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Making music for stress reduction?

Abstract

Stress constitutes a major risk factor for prevalent chronic diseases. Currently, one in four individuals reports experiencing frequent stress. Learning to play a musical instrument and engaging in music-making may represent an accessible resource for stress reduction. Although 67% of the German population have played an instrument at some point, only a proportion continue this activity; at present, 18% of individuals over the age of 16 actively engage in music-making.

This research investigates which insights stress theories, empirical evidence, and expert opinions can provide for the design of instrumental instruction so that music-making may also serve as a means of stress reduction.

Method: Approaches to stress reduction derived from established stress theories (Selye, Benson, Antonovsky, Lazarus, Becker) were transferred to the context of instrumental instruction. For the literature review, 348 studies were screened in the PubMed database, of which 17 were selected for inclusion. Additionally, six experts were surveyed via email using two open-ended questions regarding recommendations and suggestions for instrumental teaching and music-making.

Results: Based on stress theories, empirical studies, and expert interviews, several overarching components of stress reduction were identified at the mental, emotional, physical, social, and structural levels. The recommendations mentioned were assigned to these components, revealing distinct tendencies: stress theories primarily emphasized relationship/connection, mental reflection, relaxation, and body-oriented practices. The empirical studies highlighted relationship/connection (particularly within groups of musicians), positive emotions, and mental reflection. The experts mainly emphasized relationship/connection (teacher–student), as well as instructional approaches that enable the attainment of appropriate and achievable challenges through modeling, individually tailored exercises, and resource-oriented knowledge transfer. Across all three sources, the components most frequently identified were relationship/connection, mental reflection, feasibility, and positive emotions.



Conclusion and outlook: The study demonstrates that instrumental instruction aimed at fostering stress resilience should place greater emphasis on and integrate relational work, mental reflection, positive emotional experiences, and achievable goals.

Promising directions for future research include examining elements of music therapy as well as stress management strategies for performance anxiety, with the aim of integrating these into instrumental instruction for amateur musicians.

Short CV

Dr. Annette Kerckhoff, born 1965, was until 2025 Professor of Medical Education, Dean of the Faculty of Health of the German University of Health and Sports, Berlin. B.Sc. in Naturopathy, M.Sc. Health Sciences.

She has worked for the Karl and Veronica Carstens Foundation for almost thirty years, explaining research findings from the field of integrative medicine to laypeople and documenting and classifying self-help strategies. In her scientific work in the last decades, she has made women in medicine visible and researched their health concepts and recipes.

Besides, she got a B.A. musical education and works in her holidays as a band coach with the focus on music-making for stress-release.

Annette Kerckhoff is particularly interested in self-help and health-promoting factors from simple household remedies to music, especially in intercultural and interconceptual comparison.