

BOOK REVIEW | PEER REVIEWED

# Laura E. Beer and Jacqueline C. Birnbaum (Eds.): Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice

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## Abstract

This is a book review of *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* edited by Laura E. Beer and Jacqueline C. Birnbaum and published by Routledge in 2022.

The music therapy profession is fortunate to have a timely and comprehensive study of the principles of trauma-informed care, one that tackles challenging issues related to race, culture, systemic oppression, power dynamics, and gender-identity. To practice ethically, it is critical that we understand how and why trauma manifests in our clients' lives. Because of the prevalence of trauma in the lives of people worldwide, professional music therapists have a moral responsibility to learn about trauma-informed care. Resources that afford health practitioners an opportunity to enhance the clinical skills needed to treat survivors of trauma are essential. *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* is a vital book that can support music therapists in developing knowledge that can aid in providing effective care to the clients they serve.

**Keywords:** trauma-informed music therapy; resilience; trauma

## Introduction

*Trauma-informed music therapy: Theory and practice*. Edited by Laura E. Beer and Jacqueline C. Birnbaum. 184 pages. Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 9781032061269

In *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice*, the editors have excelled in creating a resource that meets their objective of integrating “theoretical perspectives on trauma-informed practice (TIP) with real life applications in music therapy practice” (Beer & Birnbaum, 2022, p. 158). This book is an invaluable resource for the entire spectrum of

music therapists from students working with survivors of trauma to experienced practitioners.

Music therapists interested in trauma-informed care will gain a deeper understanding of contemporary music therapy and music psychotherapy theories, effective treatment methodologies, frameworks, and applications used in various populations and within diverse clinical settings.

Although many of the chapters detail approaches and concepts that may be more familiar to practitioners with a background in trauma-informed work, student and entry level music therapists will also gain a wealth of knowledge of trauma-informed music therapy. The contemporary and comprehensive nature of this resource can help to further develop skills, sharpen theoretical frameworks, and inform clinical treatment. The diversity of topics, clinical settings, backgrounds of authors, and therapeutic approaches provide the reader with a broad range from which to contextualize the impact of TIP and the many ways it can be employed in music psychotherapy treatment. An invaluable component of this publication is that each chapter includes reflections/reflective questions and clinical practice recommendations/considerations specific to the types of trauma, the various settings, and the individuals/groups in which the therapist(s) practice.

As a music therapist with well over a decade of experience in various settings, I have seen changes in our profession in treatment applications and socio-cultural and political considerations. It feels critical that our profession has resources that respond to our changing world. *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* has accomplished this task by providing a text that addresses many of the socio-cultural and political themes that affect and shape people's lives, particularly those who have experienced trauma. I have gained valuable insights and perspectives that will enhance my clinical work going forward. The socio-cultural-political considerations in many of the chapters presented highlight the necessity that music therapists be reflexive and have a deep awareness of their positionality in relation to those they serve.

In our music therapy profession, the trauma-informed resources available often fail to provide a robust context for understanding culture as it relates to power, nor do they examine the significance of practicing with cultural humility. It is of utmost importance to have lenses that center socio-cultural perspectives and the complexities of power dynamics. These lenses not only support music therapists in gaining a deeper understanding of the ways in which trauma manifests in the lives of their clients, but also support the location of self and reflexivity in this work.

What *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy* does not specifically address is the neurobiological perspectives of trauma, nor does it address the history and foundations of TIP. But because these perspectives are more widely available in other resources related to TIP, I did not feel this perspective was missed. Readers who are seeking neurobiological perspectives and a foundational knowledge of trauma-informed practice should consider other resources. For the music therapist interested in taking a deeper look into best practices surrounding the socio-cultural and political elements that may be at play when working with survivors of trauma, I highly recommend this book.

I grew up experiencing trauma vicariously. My mother opened our home to survivor families of domestic abuse when I was a child and I saw the physical effects of abuse on the bodies of many women and children - bruises, gun shot and knife wounds, and burn marks. I felt the unseen emotional pain in their histories of abuse but often wonder how much of it I would have felt were it not for the physical manifestations. It is often the unseen pain that clients bring to the clinical setting. As music therapists, we need to have an awareness of those less palpable traumas. It is important to remember that many of our clients' traumas have roots in systemic racism and injustices and cause deep seated wounds that may be stored within. *Trauma-informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* brings to light some of the ways we as clinicians can become more attuned to the traumas that

inhabit both the minds and bodies of our clients and help us develop the tools necessary to better support them.

