

A music and mental health research clinic

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The University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research at The Royal details the context and challenge of a music and mental health research clinic

Anxiety and depression are among the most common types of mental issues (1-2), and their consequences include diminished quality of life, and a negative effect on relationships, work, and school, considerably affecting our social fabric.

Additionally, stigma and other barriers can delay people from seeking help. (3) We believe that music may be an innovative, non-clinical, cost-effective solution to this societal problem, and that community-based music programs could be a successful way of reaching and helping individuals with mental illness or at risk of mental illness.

The mental health benefits of music

Music is increasingly recognized for its potential to sustain quality of life by directly influencing mood (4) and promoting cognitive stimulation, physical activity, and social interaction. (5) These activities can lead to psychological, physiological, and social benefits associated with wellness. (6-9)

Active music activities (i.e., playing or moving to music) positively affect emotional states and moods, reducing anxiety, alleviating depression, and aiding emotional self-regulation. (10-12) Therefore, music programs can reduce the risk or severity of mental illnesses and help lessen the stigma and barriers associated with mental health conditions. (7,13) Engaging in music has been strongly associated with higher quality of life and life satisfaction. (14-17).

Community-based music programs

Community-based music programs, led by musicians and educators, are emerging and are addressing various health conditions, including individuals with mental illness. (18) Interest in music and well-being is growing, with community music educators introducing their skills into care contexts for creative, expressive experiences. (19)

These music programs have proliferated with only limited corresponding research on their psychosocial effects, (20,23) and while music's potential to improve well-being is recognized, existing research often has limitations. (24,25) Studies tend to be exploratory, with small samples, short interventions, (26,27) limited follow-up, (26) monocentric locations, heterogeneous interventions, (28) and lack control groups. (29)

There are also concerns about inappropriate measures and methodological biases. (30) While music-making activates cognitive, sensorimotor, and emotional processing (31-33) with beneficial psychosocial effects, high-quality research confirming these effects is scarce. (14,20, 34-37)

Lastly, evidence for long-term effectiveness is lacking. (38) Our research clinic aims to address these concerns through multidisciplinary collaborations on standardized music programs, using a common design and standardized multi-year measurements across multiple implementation sites. This clinic is particularly relevant at a time when the prevalence of mental health issues has increased considerably, when most healthcare systems are facing a clinical staffing shortage, and waiting lists for mental health support are getting longer.

Establishing a research clinic on music & mental health

Purpose of the clinic

The overall goal of the research clinic is to demonstrate and validate the health benefits of community-based music programs for individuals experiencing mental illnesses.

The clinic's first research pillar focuses on understanding how music can affect the mind in the context of mental illness. Over the last several decades, research has shown that musical experiences can significantly affect the mind. However, there is much less research on how music affects brain functions in people with mental health conditions, and the underlying mechanisms and individual differences remain poorly understood.

Musical activities are increasingly used alongside or as alternatives to pharmacological interventions to treat psychological and mental health conditions, including bipolar affective disorders, depression, and anxiety. Yet there is still little convincing scientific evidence that music interventions for psychological and mental health conditions are effective.

The lack of research and the paucity of scientific evidence has made it difficult for music-based treatments to enter mainstream medical practice.

The second research pillar of the clinic aims to design and test music programs, assess their potential impacts on mental health, and develop and share best practices and strategies.

The research activities of the clinic seek to:

1. Reduce the gap between practice and research-based interventions.
2. Provide best-practices guidelines.
3. Provide best strategies for an apprentice training program for music educators.

4. Provide recommendations for successful implementation and sustainability of music programs.
5. Develop a plan for scaling up our initiatives.

Access to remarkable technology

The clinic is located within the University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research at The Royal (IMHR) and, therefore, has unique access to the Brain Imaging Centre, which provides access to technology such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and positron emission tomography (PET), part of the IMHR's Clinical Brain Research Centre.

Through our research, we can actually see how music affects the brain and how the brains of those with a mental illness react to music interventions. This equipment is tremendously helpful to help fill the research gap in music and mental health.

Multidisciplinary and multisectoral partnership

The partnership created by the research clinic involves a multidisciplinary group of experts from universities, major research institutes, medical clinics, community centers, community music schools, and community organizations. Through this partnership, researchers collaborate with physicians, social workers, health workers, music educators, and people with lived expertise. Our team is developing new research approaches, new interdisciplinary knowledge, and new intersectoral expertise, while offering training opportunities for students and young researchers concerning the relationship between music and mental health.

The research activities of our clinic align well with the mission and strategic priorities of our partners as they seek to implement community-based music programs to address the well-being of the populations they serve while gaining knowledge on how other organizations in Canada and abroad have integrated these programs in the social and healthcare system.

Understand what works, for whom, for what conditions, and in what circumstances

Our clinic brings together researchers and partners to think about music as a meaningful resource that can improve well-being and quality of life for people living with mental illnesses. We are contributing to important scientific, social, and economic outcomes.

Scientific outcomes:

- Increase scientific understanding of how music affects the minds of individuals with mental illness.
- Provide new knowledge for better predictions of individual differences in response to music interventions by providing answers to the questions of “how much,” “what kind”, and “for how long.”

- Contribute essential knowledge to establish best practices to optimize intervention and improve outcomes.

Social outcomes:

- Improve health and well-being by reducing mental distress, depression, and anxiety.
- Reduce medical interventions and rehabilitation therapy with increased well-being through music making.
- Demonstrate how the inclusion of music educators in care settings can be broadened to benefit the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Economic outcomes:

- Contribute to improving the diversity of public health services by providing a mental health intervention that is relatively low cost, non-invasive, and low risk.
- Pave the way for the eventual coverage of music interventions by insurance plans.

Canadian leadership

We expect this research program to situate Canada as a leader in studying the relationship between music and mental health. It will bring together several musical institutions and research laboratories worldwide, foreshadowing the creation of the first international consortium focussing on Music for mental health. Our research clinic will position Canada as the unifier and international spokesperson for this major social innovation approach for promoting health and well-being through community-based music programs.

Coming articles will feature specific research projects at the clinic: Geriatric Psychiatry: Improving well-being of older adults through community-based music and movement programs; Mood and Disorder: How to improve therapeutic efficacy of music interventions in depression and anxiety; Music Performance Anxiety: Addressing the mental health of musicians.

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More About Stakeholder

The Royal Ottawa Health Care Group: Promoting mental health and wellbeing

The Royal Ottawa Health Care Group (The Royal) is one of Canada's foremost mental health care, teaching, and research hospitals. Our mission is to transform the lives of people living with complex and treatment-resistant mental health and substance use needs through client and family-centred care and research.