareness involves bringing into consciousness the thoughts, sensations, and emotions being experienced in the here-and-now. This includes the painful as well as the pleasant. The purpose of this attitude is to face, accept, and even welcome experiences of tension (e.g., fear, anger, frustration) when they are present (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). Being aware in this manner is not intended to uncover psychodynamic material or objectify sensory-emotional experiences. The intent is to encourage the music therapist’s conscious, non-judgmental awareness of here-and-now emotions, thoughts, and physical states. Approaching this method with an attitude of open awareness contributes to the holding environment by allowing acceptance of the self as a human being who has reactions.

The Music

The music contributes to the holding environment by being a reliable, familiar, safe element that is reflective of the music therapist's experience. In this manner, *holding music* acts as an unconditionally caring "other" that holds and supports without judgment. Music of a holding nature has simple, repetitive, un-developing melodies and harmonic progressions. The tempos are steady, the dynamics are moderate, and the textures (or orchestrations) are simple. Holding music pieces may be of any length but are typically 4-8 minutes long. The musical qualities of a holding piece, such as rhythm, meter, instrumental timbres, and tempo, are selected to "match" the qualities of the participant's experience and in this manner be responsive to their emotional expression (see Box 2; Abbott, 2010). The music, as a stable reflection of the music therapist's experience, invites the music therapist to stay with their experience and allow it to come more fully into awareness.

Examples of holding music selections include *The Humming Chorus* (Puccini, 1990), and *Art of Motion* (McKee, 2013). A music therapist might choose to play *The Humming Chorus* when the qualities of their experience feel slower and quieter, while they might choose the *Art of Motion* when the qualities of their experience feel more stimulating. Even stimulating music can provide a reliable, familiar, safe environment when it has simple, repetitive, un-developing melodies, and harmonic progressions. It is the reliable, familiarity of the music that contributes to the holding environment.

Music therapists are encouraged to develop a personal collection of holding music pieces to which they relate well. The collection may include pieces of any genre, any tempo, any meter, and any preference, but they must be simple, repetitive, and un-developing. The use of music with qualities that are unreliable and developing, i.e., have unfamiliar harmonic progressions, changing meter, thematic development, harmonic development, and/or shifting dynamics, is contraindicated for this music and mandala method. Its evocative nature has the potential to uncover dynamic material that might be better worked with in a reconstructive-oriented, psychotherapeutic setting (Abbott, 2010).

The Mandala

As representative of "the wholeness of the personality" (Jung & Storr, 1983, p. 230), *mandalas* can be considered "cryptograms concerning the state of the self" (p. 234). In relationship to the present method, mandala drawing is intended to create a visual expression of the music therapist's reaction. The drawing becomes a concrete object the music therapist can reflect on and make meaning of. The circular form of the mandala contributes to the holding environment by serving "as a container, offering a gentle, nonthreatening boundary affording safety and stability" (Cox & Cohen, 2000, p. 195). In the present method, the mandala drawing is not interpreted according to a specific theory like the Great Round of the Mandala (Kellogg, 1978). A framework for making meaning of the drawing is provided in Step 5, Naming the Experiences.

The Physical Environment

Much like a music therapist sets up the session room for clients (Polen et al., 2017), the music therapist should set up their own physical space to engage in the self-reflective music and mandala method (see Box 2). The physical environment should be a quiet, private space that feels safe. It contributes to the holding environment by protecting the participant from disruption and preventing undesired input from others.

Box 2. Case Example: Creating a Holding Environment.

Mary decided to use the self-reflective music and mandala method at home. She shared her work office with two other colleagues and was not comfortable using the music and mandala method around them. At home, however, she could close the door to her bedroom and spend a quiet half hour alone. She brought with her several pieces of mandala paper," i.e., 14" x 17" white paper on which she had pencil drawn a "face-sized" circle in the center (she used an 8" dinner plate or terra cotta plant saucer as a guide when drawing the circle). She also brought sets of pastels (oil and chalk), a box of facial tissues, an mp3 player on which her collection of holding music pieces was loaded, and a set of headphones. She prepared herself to draw by setting up her sound system; creating a flat, stable space on which she could draw; setting out her mandala paper; and opening her pastels.

Step 3: Bringing the Experience into Awareness

To bring the experience of the reaction into awareness, the music therapist is invited to adopt the above-described attitude of open awareness and acknowledge as much of the experience as possible. They are invited to slow down and to be present to any thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences related to the reaction. Successful use of the method relies on the music therapist's ability to bring these experiences into awareness without judgment. The music therapist can acknowledge any judgmental thoughts and then let them go. As the experiences come into awareness, the music therapist can consciously identify any immediate thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences.

