

# Expressive Therapies

Creating a safe and empowering space for equality with – race, gender, sexuality, age, economic status, cognitive, physical, spiritual needs and those living with mental illness – through trauma-informed care: music therapy, art therapy, dance/movement therapy, and psychotherapy, to improve health and well-being.

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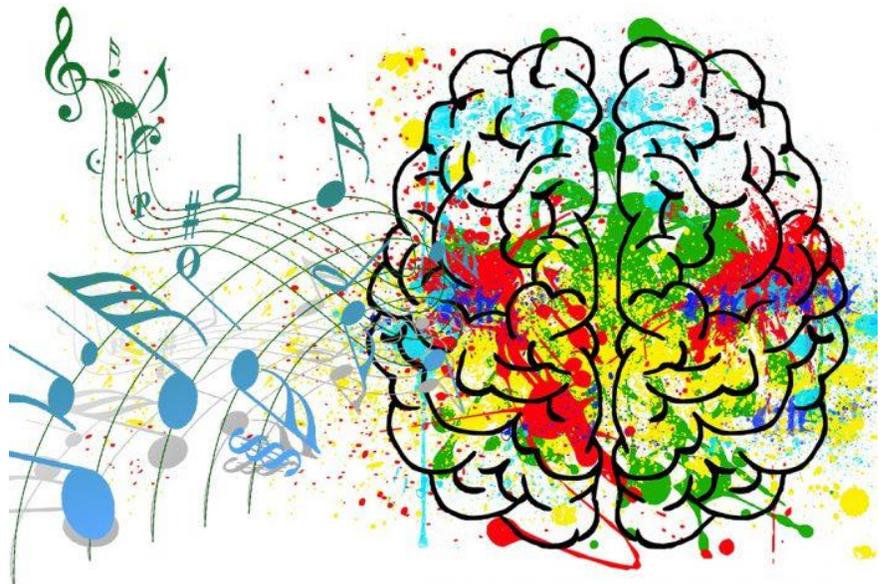
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## Music, Art, and Dance/Movement Therapy and Addictions

Music therapy, art therapy, and dance movement therapy all enable an individual to utilize a creative medium as a means for emotional expression, processing, and coping. Additionally, engagement in creative therapies is excellent for development of executive functioning abilities (i.e., problem solving, decision making, organizing, planning, impulse control), improving self-esteem and self-awareness, and enhancing motivation. All these skill areas are crucial for individuals who are struggling with an addiction, whether it be substance use or behavioral. Participation in music therapy, art therapy, and/or dance/movement therapy can be a highly effective intervention strategy for these individuals because of their ability to target the specific need areas that are often present for individuals struggling with addiction. This newsletter will explore what addiction and the recovery process can look like for different people, and explore how music therapy, art

therapy, and dance/movement therapy provide effective and creative intervention at different stages of the recovery process.