## Part I - Theories and Perspectives

The first section of this book focuses on the theories and perspectives of trauma-informed work. It provides an overview of the resilience framework for TIP in clinical music therapy practice. The authors emphasize how trauma can be felt on a somatic, physiological, and neurobiological level and impact the psychological functioning of an individual, an essential aspect to keep in mind as a therapist in the healing professions. They provide a concrete framework to help clinicians in supporting the ever-changing needs of clients who have experienced trauma. Throughout chapter 1, “The Resilience Framework for Trauma-Informed Music Therapy,” Sokira, Allen, and Wagner offer a set of reflection questions that serve to encourage clinicians to stay in tune with the needs of those they serve and maintain cognizance of their own attitudes, beliefs, values, and socio-cultural perspectives in relation to their clients. In chapter 2, “Global Trends in Music Therapy for Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery,” we learn about a disaster response model that emphasizes the importance of a culturally informed approach. Else and González highlight the difference between various organizational “drive-by” approaches versus long-term aid in the aftermath of a disaster. They discuss the impact of providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) even after the acuteness of a disaster and offer a case vignette (pp. 22–25) that poignantly depicts the powerful effect of their approach. What stands out are some of the “Lessons Learned and Recommendations” (p. 25) and the authors’ willingness to truly promote empowerment by respecting the social and cultural aspects of the clients they served. The practices described by Else and González remind me of Pasiali’s (2012) description of the music therapist as engaging “in a process of enhancing each person’s capacity for gaining control in their lives and adapting to sociocultural demands and expectations” (p. 44). These kinds of practice guidelines are important reminders to ensure that music therapists foster humility and reflexivity, to allow clients to make choices and establish goals, and to commit to learning about the values and culture of those we serve.

In chapters 3 & 4, the authors highlight the role that culture plays in clinical practice and stress the importance of practicing with cultural humility as a framework. Both chapters address how a client’s repeated experiences with being unsafe as a byproduct of living under an oppressive system cause trauma. In chapter 3, “Cultural Humility in Music Therapy Practice,” Edwards offers valuable suggestions and targeted self-reflection questions that support a culturally sensitive therapeutic approach (p. 31). Chapter 4, “Questioning the Promise of Safety in Trauma-Informed Music Therapy Practice,” questions the notion of safety in the systems that are designed to keep people safe and healthy. Scrine and Koike assert that these systems, nationally and internationally, should be redesigned in a way that serves the community rather than retraumatizes the people in them. Another interesting assertion made in this chapter is the idea of benevolence. Music therapists are regarded as inherently good and, as a result, this belief may “absolve us of the need to be deeply reflexive about our therapeutic practice” (p. 40). Music therapists are urged to examine the interpersonal and systemic factors that influence the notion of safety and how we practice.

Scrine and Koike encourage music therapists to develop a framework of practicing with an awareness and understanding of the harm that is inherently embedded in systems worldwide. This stance reflects that of Baines (2013):

To fully embrace the term, health care practitioner, it is our responsibility to use an Anti-Oppressive Practice analysis to critique the health care service delivery system and to support

our clients to navigate that system to their ultimate increased health. Simultaneously, it is our job to work to change that system and other societal oppressive structures that negatively affect our universal developmental potential. (p. 4)

Both chapters place an emphasis on social and racial justice and invite the reader to be an ally for social change.

## Part II - Children and Adolescents

The next four chapters of the book (chapters 5–8) focus on trauma work with children and adolescents. In chapter 5, “I am Safe and I Am Strong: Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences and Building Resilience through Trauma-Informed Music Therapy,” Swedberg Yinger describes the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study and presents a descriptive case example (pp. 51–52) that depicts the essential components in a trauma-informed approach. Particularly compelling is the author’s proposal of starting with a sixth pillar of trauma-informed care in the planning stages of treatment to equalize the power dynamic when working with adolescents. Swedberg Yinger outlines a powerful trauma-informed and resilience building framework for working with children with a focus on multiculturalism and social justice (p. 53).

