A Music Therapy Approach to Life

TUNE IN

Use Music Intentionally
To Curb Stress, Boost Morale, and Restore Health

Jennifer Buchanan
Tune In to Music: Use Music Intentionally to Curb Stress, Boost Morale, and Restore Health. A Music Therapy Approach to Life

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Except for family names and personal friends, names in the stories have been changed. Some stories are a composite of stories that I have experienced in my music therapy career.

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Dedication

to Granny and Grandad
Foreword

Instinctively, we all know that music is powerful, that is has something magical about it. Put on the right song and you smile or cry, tap your feet or just sigh a contended “ah.”

Music connects to something deep within us, something that has to do with our ability as human beings to create anything we desire. I’m not just talking about creating art, music, or writing. Creating encompasses all of life—creating a cake or a clean space in your house, or even just creating an emotion, good or bad. Music gives us a direct conduit into that creative force and helps it blossom in a way that’s almost unexplainable.

I had heard of the term “music therapy,” a while ago, but never really paid attention—even dismissed it because of the word “therapy” to be honest (how could something so wonderful as music be reduced to therapy—like psychoanalysis or something.) Then I met Jennifer Buchanan. She’s a music therapist by training, but there was something about Jennifer that made me immediately sit up and pay attention. She talked about music in a way that I had not heard before. It was getting close to that “unexplainable” thing that I had always known existed with music but could never really put my finger on.

Jennifer definitely had a book inside her, itching to get out. I had never read a “music therapy” book, but I could tell that she was trying to get at something that hadn’t been fully expressed before in writing. I told her that the science of music wasn’t what made the topic interesting to me. As she started telling me her stories, I knew that in those stories lay the answer:
it was what music could do to a being, a person who was in need of cheering up, of de-stressing, of even finding a way to connect back to the world.

Two years have passed since Jennifer first approached me about her book. I had read some preliminary drafts, had given her some suggestions on how to enhance the message. After reading her book I thought a lot about music and how it was lacking more than a little in my life. I love music—I grew up playing the piano. I could pick up just about any instrument, except the guitar for some reason, and learn how to play it pretty quickly. But I stopped listening to music consistently more than a few years ago. I didn’t play the radio in the car because I liked the silence. As a writer, sometimes I am consumed with my thoughts. I talk about “hearing” a book in my head before I write it, so I guess you could say I’m constantly writing, no matter what else I’m doing.

But since reading the first drafts of *Tune In*, I have been slightly bothered by the idea that I didn’t listen to music that much anymore, and I certainly didn’t listen to anything that uplifted me. I have a grade-school aged daughter so we listen to a lot of pop music but not much else.

Then one Sunday morning, I came home from the grocery store. My beloved father had died about three weeks earlier; I was buried in work, and I wasn’t particularly happy—just doing my chores, making sure my family was taken care of.

As I walked in the door, I heard the wonderful sound of James Taylor singing “Sweet Baby James.” We have a little boom box in our kitchen, nothing fancy, and my husband had put on a James Taylor *Greatest Hits* CD he had found in a thrift store the day before. As I listened to the strains of that song, I almost cried. It was the most beautiful thing I had heard in a long time. For whatever reason, on that morning that was “my” music, and the message of Jennifer’s book
hit me in the gut. When I needed something soothing, there it was: James Taylor singing to my soul. I felt immediately more relaxed. I put down the sack of groceries I was carrying and made my husband dance with me in the middle of the kitchen. I felt more connected to life than I had in a while. It is a memory I will cherish.

*Tune In* is all about using music *intentionally*. You’ll hear a lot more about that in the following pages, but I’m sure you know instinctually what it means already. It’s finding the right music for whatever situation: for when you’re feeling blue and want to feel blue or when you need cheering up, for helping you through a tough spot in life or finding a way to make a difficult decision. It’s dancing your way out of your kitchen—or wherever—because you have a reason to celebrate or “just because.”

The greatest thing about music is that it is intensely personal. There is no “right” or “wrong” answers in finding the right music to help you in whatever situation you find yourself in. I hope, however, that by reading *Tune In*, you’ll have a better handle on understanding what music can do for you and how to use it more effectively and *purposefully* in your life.

I don’t know if anyone can ever explain fully why music is so powerful. I do know that when you use music intentionally, you are tapping into a power source within you that knows no bounds.

Happy reading—and happy listening!

Patricia Ross

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Table of Contents

Forward

First Note : Grumpy People Need Music Too

Part 1 : The Value of Music

Part 2 : Music to Change and Connect

Part 3 : Trigger Your Happy

Part 4 : Find Your Music

Part 5 : Live on a High Note : Finding Purpose Through Music

End Note

Gratitudes

Disclaimer

About the Author

References
First Note

Grumpy People Need Music Too

My granny was perfect. Really. Everything about her said, “I know what I’m doing.” Her house was immaculate. Her garden always looked like something out of a magazine. She seemed to have a secret way of knowing exactly where to plant each variety of plant or flower so that there was an explosion of colour throughout from the early spring through late summer. The only thing better than her house was the smell of baking that wafted continually from the kitchen. She was wonderfully generous with her love, and it showed in all that she did.