## Areas of Addiction

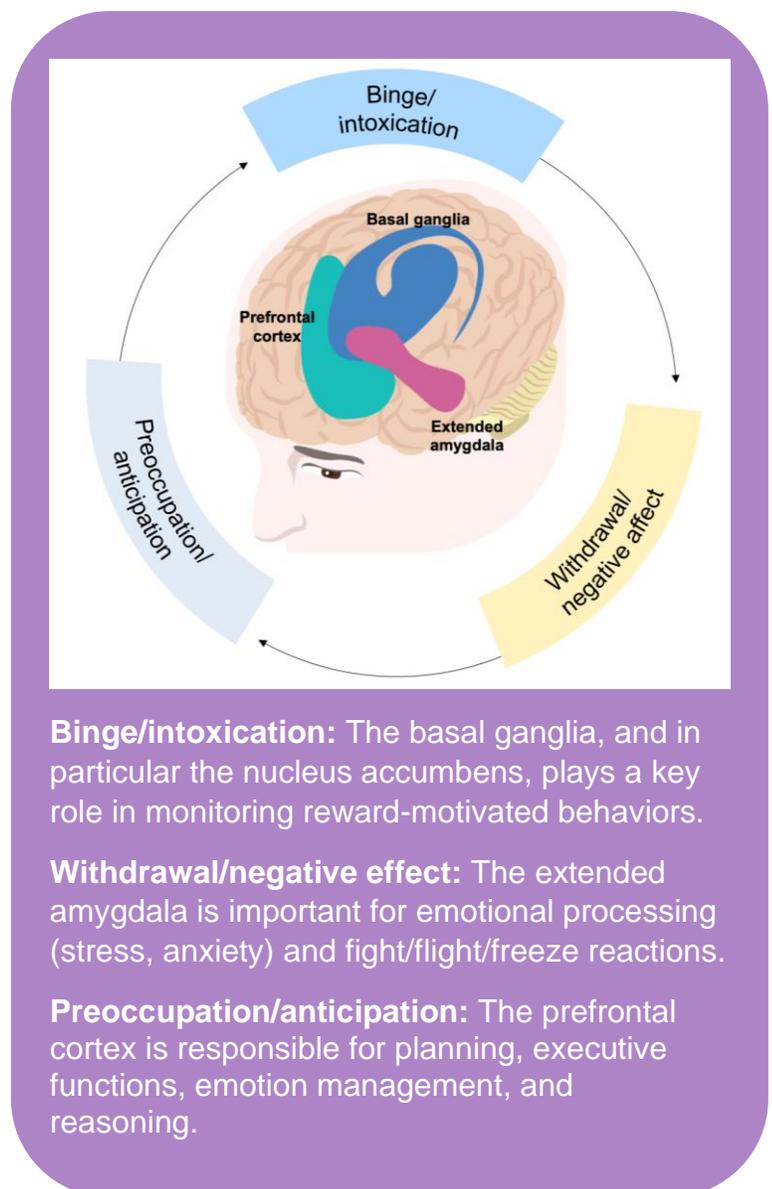
“Addiction” is an umbrella term that covers several different areas with which people may be struggling. What first comes to mind as an addiction might be substance use, referring to unhealthy alcohol and/or drug use. Other forms of addiction are behavioral, referring to struggles with excessive gambling, shopping, video games, or other activities. What relates all of these under the umbrella of addictions is the impairment they cause to a person’s well-being and ability to engage successfully in other areas of their life.

## What influences addictions?

Experiences of addiction will look different and be unique to every individual who struggles with one, regardless of what area the addiction falls under. However, there may be similarities between the past experiences of different people that can have a significant impact on the present difficulties, whether the addiction be substance use or behavioral. In particular, past trauma is a major risk factor for the development of an addiction. Trauma is defined as an experience of crisis, and it can be difficult to face and cope with crises. The brain is significantly affected by trauma, especially when it comes to healthy emotional expression, coping, and executive functioning skills. All of these can put individuals at risk for maladaptive, unhealthy emotional expression and coping. Experiences will be different for every individual: not everyone struggling with trauma will also struggle with addiction, and not everyone who is struggling with addiction has a trauma history. However, it is important to note the relationship between trauma and addictions, especially when it comes to trauma-informed approaches and understanding what the different influences might be for different people’s experiences with addiction.

## The Cycle of Addiction

Addictions, whether they be substance use or behavioral, can be viewed as a cycle: binge/intoxication, withdrawal/negative effect, and preoccupation/anticipation. During a time of binge/intoxication, a person is actively engaging in unhealthy substance use or behavioral choices, without regard for any resulting impacts or consequences. The resulting impacts or consequences are recognized or become evident after a time of binge/intoxication, during a period of withdrawal/negative effect. Following this time is often a period of preoccupation/anticipation, during which a person may be thinking about their next unhealthy use or behavior. At each part of this cycle, there is a need area that is making it difficult for the person to avoid their addiction and make



healthy choice instead. It may be a need for emotional expression and processing, healthy coping strategies, improved executive functioning skills, or improved sense of control. Creative arts therapies like music therapy, art therapy, and dance movement therapy, offer healthy methods for addressing the needs that arise for individuals struggling with an addiction, and also help provide motivation for continued improvement once a person has decided to take steps towards recovery.