With the above experiences in mind, the music therapist selects a holding piece of music that acts as an unconditionally caring "other" and reflects their experience back to them without judgment. They are to choose a piece that supports the experience of the reaction. For example, they can find a piece with a tempo that has the same energy level as their experience and a melody that seems to fit the emotions of their experience (see Box 3). The intent is to create an environment in which it is safe to be vulnerable, honest, and authentic while bringing a holistic experience of the reaction into awareness, i.e., an experience that includes thoughts, needs, sensory experiences, and emotions.

Box 3. Case Example: Bringing the Experience Into Awareness.

As Mary brought the experience of her reaction into awareness, the depth of her anger startled her. She could quickly imagine herself yelling at the paraprofessional and seeing the look on the paraprofessional's face as she did so. At the same time, she could hear herself saying that she should not yell at the paraprofessional. She felt strongly that such behavior was unprofessional and demeaning, even if it was only imagined. Intentionally setting aside the judgmental ideas about what she should and should not do, Mary selected the music piece *Art of Motion* (McKee, 2013). The tempo of the piece was fast-paced and matched her energy level; the more she let herself think about the event, the more aware she was of her pounding heart. Additionally, the syncopation of the rhythms suited the unevenness of her experience (she felt agitated by the awareness of her intense anger, and her agitation felt uneven and unsettled).

Step 4: Reactivating the Reaction

Re-activating the reaction is an open, accepting action in which the music therapist consciously allows themselves to again make active the experiences of their previous reaction and to bring them into the here-and-now. Doing this provides opportunity for previous experiences to be expressed without judgment or need for consideration of another. It allows for the creation of a physical manifestation of experience through mandala drawing. It is an intentional action on the behalf of the participant. It is not an unconscious process related to trauma or stress.

To reactivate the experience of a reaction, the music therapist starts playing the selected piece of holding music. As the music plays, the music therapist takes a few moments to let their experience of the reaction come into the present moment without any judgment. Their experience may include things like emotions, feelings in the body, and thoughts. Then, the music therapist looks over at the oil pastels and sees to which color(s) they are drawn. They let the predominant feelings of the reaction come forward, they pick up a color that expresses the experience, and they begin to draw. The music therapist is not to think about or judge their color selections or their drawing. They can use as many colors as they need. While drawing, the music therapist expresses their experience of the reaction on the paper through color, texture, and form. Their drawing can be as abstract or as concrete as feels authentic. They can repeat the music piece if needed and can let the music play for 8 to 10 minutes while drawing. Box 4 provides an example of this process.

Box 4. Case Example: Reactivating the Reaction.

As Mary turned on the music, she allowed herself to listen to it and to hear her own experience in it. It was a relief to realize that she had chosen the music well. The fast tempo and syncopated rhythms sounded the way her pounding heart, her anger, and her agitation felt. She picked up a brown oil pastel and drew curlicues inside the circle. Wanting a brighter color, she added red circles and extended red lines from them like rays of a sun. Something inside her wanted her to add black and red-orange to the drawing. She added the colors to the drawing as the music repeated three times. As she drew and listened, she heard herself thinking, "That paraprofessional deserves to be yelled at!" When the mandala (see Figure 1) seemed to express her experience as fully as it could, she let the music come to an end and turned it off.



Figure 1. Mary's Mandala.

Step 5. Naming the Experiences

Naming is a process by which experiences (i.e., thoughts, emotions, sensations) are identified and attached to descriptive words or phrases. Naming, like in mindfulness meditation, allows experiences to be observed by the cognitive mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). It provides opportunity to simultaneously have and think about one's experiences and to gain perspective on them. Naming is a cognitive technique for relating thoughtfully to subjective experiences.

To name the experiences of a reaction, the music therapist can journal whatever thoughts come to mind and whatever experiences seem salient after turning the music off. If open journaling feels difficult to the music therapist, they can take time to look at the mandala and describe it with at least five different adjectives. The music therapist can then use the adjectives to make a short story about the experience (see Box 5). They can include in the story their sensory and emotional experiences, as well as the thoughts, that occurred during the reaction.

Box 5. Case Example: Naming the Experiences.

With the music turned off, Mary took several moments to look at the mandala. She was struck by how nearly out of control the drawing felt to her. The five adjectives with which she described the drawing included turbulent, chaotic, furious, hot, and scary. The story she wrote using the five adjectives was, "I felt so furious with that paraprofessional. I see my rage and it looks hot, chaotic, and turbulent. I scare myself when I feel anger this strongly."

Step 6: Reflecting on the Experiences

Reflecting is a process of "exploring experience in order to learn new things from it" (Boud, 2001, p. 10). Like in mindfulness meditation, reflection can provide an opportunity to make meaning from and gain insight into one's experience. Reflecting is intended to increase understanding of one's own self. Additionally, it may allow for the ability to respond more effectively to situations that engender reactions (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). See Box 6 for an example.