Grandad, however, was Granny’s complete opposite. While Granny made sure we were all well looked after, Grandad was in the basement where he spent endless hours in his immaculate workshop away from the visiting grandchildren. When I did see Grandad, he always seemed grumpy. It would be many years before I would learn that his stern look had to do with his resolve to be a successful provider, giving my dad and his brother what his parents were unable to give to him.

I don’t remember Granny and Grandad laughing or talking together much but I do remember them hosting many family gatherings including BBQ’s, Christmas parties, and Sunday dinners. I loved it when all my cousins would get together to play and while distant, lively, and quirky aunts and uncles would laugh and debate politics. At dinner time we would all head to the buffet line for roast beef, ham, and heaping bowls of white potatoes enthusiastically doused in
gravy. Through it all the stereo would play an endless array of classics until someone started to play the piano. On leaving Granny’s house you could count on three things: you were full, you had a great time, and you felt loved. I didn’t know it then but this “era of perfection” was about to change.

I was twelve and my parents were on the brink of signing their divorce papers when Mom received a phone call informing us that Grandad had been rushed to the hospital. At the age of sixty-two, Grandad suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. His status was touch and go for a week and although he recovered some, he would never return home. In those days, there was no place for him to go except the local extended-care hospital.

Over a short period of time Granny and Grandad’s beautiful home and garden went up for sale and Granny moved into a small apartment. She got her driver’s licence (something she never felt she needed before) in order to visit Grandad at 7:00 a.m. each day. At night she cooked, and in the morning she transferred his favourite dishes and smells of home to the hospital. She brought fresh flowers for the dresser and his favourite comforter for the bed—all in an attempt to find a normalcy amongst the feeding tubes and daily therapies. Through it all, I never saw Granny shed a tear.

Mom had never known her own parents, and so she knew the importance of family ties for her children. Although there was stress around the impending divorce, we continued to visit Granny and Grandad at our allotted time slot: every Friday evening. However, after a couple of years of regular Friday visits, I discovered I had a different agenda, one that was full of friends, Cheezies, and Dallas. The last place I wanted to go was some hospital full of old people.

“Mom, I really don’t want to go,” I brooded.
“It is your Granny and Grandad and it means so much to them that we visit,” said Mom.

“I don’t think Grandad cares. The place smells bad and I hate it when people try to touch me.”

“Well this is what our family does, so get cleaned up and we’ll grab a bite to eat on our way out.” And that was that.

My mom, sister, and I would embark on the three-quarter hour trip. Once there, we would walk through the sliding doors and even if I had been blindfolded I would have known where we were. The smell of the place was a mix of fruit puree, musty clothes, and urine. The care facility was also quite noisy with voices reverberating off the cinder block walls and some seniors crying or yelling as they walked aimlessly throughout the halls.

As we walked into Grandad’s room, I would mumble a greeting to Granny and Grandad and then immediately zero in on the only interesting thing to me—the little black and white television set on top of the corner table. Mom sat near Grandad’s bed and visited with Granny and Grandad. My sister and I on the other hand rarely interacted with the adults as we were too busy adjusting the rabbit ears of the television set desperate to tune in to whatever we could find. Granny looked over at us from the corner of her eye. She wanted us to tune in to something else—she wanted us to tune in to Grandad.

One Friday, Granny walked over to me, gave me a hug, and handed me a piece of music, “Jenny, I brought this sheet music from home. It is your Grandad’s favourite song. Would you please learn it and sing it to him next week?”

Her request took me off guard. It seemed like such an odd request. With some reluctance I said, “Sure.”
I arrived the following Friday with my guitar in hand. Granny pulled up a chair beside the bed where Grandad was resting and said, “I’ve asked Jenny to sing a song I think you'll like.”

Grandad looked puzzled when he turned towards me, and I wondered if he even knew who I was. I sat down beside him careful not to hit the side of his bed with the neck of the guitar.

Granny said, “you can start anytime dear.” I felt nervous and looked down on my lap at the words to the song. It took me a moment and then I began to sing:

There’ll be blue birds over

The White Cliffs of Dover

Tomorrow just you wait and see

There’ll be love and laughter

And peace ever after

Tomorrow when the world is free.

The first thing I noticed was a change in the sounds around me. The typical commotion and loud conversations in the hallways stopped. Although my back was to the door, I could tell that some people were beginning to look in. One patient came right into Grandad’s room, stood beside me, and Granny gave him the last chair available. It surprised me when this new guest started to sing the words that were still new to me. Even the woman who regularly yelled in the hallways began to sing. I had no idea so many people knew this song. Granny smiled and nodded for me to keep going:

The shepherd will tend his sheep

The valley will bloom again

And Jimmy will go to sleep
In his own little room again.