Chapter 6, “Changing the Narrative: Exploring How Music Therapy Can Assist Adolescents Dealing with Race-Based Traumatic Stress,” describes a music therapy practice framework to support race-related trauma in adolescents. Holly provides an important context for understanding how many children from Black families may be socialized in the United States to help protect them from the perils of systemic and structural racism. This author shares a valuable vignette that details how therapeutic songwriting elicits challenging feelings related to identity and race-based traumatic stress and helps an adolescent student build resilience and gain power.

In chapter 7, “Music Therapy with Children in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster,” the reader is presented with harrowing statistics related to the effects of natural disasters on children. Pérez-Martínez guides us through detailed music therapy practice recommendations and interventions targeted to support the psycho-emotional effects of children who have experienced a natural disaster. Various dimensions of the treatment process and significant clinical treatment impacts are also discussed (pp. 68–71). Pérez-Martínez stresses the importance of utilizing instruments native to the culture and country of the people being served. The last paragraph stresses the importance of self-care for music therapists who are survivors of a natural disaster themselves.

Chapter 8, “Trauma-Informed Practice: Clinical Songwriting in Pediatric Cancer and Sickle Cell Disease,” details the benefits of trauma-informed therapeutic songwriting for children facing a life-threatening illness. Sandheinrich and Kennington meticulously outline a trauma-informed and person-centered methodology and discuss the value of this approach. Much of the beauty in this chapter lies in the case studies where the reader gets to witness the strength and sense of autonomy of the children, which is central to their therapeutic process.

## Part III – Adults

The last eight chapters of *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* center on work with adults. Chapter 9, “Music Therapy for Survivors of Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence,” discusses the origin and history of The Angel Band Project, a non-profit organization that empowers survivors of sexual violence and intimate partner violence (SV/IPV) using the power of music. Ebeling and Michaelis describe a group improvisatory workshop and songwriting project and share an individual case study with trauma-

informed practice recommendations when working with survivors of SV/IPV. Through their descriptions, we learn about the significant role that safety, empowerment, and connection play in the healing process.

Chapter 10, “Group Work with Adults in Short-Term Inpatient Psychiatric Treatment and Recovery,” begins with the statistic that 70% of U.S. adults have a history of trauma. This statistic emphasizes the need for those in helping professions to have a trauma-informed framework. One of the overarching themes in this book is the importance of safety and the ways in which it is established in the therapeutic process. Cadesky discusses why safety is essential in a short-term acute psychiatric setting and provides compelling clinical examples of her work that are laden with a sense of hope. Cadesky locates herself personally and within the medical system and takes ownership of some of the ways in which her identities have the potential to intersect with the sense of safety of her clients. This section may pique interest and encourage further exploration for music therapists who are committed to understanding how the intersections of their own identity can play a role in the therapeutic process. Self-reflection and self-care are encouraged, and practical clinical tools are offered in the section on practice recommendations (pp. 101–102).

Chapter 11, “Trauma-Informed Music Psychotherapy in Radiation Oncology: Implementation of the Trauma, Resilience, Safety Model,” discusses the use of the Trauma, Resilience, Safety (TRS) model of care and trauma-informed music psychotherapy in radiation oncology. Rossetti discusses the origins of the TRS model and the validity of medically induced trauma. As a music therapist with little professional experience in the medical environment, I find it fascinating to learn about environmental music therapy and the need for a model of care that specifically addresses the reduction of anxiety and distress prior to the radiation therapy. This chapter reminds us that feelings of helplessness are at the core of traumatization and provides a context for understanding how the mind and body respond to fear in connection with the Polyvagal Theory.

Chapter 12, “Finding One’s Voice: Working through Developmental Trauma with Vocal Psychotherapy,” begins with an invitation to imagine the voice as a fingerprint. The analogy reminds me of the many intricacies of the voice, my primary instrument, and of the important work of Diane Austin. This chapter reminds us of the inherent power of the voice. Fu discusses the tenets and methods of vocal psychotherapy and depicts how this advanced method is used to support clients who have buried the trauma(s) that occurred in childhood or in critical developmental stages. A descriptive case study is presented in which Fu illustrates the gentle way in which the vocal holding and free associative singing techniques support her client in repairing parts of her lost and wounded self. Clinicians with a strong foundation in trauma-informed care and a comfort level in using their voice as a therapeutic vehicle will benefit greatly from the work presented in this chapter.