The music therapist can use one or more of the following questions to prompt the reflection process:

- Is there anything I was not aware of before the session, but that I am now?
- If I have become aware of something new, how might I use it in relation to the situation? How might a new awareness be useful to me in the future?
- Do the sensory, emotional, and cognitive experiences related to the reaction remind me of anything, any person, or any time in my life?

Box 6. Case Example: Reflecting on the Experiences.

As Mary wrote her story and looked at the mandala, she realized that she felt exhausted by her anger and her fear of her anger. Having expressed it, she was faced with her inability to stop staff from negating clients' decision-making. She felt powerless, helpless, and incompetent. She also realized that she was ashamed of feeling angry and was confused by how angry she felt.

Step 7. Determining a Course of Action

Depending on the situation, several courses of action may be available to the music therapist. Self-care might be helpful, e.g., the music therapist might go for a walk, decide to set a new interpersonal boundary, journal, or call a friend. Supervision might be helpful, e.g., they might talk with a supervisor, with a colleague, or with peers in a supervision group. Personal therapy might also be helpful. An example is provided in Box 7.

To determine a course of action, the music therapist might consider the following questions:

- Do I need to confer with someone else about the situation? If so, with whom might it be best to talk?
- What do I need? Can my needs be met, and if so, by whom and how?
- What do others need? Can their needs be met, and if so, by whom and how?

Box 7. Case Example: Determining a Course of Action.

Realizing that she felt helpless to impact this situation and potential future situations like it, Mary decided to talk with the paraprofessionals' supervisor. Her goal was to approach the supervisor for help to develop a constructive approach to potential, similar situations. She also realized, because her reaction was so disconcerting, that she needed to talk with someone about it. She felt relieved that she had not acted in the moment and wanted to understand why she felt so strongly about the situation. She decided to contact her Employee Assistance Program for a referral to a counselor.

Discussion and Conclusions

The methods of self-reflection in which music therapists choose to participate are very personal. It is important for the music therapist to determine whether this music and mandala method is a good fit for them. To assess whether the method is useful to them, they can ask themselves the following questions: How did I experience the music? Did it help me feel safe and hold me to authentically explore my reaction? How did I experience the drawing? Could I draw freely without judging my self-expression? How did I experience the journaling? Could I describe my experience of the mandala in words? What elements of this process worked for me? What about this process did not work for me? What might I do differently next time? Answering "yes" to the above questions can indicate that the method is a good fit for the music therapist. Answering "no" to the above questions may indicate that it is not be a good fit. Additionally, music therapists can compare their own responses to the method to those described below.

The following two types of responses may be indicators that the method was helpful to the music therapist. First, the method helped the music therapist increase their self-understanding, find ways to tend to their personal needs, and find constructive ways to respond to clients and colleagues. Second, the music therapist was curious about their experiences and their mandala drawing even when they did not fully understand what they were about. Further, they wanted to try using the method again to see of what they might become aware.

The following two types of responses may be indicators that the method was not helpful to the music therapist. First, the music therapist was more confused and upset after using the method than before using it. Second, the music therapist had difficulty finding meaning in the experience and was upset because they did not understand their experience or their

mandala drawing. These responses to the method may be indicators that it is raising issues that could be more helpfully addressed in a personal therapy setting. This method is not intended to uncover psychodynamic material or serve as self-therapy. As stated above, the self-reflection methods that music therapists choose to use are personal. Not all methods are useful to all music therapists.

Self-administered use of music and mandala methods to increase self-awareness can be very helpful to music therapists, but there are also times for them to seek out supervision or personal therapy. Music therapists need to seek supervision when they are unable to independently find constructive ways to respond to difficult work situations. Additionally, they may want to find a therapist when their work environment feels draining or when going to work consistently feels overwhelming. Therapy can also be helpful when the music therapist is unable to resolve uncomfortable feelings about work issues or recognizes a reaction as a familiar, unhealthy pattern they cannot seem to change. Lastly, the music therapist may want to find a therapist when they feel curious about themselves and want support from another person to participate in a process of self-exploration.

In conclusion, the present paper offers a music and mandala method by which music therapists may work independently to increase self-awareness and identify their needs for self-care, supervision, and/or personal therapy. This music and mandala method is a receptive method of music therapy. Other music therapy methods may be equally useful for the purpose of self-reflection, e.g., improvisation, composition, and re-creative methods (Bruscia, 2014). Whichever method the music therapist finds effective, it is important to engage in some process of self-reflection. Doing so has the potential to positively impact music therapists' abilities to cope with workplace stressors and increase their well-being.

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