There’ll be blue birds over

The white cliffs of Dover

Tomorrow, just you wait and see. (1)

I finished the song and looked up from the words into Grandad’s eyes. He was crying. He reached out and held my hand and squeezed. It was the first time I felt any connection to my Grandad. I felt uncomfortable. I was only a teenager after all, but I also knew something bigger was happening, something far more important than me being worried about whether or not I got to watch T.V.

Granny rested her hand on my shoulder and announced proudly to the room, “Jenny will be here to sing every Friday night.” I couldn’t help but smile. Although I couldn’t describe what was going on, I knew music had something to do with it.

Fortunately for me, many more musical moments like this would be in my future— with all sorts of people, from many different backgrounds and at all stages of life. Little did I know that these hospital visits would eventually lead me toward a rewarding career—a career as a music therapist where, after many years of school, I would learn how to use music to calm, connect, even change all sorts of people—even broody teenagers and grumpy old men.

About TUNE IN to Music

The fundamental purpose of this book is to help you use music intentionally and with purpose to feel better regardless of your position, affluence, ability, age or music background. This book is meant to show you how to use music to uplift spirits, but it is not intended as a cure-
all. Rooted in over twenty years of experience as a music therapist, including my experiences working directly with clients and also the collective experiences of my team of accredited music therapists, the purpose of this book is to help everyone understand what music is capable of doing for anyone when we allow ourselves to tap into its power.

*TUNE IN to Music* is meant to be a source of inspiration and a guide for those who not only like music but are curious about using music to help them handle whatever issue in their life is causing them problems.

**Music can stop babies from crying and make great men start.** I have seen music open doors to communication for someone unable to speak, and silence someone who normally has words for everything.

Ultimately, music can benefit your health and well-being. There are countless opportunities for music to make a difference. I have personally witnessed individuals who are unhappy or distraught experience a complete turnaround after being exposed to twenty minutes of intentionally listening to or playing their own music. They feel brighter, they are able to laugh about themselves or with others; they even have been able to set a goal they previously felt they were not capable of pursuing.

To guide you beyond this introduction, this book is organized as follows:

- Part 1 addresses the role and value of music in your life. The short stories illustrate people using music under extreme circumstances with surprising results.
- Part 2 demonstrates how music can change your emotional state and help you achieve your goals.
Part 3 introduces you to how music is a trigger to both good and bad emotional states, and how to use this information to your advantage.

Part 4 is about how to find your music and create your own personal soundtrack.

Part 5 is a call to action highlighting five guidelines to maximize your music, helping to tie everything together in a way that is personal and unique to you.

This is not a scientific book on using music. You are not going to find out how music can permeate the very cells of our body to heal us; you will not find studies cited about how people respond to music stimuli or how the different vibrations in music match our own. Rather, *Tune In* is about people and the music-based practices that have worked for them. It is about finding inspiration in how others have used music in their lives so that you can find a way to use music to help you in yours.

Although the majority of the stories took place in a controlled music-therapy setting, the general public has much to gain from reading about the outcomes and changes that are possible with music. After you learn how music triggers feelings and shifts attitudes, the guidelines at the end of book are meant to help you use music, from this point forward, with greater intention, for the purpose of feeling better.

There is no sacred order to this book. Your interests and needs will dictate where to begin. I hope you enjoy it.

Jennifer Buchanan 2012
Part 1

The Value of Music

When I was eight years old, I woke up just in time to see two burly men carrying an upright piano into our living room. The following Saturday morning Mr. Nicholwitz arrived at our front door to teach me my first piano lesson.

Each week we could count on Mr. Nicholwitz to arrive each week, precisely five minutes before the lesson was scheduled, wearing his uniform—a pin-striped suit, dark-rimmed glasses and a fedora hat. He was robust in every way, with a belt you could barely see tucked under his belly. As he walked up our driveway he would appear distracted as he stopped to glance at something on the lawn or to look up into the sky. But he never failed to carry a large folder with pages protruding haphazardly under his arm.

Just before Mr. Nicholwitz knocked on our door, my sister and I ran from the window we had been watching from, quickly carried the sturdy chair from the spare room, and placed it close to the piano. He entered the house, nodded a heartfelt good morning, placed his hat on the corner table, and very slowly lowered himself into the chair. I knew the piano lesson had started when Mr. Nicholwitz reached in his folder and with a look of surprise pulled out a seemingly random song. "Oh yes, this is a good one” he would say as he placed the sheet music on the piano stand.

Each piece may have been a surprise to him, but I can assure you, it was even more of a surprise to me. When playing an unfamiliar song, I was frequently stumped half-way through. Mr. Nicholwitz would smile, tap my shoulder, and comment, “Oh that was really good…we will
come back to that song later… here try this one,” and he would put that song away and pull out another seemingly random sheet from his folder.

Over time a pattern emerged and the seemingly random, unfamiliar pieces became dependable, familiar favourites. Every time Mr. Nicholwitz leaned back in his chair with his eyelids closed, I knew he was happily absorbed in the piece and that I was playing it well enough for him to feel it. His responses made me love the experience even more.

Not for one moment did I ever feel that I disappointed Mr. Nicholwitz when I couldn’t play a portion of the song at speed or with the right flourish. Looking back, his teaching style was certainly unorthodox, but in spite of it, and perhaps because of it, music became my lifelong passion.