Chapter 13, “Music Therapy in the Treatment of Complex Trauma in Adult Mental Health,” provides a holistic approach for supporting adults with trauma in a long-term psychiatric setting through two different models of group work. Stephens Langdon’s models centralize the resilience, aspirations, hope, and creative expressions of her clients. She describes how words can often feel threatening for trauma survivors and how music can serve as a safe container and a comfort. Stephens Langdon outlines ways in which to create safety, which she asserts is the most important aspect in trauma-informed music therapy groups and explains why establishing safety is crucial in these groups. As an intern, I had the privilege of co-leading one of Stephens Langdon’s music-verbal therapy trauma groups and experienced firsthand why creating safety is a priority when working in trauma settings. The knowledge and expertise shared in this chapter are of utmost importance for any therapist working with trauma survivors, and particularly useful for those facilitating music therapy groups with survivors of trauma.

In the introduction of this book, Beer and Birnbaum state “music unlocks a sense of play: focusing on the here-and-now, an essential component of making music, brings the client

into a state of spontaneity and moves them out of negative and self-destructive cycles of thought and emotion” (pp. 1–2). This quote is a main premise of chapter 14, “I Hear You: The Potency of Play in Music Psychotherapy for Treating Trauma in Musicians.” In this chapter, Loewy, a professional musician herself, provides her perspectives of working with and treating the trauma that musicians experience due to physical injury, excessive fatigue, cognitive dysfunctions, and the manifestations of severe performance anxiety. Loewy describes how providing music psychotherapy which supports musicians in accessing their spontaneous creativity and playfulness can prevent and alleviate trauma. She discusses an assessment tool created specifically for professional musicians, session format recommendations, and a case example that illustrates how severe anxiety manifests itself physically in the life of a high-level musician. This chapter should be of particular interest to music therapists working with professional musicians.

Chapter 15, “Bent Pitch: Trauma, the LGBTQAI+ Community, and Music Psychotherapy,” illustrates how experiences of trauma are pervasive and recurrent for members of the LGBTQAI+ community. Harris provides a personal account of his own exploration around gender and reflects on the trauma he carried in his own body related to gender identity. Through a powerful music psychotherapeutic clinical example (pp. 146–148), Harris illustrates how working from an intersubjective lens transformed the relational context and provided an opportunity for his client to be seen as equal and feel safe in expressing the more vulnerable parts of himself. It feels of utmost importance that all music therapists be open to exploring their own attitudes and beliefs around gender issues and have an awareness of their own feelings and reactions to members of the LGBTQAI+ community, particularly if working within this community.

In the last chapter (16), “Mechanisms of Change in Music Therapy When Treating Adults Coping with Trauma,” Bensimon describes a treatment approach that involves a sequence of processes in music therapy that he posits can stabilize the sympathetic nervous system; reignite playfulness; hold, reflect, and heal intense emotions; and provide a sense of control and connectedness. The introduction provides a summary of how trauma is processed in the brain within the context of the Polyvagal Theory. Bensimon skillfully describes how the music therapy interventions delineated have the potential to reshape how the mind and body react and respond to stored trauma.

## Conclusion

The music therapy profession is fortunate to have a timely and comprehensive study of the principles of trauma-informed care, one that tackles challenging issues related to race, culture, systemic oppression, power dynamics, and gender-identity. To practice ethically, it is critical that we understand how and why trauma manifests in our clients’ lives. Because of the prevalence of trauma in the lives of people worldwide, professional music therapists have a moral responsibility to learn about trauma-informed care. Resources that afford health practitioners an opportunity to enhance the clinical skills needed to treat survivors of trauma are essential. *Trauma-Informed Music Therapy: Theory and Practice* is a vital book that can support music therapists in developing knowledge that can aid in providing effective care to the clients they serve.

## About the Author

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