## The Stages of Change

Recovery from addiction is not a step-by-step process that happens in a linear fashion. In reality, every individual's recovery process will be different, and they may shift between various stages that are indicative of the change process, regardless of the order in which someone moves through them. The stages are identified below, along with different skills that become important at each.

### Precontemplation Stage

The person who is in the precontemplation stage does not think or see that there is a problem at all—this does not mean that they are in denial about the problem, but rather that they don't have enough information. Other

people in the person's life may believe that the individual's substance use or behavior is putting them at risk. Goal areas that are relevant to this stage include motivation, mood regulation, coping skills, and self-awareness.

### Contemplation Stage

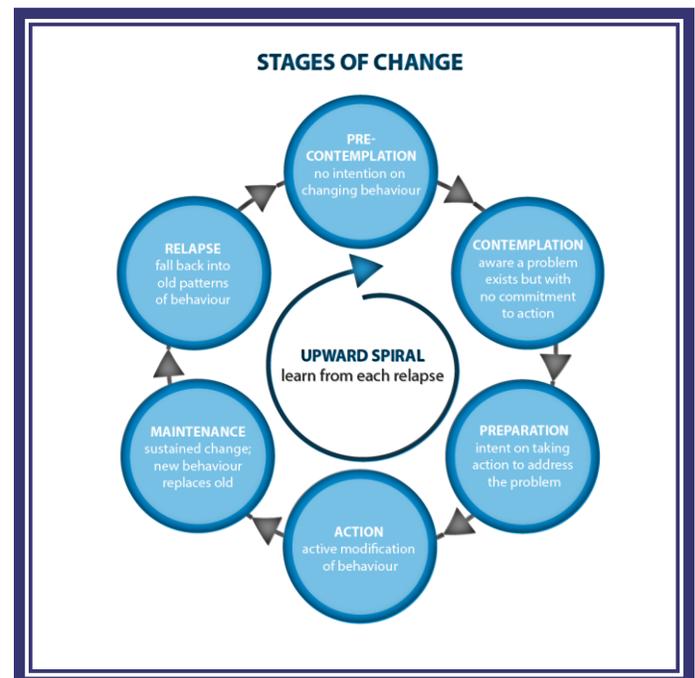
At the contemplation stage, the person is acknowledging that there is a problem, but isn't yet ready to actively attempt to make a change. This is the "Yes, but..." stage, where someone is considering the problem but not addressing the problem, they can argue for and against the change. Goal areas that are important at this stage include motivation, self-awareness, and executive functioning.

### Preparation Stage

A person in the preparation stage has decided to make a change and is starting to gather information and create a plan. Goal areas that are relevant at this stage include motivation, agency and locus of control, coping skills, mood regulation, grief, self-awareness, and executive functioning skills.

### Action Stage

At the action stage, the person has made a plan for change and is actively starting to do it. This stage is when a person begins to make a change. Important goal areas at this stage include mood regulation, coping skills, self-awareness, and executive functioning skills.



## Maintenance Stage

A person in the maintenance stage is sustaining the changes they began in the action stage over an extended period of time, usually 6 months or longer. This is the stage where new habits are developed, and the person has made efforts to stick to the plans they made for themselves. Treatment goal areas at this stage include coping skills, mood regulation, self-awareness, and executive functioning skills.

## Relapse Stage

The relapse stage is a normal part of any change process, including when it comes to addictions. This is when a person slips and reverts back to an earlier stage. After an individual has relapsed, important goal areas include all the treatment goal areas explored below.

## Treatment Goal Areas

Supporting growth and progress is important for individuals struggling with an addiction at all stages of their change and recovery process. Many skills and goal areas are important at all stages, especially when it comes to supporting sustained progress and change. Music, art, and dance-movement therapies are effective in supporting development of skills and forward progress in a variety of areas, which are identified and explored below. Creative therapies like music, art, and dance-movement are also highly motivating for many people, and therefore can provide a healthy and valuable avenue for growth and change.