Mr. Nicholwitz was the beginning of me appreciating music in a different way. Sure I learned how to play the piano through him, but what he really taught me was how to see, hear, and feel music differently. With my first piano teacher, music became more than just entertainment or an outlet for pent-up energy. Every week he reminded me that music can go deep down inside someone and find a harmony in that person’s soul—I saw that in Mr. Nicholwitz’s face every time I played. For me, my piano lessons taught me over and over that music was important to me because it could create such a wonderful effect in someone else.

**People’s Relationship to Music**

Music seems to be significant in many people’s lives. Many simply enjoy listening. Others perform or create music, and thus music is a central part of their work life. Still others know that music creates an emotional response and use it to that effect liberally. Music can set
the tone in any room—think about the soft music in a restaurant or upbeat sounds at a retail store and how that makes you feel. Athletes have been known to listen to music before competing and many of us use music in our never-ending quest for relaxation. And let's not forget those unforgettable soundtracks to our favorite films. All we need to hear is a few bars from our favourite movie and we can imagine scenes in the movie like we were there watching it.

There are many different styles, or genres, of music. From classical, jazz, blues, rock & roll, rhythm and blues, to rap, hip hop, country, bluegrass, folk, house, new age, world, metal—the list is ever-expanding. The long list of music choices coupled with many people carrying devices that can play music on a moment’s notice makes music more accessible than ever.

The value people place on music varies from person to person. Some people have a casual relationship with music. They listen to various kinds of music they enjoy but don’t try to interpret it much more than that. Some people integrate music into every aspect of their life and miss it when it does not exist. Then there are those who analyze what the author of a song is trying to say through their music while others critique singers and songwriters and confidently suggest what is or is not worth listening to.

However, I believe the real value of music is determined by what it does to the person experiencing it. Our connection to music is intensely personal. No one can tell you what music to listen to or play to help you get to where you want to be.

Music can allow people to feel freedom or connected to others. Music can make help us feel balanced and confident or soothed and relaxed. Music, the right music for the right moment, can make us feel better. Music also has the most amazing ability to tune us in to our values and beliefs, some even very deep-seated—and can bring them front and centre.
In the introduction, I talk about how the foundation of this book is stories, for it is only through stories that I can even begin to suggest the power that music can have on an individual. The following stories are about how valuable music can be to a person. These stories are intense, possibly even shocking. They are about people who were experienced extreme difficulty in their lives, but through music, found a way to find peace with their situation while connecting with others or in my case, myself.

Opening the Drapes to Feeling Better

When I entered his room, Brad was laying on the top of his bed covers in his pajama bottoms and well-worn Ramones t-shirt. The sun was shining brightly outside, but the thick orange curtains were pulled tightly across the window. You could not see anything through them. When I entered, it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room. Two twin beds were pressed against parallel walls with a nightstand in between and a small clock radio on top. Brad’s roommate was also in the room. His eyes were shut, and he was curled up towards the wall and well-hidden under his pillows and blankets. He did not move or speak for the duration of my visit.

Earlier that day I was asked by a member of the care staff to help Brad get motivated. “He needs something,” she said with a flick of a hand in the direction of his room. “He rarely goes out anymore. He just lies there.”

Looking quickly at Brad’s chart, I read that he was forty-six-years old and had spent almost half his life in health-care facilities. Brad suffered from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (1) and chronic depression (2) due to his service in the first Gulf War. When his
doctor determined he could no longer look after himself, he was admitted into a long-term care
facility for assessment. That was almost twenty years ago.

Brad was one of the youngest residents in this facility. His schedule was a lot like many
of the other residents. Each day, he went to the breakfast room for 8:30 a.m. After breakfast, he
went back to his room and listened to his radio until smoke break at 10:30 a.m. After his five-
minute break he went back to his room, lay on his bed, and listened to the radio until noon when
lunch would be served in the communal dining room. Twice a week he would watch a movie,
take a walk, or go for a swim with care staff. He ate dinner precisely at 5:30 p.m., went out for
another smoke break, watched television, and went to sleep. Every day was the same.

I met Brad on a Tuesday; he was somewhere between smoke break and lunch. I closed
the door to the noisy hallway behind me. Even with the door closed, I could still hear cutlery
clanking, wobbly food trays squeaking, and heavy footsteps stomping past the door. Brad didn’t
seem to pay much attention to the noise and when I asked him what he was doing he said, “Just
listening to the radio.”

The radio was almost inaudible. When I adjusted my hearing, I picked up on a few strains
from John Cougar Mellencamp. After introducing myself, I was told it was okay if I stayed for “a
little while,” so I pulled up a chair.

