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Bilateral Music for Anxiety, Stress and Trauma

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Summary: Many people find music helpful. Bilateral music is a type of music that you listen to using headphones, where you can hear the music alternating between the left and right ears. This alternate stimulation of each side of the brain can be helpful when people have anxiety, stress or trauma. Bilateral stimulation seems to help the brain with reprocessing stressful and traumatic memories. Hence, bilateral music is used in treatments for anxiety and trauma, such as eye movement desensitization and processing (EMDR) and brainspotting.

Introduction

Do you have problems with anxiety, depression or sleep problems? Interested in trying a musical intervention?

If so, then consider bilateral music.

Music and the Brain

Music exists in all human cultures. Modern research confirms that music has powerful effects on the nervous system.

Listening to music is a popular pastime for many people. Many people also find music helpful as a coping strategy. In music therapy, a therapist uses music to help people with various issues.

Music stimulates many areas in the brain, such as the hippocampus, amygdala, nucleus accumbens and the mesolimbic dopamine system. Studies show that in people with brain injuries, it can help in their brain rehabilitation.

What is Bilateral Music?

When listening to regular music with headphones, the sound can be heard in both ears.

When listening to bilateral music with headphones however, listeners hear the music alternating between the left and right ear. It is created by taking standard music, and using music editing software so that music alternates between the left and right stereo channels. Listening to bilateral music leads the brain to “dual attention stimulation (DAS)” which is felt to help the brain process difficult memories that otherwise trigger anxiety and trauma.

In therapies such as EMDR or brainspotting, a therapist might have the person listen to bilateral music while having

the patient think about stressful or traumatic memories. Bilateral music helps the brain process the stress or traumatic memories so that the person can eventually think about the stressful memories without triggering severe anxiety or stress.

Most bilateral music is based on relaxation-type music. Hence it tends to be calming, soothing and relaxing.

How Can I Use Bilateral Music?

You can use bilateral music in different ways:

• As needed	Some people listen to bilateral music as needed when they get stressed or upset, just like some people might use deep breathing, going for a walk, etc.
• As part of your daily routine	Some people also make bilateral music a part of their daily routines for example: • In the morning to start your day. • Before bedtime to help calm the brain.

How to Use Bilateral Music with Your Child

You can use bilateral music with your child as part of their daily routines:

• In the morning	Mornings can be stressful with the stress of the child having to go to school, along with the stress of separation from parents. Consider having your child listen to bilateral music (with headphones for 10-15 minutes) in the morning or during the commute to school (e.g. whether in the car, bus or even walking).
• After school	After a day at school, many children like to “chill out” by listening to music after school anyways. If you have a Y splitter, then you can listen alongside your child at the same time. If your child can talk about their day, then fantastic. It might be actually to help your child with reprocessing stressful memories from the day, similar to how trauma therapists used bilateral music. On the other hand, if your child cannot talk about their day, it is best to simply accept that.
• Evening	Getting ready for bed and going to sleep can be difficult for many children and youth, especially with stress or anxiety. Consider listening to soothing bilateral music as part of the bedtime routine.

Terms

When you look for bilateral music, you may encounter other terms:

- “EMDR music,” which is the same as bilateral music.
- “Biolateral” music, which is a type of bilateral music developed by Dr. David Grand, an EMDR practitioner who developed a type of therapy known as brainspotting (BSP). Biolateral music is mixed in a way where the volume increases in the left ear and then decreases in volume before slowing increasing in volume in the right ear and then decreasing. In this way, the music gently rocks back and forth between the ears.

Where Can I Find Bilateral Music?

There are many places you can find bilateral music online. In general, search for “bilateral music” or “EMDR music” or “biolateral music”.

Examples

- Spotify

https://open.spotify.com/search/bilateral%20music

- iTunes music store
  https://music.apple.com/us/search?term=bilateral%20music

- Google Play for various bilateral music apps.
  https://play.google.com/store/search?q=bilateral%20music&c=apps

- Youtube.com
  https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=bilateral+music

- Bilateral CDs can be purchased from online stores. Examples of bilateral CD include
  - Reflection by Bodhi Tree
  - Release by Bodhi Tree
  - Brainspotting: Biolateral Sound Healing (2-CD set), by Dr. Grand.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q. What Equipment Do I Need?

A. You will need

- Headphones
- CD player if playing CDs
- Computer or smartphone to listen to mp3s from online sources.

Q. I tried using the headphones with bilateral music. My child didn't like it! What now?
A. Some children may not like the bilateral music at first.

It might help to get them accustomed to things by going step by step:

- Listening to the bilateral music through speakers, not headphones, until they are used to the music
- Once they are used to the music, then try getting them used to wearing headphones, perhaps during a time when they are distracted by another activity, e.g. drawing, using modelling clay, watching TV etc.
- Gradually work up to longer time on the headphones.

When to See a Professional

Bilateral music is a coping strategy that many people find helpful.

On the other hand, it is not a cure-all or panacea. When therapists recommend bilateral music, it is used as part of a comprehensive treatment plan.

Are you noticing that despite bilateral music, there are still problems with anxiety or stress?

If so, see your primary care provider, or mental health professional.

References

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About this Document

Written by the eMentalHealth.ca Team.

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