## Motivation

Minimal or absent motivation is a significant and common problem in the treatment of addictions, be they substance use or behavioral. Music and art on their own can be highly motivating and empowering for many people. Engagement in music, art, and dance/movement therapy interventions further enhances problem recognition, desire for help, and treatment readiness, in addition to overall motivation. Music and art provide an external means for gaining insight and awareness and recognizing difficulties and struggles—for example, through a lyric discussion, songwriting, or active art making process, individuals can see different challenges in an external way, which then becomes a model or example for motivating change. Dance/movement may initially feel uncomfortable or vulnerable for people—however, by actively engaging in and paying attention to movements, or “trying on” the movements of others, individuals can feel seen, validated, and motivated to pursue change. Through engagement in creative therapy interventions, individuals can improve insight and awareness of their own experiences, and begin to explore how they might pursue change.



## Agency/Locus of Control

Individuals who are struggling with an addiction often feel as though they don't have agency or control over their experience—it is as if the addiction has agency over them. In creative therapy interventions, individuals are empowered to regain a sense of agency and control over their experiences, whether through active music making or music listening/song discussion, stress painting or art making, and exploring movements that reflect feeling “stuck” compared to movements that reflect feelings of “change.” Individuals can create music, art, or movements that reflect their experiences, explore the experiences described by others in their music/art/movement, and engage in opportunities for creative problem-solving and enhancing use of healthy coping strategies.

## Coping Skills

For many individuals struggling with an addiction, the addiction started out as and continues to serve as an unhealthy or maladaptive coping strategy. (\*Please see our previous newsletter on Immune Support, Emotional Health, and Burnout for more information about adaptive/maladaptive coping skills!). Music, art, and dance/movement can be healthy, adaptive coping strategies on their own, and engagement in music/art/dance-movement therapy sessions further promotes the development and use of creative outlets as alternative, healthy coping strategies. Music has a significant impact on mood, movement helps people to reconnect with and gain insight into their internal experiences, and art can effectively address stress, anxiety, and depression. Creative therapies help individuals to gain insight into their experiences and emotions, and then to express and cope with struggles in a meaningful and adaptive way.

## Mood Regulation

Music, art, and dance-movement therapies have highly beneficial impacts on mood and emotions, including: positive mood change, decreased negative emotions, and beneficial effects on anxiety, depression, and anger. Music is supported by research to have a significant impact on the brain's emotional responses, and is highly beneficial for mood vectoring, relaxation, and coping. Art therapy has been shown to decrease stress and lessen shame for individuals struggling with addiction, the latter of which is a prevalent struggle for many. Dance/movement helps individuals to connect with their bodies and emotions in a way that they may have been avoiding (e.g., addiction can “numb” emotions), and create a sense of safety, acceptance, and freedom from shame. Creative therapies are highly beneficial in supporting emotional expression, improving mood, and regulating stress, all of which are significant need areas for many people struggling with addiction.



Using words or talking about moods and emotions can be incredibly difficult for many people, especially those with a history of trauma—music, art, and dance/movement provide a healthy emotional outlet without the necessity for using words.

## Grief

For some individuals struggling with addiction, substance use or unhealthy/risky behaviors may be fueled by the desire to cope with grief. Grief and loss are very complex emotions for many people, and processing these feelings can be even more complex. If an individual has begun to use substances or risky behaviors as a means for “numbing” their feelings, it can ultimately lead to even greater loss. For those individuals who have “numbed” their emotions, disconnected from their bodies and emotional experiences, dance/movement therapy serves as a means for reengaging with the body and tuning in to oneself in a way that can be very vulnerable but also insightful and validating. When someone is making changes and no longer utilizing the addiction process to cope, this is a loss in their life. The addiction has become someone's “love” and priority in their life, and there is much grief present when they choose to no longer have this, along with grieving the loss of the routines, people, and other daily

events that may have been part of their addiction. We as providers are aware that grief is going to be present in all individuals working towards change. Acknowledging and allowing the grief process to begin is a necessity for individuals struggling with addictions. Music, art, and dance/movement therapy provide excellent creative mediums for processing grief and loss, because they not only support expression and externalization of those difficult emotions and feelings, but also because these creative mediums activate the part of our brain that stores and processes emotions.