Suddenly, I was startled by a large crash—a food cart collapsed in the hallway. Neither
man flinched. I took the opportunity to ask Brad what he thought about all the sounds around
him including the sounds outside his door. He turned his head slightly toward the wall and
shrugged his shoulders. I explained that I believed sounds have many personalities and that I was
affected emotionally by the crash we just heard.
Again, I asked him to explain what it sounded like to him. He looked at the wall again and said very slowly, “Unhappy…muddled up… and lonely.” The last word was almost completely inaudible. He then looked down at the floor and said a bit louder, “I noticed you brought a guitar in here.”

“Would you like me to play a little?” I asked.

He nodded.

He leaned over, turned off the radio, and stared at my guitar. I put the strap over my head and set my hands in position to play the first chord of a James Taylor tune. Brad was silent throughout. When I finished, he lifted his head a little higher on the pillow so his shoulders were elevated. I could now see him more clearly. The lines on his face made him seem much older than his forty-six years. I took a couple of deep breaths and began to sing a Bob Dylan song.

By the end of that song, Brad had shifted his pillow over to the side and was partially sitting up in his bed. I took a couple more breaths and sang yet one more song, this time from the Rolling Stones first album release. Once more, there was silence at the end of the song.

Finally, Brad looked directly at me, smiled, and sat fully upright with his feet hanging on the side of the bed. “Wow, those are good ones,” he said. He began to suggest more songs and smiled again when I said I knew one he spoke of.

The more songs I played, the more Brad opened up. Eventually, every song he suggested was coupled with a personal story from his past. It wasn't long before I saw a clear picture of the man now sitting in front of me. Once upon a time, Brad was a fearless, strong, vibrant and independent man who desired something more from his life.
The hour went by very quickly. As Brad walked me to the front door, I noticed his eyes were glistening a little in the sunlight. He suggested a few songs for the following week and waved goodbye.

Many people have encountered feeling down or even feeling totally apathetic about life at some time or another in their lives. For Brad, chronic PTSD and depression robbed him of living independently, of having many friends his own age, and of feeling involved in what was happening in the real world. Music helped him connect to a bigger world—the world closed off by his dark orange drapes.

**Out of Chaos comes the Calm**

As the saying goes, “everything in moderation,” and for Michael’s mom this was a discovery about to be made. I noticed several things about Michael’s environment that reminded me of many modern homes. There were “things” everywhere, including many toys that were colourful and loud. The whole house had been modified to become his play centre and learning centre, from the kitchen to the living room, bathroom, and basement. “Things” were everywhere. Anyone visiting for the first time may not even think that adults actually lived there.

Michael was four years old and had autism. Michael’s mom, Cathy, moved very quickly around the house. She darted in and out of different rooms to complete her household tasks all the while ensuring that Michael was safe in his home. I was contracted to work with Michael, but this story is more about Cathy.

When I met Cathy for the first time she stood at the counter and kept looking over her shoulder at her son. She spoke in a fast, high-pitched voice and every sentence went up at the
end, sounding more like a question than a comment. She spoke loudly when Michael started
going somewhere he shouldn’t, in an attempt to get his attention. He made no apparent
acknowledgement of her. I found out a bit more about Michael, and then I asked Cathy how she
was doing. “I feel exhausted all the time. Sometimes I just want to sit in the middle of the floor,
close my eyes, plug my ears and shut everything out.” Her face was weary, and I couldn’t help
but think how familiar this sounded – many of my friends and I were feeling the same.

I asked Cathy if she would prepare a small room in her house for our next session,
removing as many play things as possible, leaving only big furniture. I explained that with the
majority of the house so “full of life” I wanted to eliminate as many distractions as possible to
see if we could reach Michael together without the use of his “things”.

The following week, I entered the room with just one large drum and placed it in the
middle of the floor. I had two mallets with me. I kept one mallet beside me and with the other I
began to drum a steady, consistent beat. Michael entered the room and immediately stood still.
He moved forward looking at the drum and the mallet that struck it. Not once did he attempt to
take the mallet from me. He then turned to face the wall, rocking slightly. His rocking was in
perfect time to the beating of the drum. After a few minutes, he looked back toward the drum
and, after staring at it for a bit, moved to another area of the room and began to rock again. He
repeated this behavior several times until I changed the rhythm. Then he stopped, and I stopped.
He looked at the drum again and I passed him the mallet. He began to beat the drum in the same
steady pulse when I had started the session. I began to play with him.

Suddenly, Michael’s mom entered the room and began to clap. She used her voice to
encourage him to continue. The child’s unsolicited interaction ceased and he began to rock to his
own rhythm.

“It was so great to see Michael responding to something. Then he stopped as soon as I entered the room,” she said.

When Cathy entered the room she appeared desperate—wanting to see a son she could be proud of. She wanted to see her son connect to his world in a way that she understood. She began to cry and said how overwhelmed she felt looking after a son who rarely, if ever, interacts with her. “By the time my husband comes home from work, I am too tired to give him any attention.”

In this kind of situation, music could help her feel more connected to her son but it could also help her reconnect to herself—her less-stressed self. “Timbre is another word for tone.” I explained, “and timbre and tempo can trigger the changes you want to make. All tones affect us differently.” When we are stressed our voice sometimes gets louder, higher and sharper in tone. However, I noticed that Cathy’s voice was now slower, calmer, lower, and softer. We went on to discuss Michael’s program and goals and then moved on to discuss the tone of her home.

We also discussed the energy shift when her two children and husband came home in the early evenings. We talked about the goals she had for her entire family and not just Michael. We then strategized a plan to drastically change the auditory environment of her home. We put away all of the sound-based toys that would now be brought out for purposeful activities and then be put away again. We selected music that would be used throughout the week and put together a playlist for Cathy to use after Michael’s bedtime.

Two weeks later, Cathy called, “I am feeling much more relaxed at home. It is not perfect, but there are moments when I feel less frantic and overwhelmed.” She went on to say that, “The best part is, Michael is changing. He is not moving from room to room so fast and we can
actually be in the same room for a longer period of time.”

Cathy hired me to help Michael, but in the end, she benefitted as much or more than her son. Prior to our work, Cathy was affected by everything around her. Once she started using music with Michael and throughout her home, she felt some relief from being constantly stressed and overwhelmed.

When a person starts using music with purpose, it can move that person so easily in the direction they want to go.

Moving Through the Green Light

Several years before I met Brad, I spent fourteen months feeling low after the birth of my second child. I have discovered over the years that this is a very common trend in our society.

When my beautiful daughter was born, I continued with life normally—or so I thought. I cared for my older son who was eighteen months, worked full time, arranged childcare, found time with my husband, and completed the laundry most weeks.

I did not realize that many of our family meals were now coming out of a box, that I stopped making the bed regularly, that I no longer felt like visiting friends, and that I was feeling generally tired all the time while rarely sleeping through the night. I didn’t even question why I was crying when I pulled my car to the side of the road to pull myself together. I just continued on with my day, forgetting I had taken the time to cry at all.

Eventually I became less emotional and more dull—never getting too upset or too happy. Nothing bothered me, but nothing seemed to excite me either. This dullness became reflected in
my music. I stopped listening to music for pleasure. I didn’t see the point. I didn’t consciously decide to stop listening, I just didn’t turn the music on.

One day, fourteen months after the birth of my daughter, I pulled up to an intersection and waited a few minutes at the red light. I reached down and turned on my favourite radio station. As the upbeat music hit my eardrum, I immediately felt different. I realized in an instant that I had not turned on this radio station since the birth of my second child fourteen long months before. After ignoring months of unusual behaviour, I suddenly realized that for me, not listening to music for a long period of time was a clear indicator of something gone wrong.

In that moment, when I stopped at that red traffic light and decided to turn on my favourite radio station, I instantly felt a renewed energy that I had not had for quite some time. I remember smiling and feeling a lot lighter and brighter as soon as I started singing along to the music. The dull, disconnected feeling disappeared and I never felt that way again.

Today, I know I was affected by postpartum depression (3). I didn’t need drugs to help me. I simply needed to turn on the radio! I have never gone through a music hiatus since; but, I have promised myself to be aware and catch myself if I ever do it again.

There are many indicators of extra stressors in our lives that make it hard to cope. Some are more recognized than others. Over the years, I have worked with many individuals like Brad who, after something happened in their lives, drastically changed their music listening habits or stopped listening to music altogether.

Music becomes a soothing agent during critical times. It is also an indicator of where we are emotionally. In my case, not listening to music revealed issues needing serious attention. Music moved me through to the green light and through the door into the rest of my life. Music
helped me express my renewal of spirit, and from then on I was ready to face my day, no matter what it would throw at me.

A Moment of Clarity During a Difficult Time

For Donna, her greatest stressor was rooted in family. Donna’s dad had Alzheimer’s Disease (4). I have heard many people describe Alzheimer’s as "as good as death." There are not many circumstances more stressful than the loss of a loved one. She told me, with tears in her eyes, “Three years ago I laid my father to rest. Today I care for a body that looks like him.”

Donna, the youngest of three children, grew up in a small rural town helping her parents with the family farm. Her parents were almost forty when she was born. Donna moved away to the big city as soon as the opportunity arose. She married and settled into the family life she had always dreamed of. Her siblings had done the same while their parents remained on the farm.

When Donna’s children were entering high school, her mom passed away and her dad was diagnosed with dementia. The family learned this disease would eventually kill him but no-one knew how long it would take. With the encouragement of her husband and two teen-aged children, Donna invited her dad to live with them.

Over the next three years, her dad’s symptoms became more serious. He would forget where he placed his clothes or become very angry at the people who were caring for him. Eventually, Donna didn’t feel comfortable leaving him alone and her family did not have the means to hire someone to help out. She realized that keeping her father at home was putting a strain on the entire family both emotionally and financially. She also realized that a long-term
care setting was the only option. At times, her guilt would get the better of her and she would say, "How could I send my dad to a place like that?"

I met Donna through the local senior’s centre. Each month, Donna took her dad to a senior's centre for a "drum circle" (5), a music program I had especially designed for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. Drums were placed in the middle of the circle of chairs. By 10:00 a.m., ten couples had entered and sat next to each other. Half of each duo held a calm but almost distant stare while the other half stood close-by, helped put on name tags, and assisted their loved-one into their chair. A few minutes before the group was about to start, Donna entered the room with David, her dad.