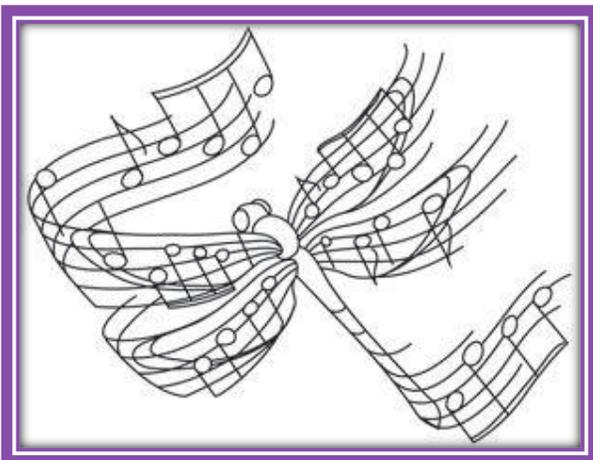
## Self-Awareness

For individuals struggling with addiction, self-awareness involves insight into what might be driving the addiction, people and/or places that may be associated with the addiction, the potential outcomes and consequences of one's current stage and continued substance use or risky behavior, one's emotions and how they are being expressed, and steps and goals for the future. For many, developing self-awareness is a distinctly difficult and emotionally raw experience, yet it is an important aspect of one's recovery journey. Music therapy and art therapy provide a creative, external means for improving self-awareness: through engagement in art making or music interventions, individuals can explore emotions externally and thus begin to gain insight into how these relate to their own emotions and struggles. Dance/movement therapy engages individuals in "trying on each other's movements," so they are able to see each other, feel seen and validated, and gain insight into their own space by viewing their physical expression on someone else. Music, art, and dance/movement can all provide critical information about what is happening internally by presenting it in an external, creative way. In this way, individuals struggling with addiction can learn about their own struggles, concerns, and triggers, to support growth and recovery.



## Executive Functioning

Difficulties with substance use or behavioral addictions often goes hand-in-hand with impaired executive functioning skills which include impulse control, decision-making, problem-solving, planning, adaptability, organization, reasoning, and analysis/evaluation. Addictions have significant impact on healthy functioning in the areas of the brain that manage executive functioning skills. When these areas of the brain are altered in any way from their pre-addiction functioning, it becomes increasingly more difficult for the brain to heal and for



individuals to achieve recovery. Creative therapies like music, art, and dance/movement therapy are unique in that they can very specifically target and develop executive functioning skills in order to support recovery. Neurologic Music Therapy (NMT) techniques in particular, as well as general music therapy techniques, are designed and structured in such a way as to target the skills associated with specific parts of the brain and support development and rehabilitation of those skills. For individuals struggling with addiction, this can be an invaluable strategy for addressing this particular area of recovery, in addition to more emotional and coping skills needs.

## Conclusion

In summary, substance use and behavioral addictions present significant challenges, and pursuing change can be very difficult, especially if the individual also has a history of trauma. Music, art, and dance/movement therapy are uniquely equipped to provide meaningful, creative, and effective treatment for different goals and areas of need. To inquire further about any of these treatment modalities as they relate to treatment of substance use and behavioral addictions, please contact Expressive Therapies.

## Citations

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## THANK YOU FOR READING OUR NEWSLETTER!

We appreciate connecting with the community by sharing the specifics of music therapy, art therapy, and dance/movement therapy. If you have further inquiries, we highly recommend you visit our website at [www.expressivetherapies.net](http://www.expressivetherapies.net), our Facebook page (Expressive Therapies), the American Music Therapy Association at [www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org), the American Art Therapy Association at <https://arttherapy.org/>, the American Dance Therapy Association at <https://www.adta.org/>, or email us at [info@expressivetherapies.net](mailto:info@expressivetherapies.net).

Take care and be well!