Donna was one of the younger members in the group; she always seemed vibrant while mingling around the room, making others laugh and feel welcome. One day, after I had known Donna and David for almost two years, Donna arrived looking exceptionally tired. After she found two chairs side-by-side, I walked over to her and while pointing said, “Donna, that chair over there is available. I put a large drum in front of it for you to play. I will sit next to David.”

With a mix of relief and concern, she kissed her dad on the cheek and went across the circle to the chair behind the big drum. David's drumming was in perfect time. His previously vacant stare was replaced with a calm, pleasant expression after just a few beats. Although Donna’s tired face didn’t change, her movements grew stronger with every beat.

As the session continued, Donna, went through a most amazing transformation. First, Donna closed her eyes; she obviously didn’t want to notice anyone else. Within a few minutes, you could hear her drum over all the others. After an hour, the drumming came to a stop. She leaned back in her chair but kept her eyes closed.
After a brief silence I strummed a few chords on my guitar leading into a familiar song. David sang every word, often looking me in the eyes with a warm smile of recognition. When the song ended, I turned to David and asked, “How did the music make you feel today?” Without looking at me, his lips opened and closed several times. I looked across the circle at Donna who was about to speak for her dad. I put up a gentle hand signifying that it was okay and that she didn’t have to answer for him. I repeated the question. “How did the music make you feel today?”

David looked at me, smiled, and said, “Music makes me happy.”

You could hear an audible exhale from those in the room who were patiently waiting for his answer. David smiled again. Donna, visibly relieved, leaned back in her chair and rubbed her hands after the intense drumming.

Donna walked me out to my car after helping her dad get into her vehicle. She shook her head and sobbed, “I can’t do it, I can’t do it.” We stopped and looked at each other. I knew her dad had changed considerably over the past two years and seemed more distant and foggy. He had greater difficulty moving around and needed help standing up.

Donna dropped her chin to her chest and, still crying, told me, “I have applied to have him moved to a facility. I cannot look after him any longer—it is not fair to Ken or our children. The entire time I was playing the drum, I realized I was so mad at him. Well, not mad at him but mad at the disease for taking him away. I have been feeling guilty about my choice to move him into a care facility.” She took a deep breath, looked back up at me, and said, “Today, all my feelings of guilt surfaced but I know it is something I must do. I will find a good place and will commit to regular visits. I just wanted you to know.”
Making tough choices on our own is difficult. Even though Donna had siblings and a husband, she knew that at the end of the day, the responsibility rested on her shoulders. We talked more about David’s transition and that it would not be easy. Encouragingly, I reminded her that it had been done successfully by other people in similar situations, many times before. Donna relaxed, and we agreed to set up weekly music sessions with David in his new home. Although it was a small piece of the pie, it provided Donna with some comfort. Although music would never fix this problem, it provided a moment of clarity for Donna. She was able to express intense anger, regret, and guilt through the drum, without hurting someone else. I think music also gave both Donna and her father great comfort as his health waned. He continued to show us that music made him happy and that helped Donna through that most difficult transition of saying her final goodbyes.

Celebrating the One I Love

Ruth never yelled or had a moment where she demonstrated frustration at another person. She smiled most days and every movement she made carried a happy lilt. Ruth’s brown hair was now speckled with grey, and she kept it cut quite short so she didn’t have to fuss too much with it. Her wide set eyes and low muscle tone indicated that she had some extra DNA on her twenty-first chromosome, better known as Down Syndrome (6).

As if it was possible, Warren had an even broader grin than Ruth. He loved wearing baggy, corduroy pants and plaid shirts tucked in. His hair was completely white and you could easily envision that in his youth, he was a happy little blond boy who occasionally got into a bit
of trouble. Warren’s genetic makeup was also unique. Missing some DNA on his seventh chromosome, Warren had William’s Syndrome (7).

Both were in their late forties and had married each other five years previously. What surprised me most about their relationship was how happy the two seemed. They were more like honeymooners than a couple who had been married for half a decade. Neither seemed to be affected by what the rest of world deemed their ability “challenges.” During one of our early conversations, they jokingly told me, “We feel great. Together we have the perfect number of chromosomes,” and then chuckled knowingly. You knew they had used that phrase frequently at socials but it never grew old.

Over the course of a weekend conference, Warren and Ruth participated in all the music activities organized for the participants. Naturally they captured my attention but not for the reason you may think. You see, I noticed that Ruth would not only walk behind Warren but would also stand slightly behind him and watch him as he sang. It didn’t seem like she felt inferior to Warren but that she truly admired him. As Warren sang, her eyes would soften and she would clap enthusiastically when he finished. At times, she would join him in a chorus. Occasionally, she would sit back and observe him with a twinkle in her eye. Likewise, Warren would glance at his wife and, with a soft smile, hold her hand while gently swaying to the music. It seemed that Warren was performing for Ruth. She was his sole audience and they both loved it that way.

I am sure you know people like Ruth. They may not sing in tune or dance to the right rhythms, however, their passion for music is released every time they hear “their band” or “their song” and in Ruth’s case when she heard “her love,” Warren, sing and perform. Through music,
Ruth could express her feelings openly, and her pleasure was infectious. She helped others enjoy the moment they were in by feeling her enthusiasm for the music she was hearing her Warren perform.

**Intentional Music**

In the introduction, I talked about the idea of using music intentionally. To do something with intention means that you do it purposefully with a goal in mind. Using music intentionally means that you aren’t just passively listening to music because you like it or because it makes you feel better. Rather, you are choosing to use music in a way to improve your well-being. You have made yourself aware of the various effects music has on you and then consciously use music to help you in whatever way you need help in that moment.

The five people I introduced you to in this chapter now use music intentionally in their lives. This has made music far more valuable to them than just background noise. Brad’s personal soundtrack brought his personality out not only to me, but to others as well. He later told me that after I left that first day, he turned up the radio, changed the station, and started conversing with his roommate. This was a roommate he rarely spoke to even though he rested in a parallel position only two metres away. Brad used music to help himself bridge the chasm he felt between himself and the world. Over time and after subsequent sessions, Brad became more active and volunteered in the facility’s kitchen so he could speak to people more often and spend less time in his room. He encouraged the kitchen staff to play music as they worked.

Cathy re-engaged with her home, her son, and I think most importantly her self when she learned how to use music effectively. She was able to find a sense of calm in her music which
helped her create the right tone for her home.

After I travelled through the green light on that fateful day, I had a new pep in my step and felt more alive in fourteen seconds than I had in the previous fourteen months. I should have known better. I knew what music could do. But it took that low moment in my life to truly understand with my gut the value music had to me. When my music reflected me, I felt more vibrant and ready to face the day.

Donna knew she was feeling guilty, tired, and frustrated with her circumstances. After expressing these feelings even more loudly on drum, she was able to reach a decision that, although still not something she felt good about, she at least had some peace about, knowing it was the best under the circumstances. For Ruth and Warren, music meant many things, but watching them that day, I was reminded that music can be used to celebrate what is right in front of us—most especially those we care about the most.

I have spent two decades using music therapeutically with families of very young children, teens coping with difficult times, adults who can’t find the right words to say, and seniors who feel like shut-ins, isolated and alone. Using music intentionally can open doors for all people, regardless of age or circumstance. and that open door can lead to desired change: improved communication, decreased stress, or an improvement in mood. That alone makes music valuable. But there is also a monetary value as well. Some studies suggest substantial health-care dollars would be saved if music was used in the care of individuals. (8)

Music - when its capabilities are understood, when it’s used with the proper intention - can achieve miraculous results, expressing our deepest core values. Whether music signifies celebration, a time to reflect, or like Brad a way to connect to yourself and to the world, it has the
potential to be so much more than we’ve previously imagined. You can use the little bits of music or the lots of music in your life and add specific goals, triggers, and eventually strategies that will improve your health and wellness.

When I began to conceptualize this book, I kept coming back to the question “how do you teach people the value of music when they are not musicians?” The answer is surprisingly simple. Each one of us is capable, thanks to technology and music’s accessibility of bringing music out of the background and put it front and centre where it can do amazing things for our health and life as we grow and age. It doesn’t matter if you are a performer or in the audience, or how passionate you are when you hear a song or sing it live, music can tap into each of us in a unique way, and that is where the benefits lie.

Music can speak for us when we can’t find the actual words to convey what we’re thinking or feeling. It can help us identify and come to know better those things we value most. Music is there, always, for us to use as a tool to help us cope with our own particularly unique life experiences. It can have a direct influence when the music itself is affecting us and can also be a metaphor for something bigger.

Most of all, music creates a direct line to areas in our life that need attention and to our desired emotional state. Connecting to the music that is important to us is the first step to having it help change our emotional state. I hope the stories in this chapter will motivate you to pay more attention to the music you’re listening to so that you can start using music not as passive background “noise” but an active tool to help you deal with whatever challenges are in your life.

Understanding music’s value is the first step to really tuning in to music. The next step to using music intentionally is to take a look at how music affects us emotionally so that you can
use music more proactively to help you when you need an emotional boost or if you’re experiencing emotionally difficult times.

Music can take you where you want to go, if you know how to let it.

Using Music Intentionally

In many ways, using music intentionally is instinctive. We know what music works for us in various situations but how often have you stopped and thought about why certain music affects you in various ways. That’s what the “Using Music Intentionally” section is all about. At the end of each chapter, I am going to ask you some guided questions or even suggest some listening exercises that will help you be more intentional with the music you have in your life.

So, using the stories in this chapter as a guide, take some time to think about the following:

· many of us like to feel strong—not necessarily physically strong but emotionally or even spiritually strong. What music lifts you up and makes you feel stronger?

· how could you use music in times when you need a boost?

· does your loved one know what music has a positive affect on you?