

# Songwriting with the Chemically Dependent

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to discuss songwriting as a therapeutic procedure with the chemically dependent population. The article includes (a) characteristics of the chemically dependent, (b) prominent treatment approaches used with the chemically dependent, (c) therapeutic objectives of songwriting with the chemically dependent, (d) techniques for facilitating songwriting, (e) lyric analysis of original songs, and (f) the role of the music therapist in the songwriting process. The article is based on the author's experience with chemically dependent persons in a 24-day in-patient treatment facility. The average age of those in treatment is 29 years, with a mean school education of 11.7 years. They are 80% male, 37% unemployed, and 91% Caucasian. Eighty-seven and one-half percent claim that their primary drug use is alcohol. The remaining 12.5% claim drug abuse (other than alcohol) as their primary addiction.

Many music therapists have advocated songwriting as a therapeutic procedure with a variety of clientele. Ortman (1984) recommends songwriting as an expressive medium for patients with limited communication skills or movement due to orthopedic handicaps. Ficken (1976), too, suggests songwriting as a source of expression, but for psychiatric clients. In addition to aiding self-expression, Ficken believes that the song acts as a source of immediate feedback since it can be written down or tape-recorded. According to Ficken, the songwriting process increases self-esteem and aids social interaction. Schmidt (1983), another advocate of songwriting, emphasizes the methodology required for lyric writing and melodic construction.

While these articles describe therapeutic purpose and general descriptions of the songwriting process, there are additional theoretical and methodological concerns that deserve consideration in using songwriting with another population: the chemically dependent. According to Kinney and Leaton (1978), the therapist who works with a substance abuse client should be as knowledgeable about the illness as possible, taking into consideration the characteristics and needs of the patient in the therapeutic process.

Therefore, this article will look at the needs and characteristics of the chemically dependent, as well as ways in which those needs can be integrated into the songwriting process. The following information will be included: (a) characteristics and needs of the chemically dependent; (b) the recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous; (c) therapeutic goals of songwriting in relation to the needs of the chemically dependent; (d) facilitating techniques of

songwriting with the chemically dependent; (e) lyric analysis of the songs; and (f) the role of the music therapist in the songwriting process.

## Characteristics and Needs of the Chemically Dependent

Chemical dependency is the use of any intoxicating substance (alcohol or drugs) on a daily basis with an inability to cut down or stop using it completely for at least a period of one month (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1980). This loss of control is accompanied by the inability to predict with accuracy what will happen when the drug is used (Kinney & Leaton, 1978). Typically, a chemically dependent patient is filled with regret and guilt about past behaviors. A pattern of deceit develops, and some clients resort to crime in order to support their habit. Unfortunately, through denial and rationalization, the substance abuser is unaware of what is happening (Johnson, 1973). Substance abusers truly believe the reality of their own projections and rationalizations; this causes family, social, and occupational relationships to deteriorate as disagreements arise over whose version of reality is accurate (Kinney & Leaton, 1978). Chemically dependent persons continue to use their drug of choice despite the resulting impairment in social, physical, or occupational functioning (APA, 1980). A sense of powerlessness results as denial of the symptoms of chemical dependency escalate (Johnson, 1973).

In order to avoid the pain of reality, immediate gratification is sought through a drug-induced euphoria. Consistent and prolonged drug abuse diminishes the degree of euphoria experienced and causes feelings of confusion, anger, frustration, and/or depression (Johnson, 1973). This self-defeating behavior stunts personal growth and promotes a negative attitudinal posture as well as a rigid thinking pattern. The results are a negative self-image and sense of hopelessness regarding the future. A vicious cycle of behaviors develops and unless chemically dependent persons can identify their needs and learn to satisfy them in a healthy manner, the pattern will continue (Kinney & Leaton, 1978). Treatment is often necessary.

According to Kinney and Leaton (1982), psychological needs which must be satisfied before a substance abuser can learn new coping strategies include: (a) the desperate need to share thoughts and feelings with other persons who are truly accepting and understanding; (b) the need to feel competent, knowing that they can gain recognition from others for their accomplishments; (c) the knowledge that they belong and are united with others in some way; (d) the need for affection and assurance that someone really cares; and (e) the need for pleasurable nourishment that comes through the senses. While these needs can be met by a variety of treatment interventions, this paper will approach the problem from the view of

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Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), two commonly used philosophical orientations for the treatment of chemical dependency.

### **Recovery Program of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous**

The philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous requires chemically dependent persons to admit three important ideas: (a) that they are chemically dependent and could not manage their own lives; (b) that probably no human power could have relieved their chemical dependency; and (c) that God, as they understand Him, would relieve them if sought (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1946). The recovery program of AA and NA is based on the following Twelve Steps (words in brackets refer to NA):

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol [our addiction]—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of those steps we tried to carry this message to alcoholics [drug abusers], and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1946, p. 71)

### ***Songwriting allows the person's feelings to be validated either by the therapist or by others in the group.***

AA and NA also encourage use of the Serenity Prayer, which follows, as an invocation for a healthy emotional life. "God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, The courage to change the things we can, And the wisdom to know the difference" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1975, p. 18).

These Twelve Steps for recovery and the Serenity Prayer are often incorporated into the lyrics or discussion during the songwriting process.

### **Therapeutic Goals of Songwriting with the Chemically Dependent**

The primary goal of songwriting with the chemically dependent is to encourage expression of feelings which relate to the individual's situation. For example, there may be repressed feelings pertaining to losses suffered, the disease of chemical dependency, treatment, or social and family situations. Songwriting allows the person's feelings to be validated either by the therapist or by others, in the group. Through this validation, individuals receive emotional support and feedback for their thoughts and feelings. Further, completion of the task itself can increase self-esteem (Ficken, 1976).

In a group situation, discussion about the expressive content of the songs often takes place. Group members can offer suggestions for problems which have been presented, thus increasing self-awareness. Lyric analysis of the song also serves as a stimulus for enhancing socialization and listening skills. This mutual sharing helps to establish rapport with the music therapist and/or group. Finally, through the creative process of songwriting, chemically dependent persons are encouraged to seek productive solutions to their problems while involved in a pleasurable, aesthetic experience (Ficken, 1976).

While these songwriting goals are fairly similar to those proposed for other clientele (Ficken, 1976; Ortman, 1984), the next section of this article presents specific techniques which structure the basic songwriting process in order to facilitate personal disclosure and to maximize interaction.

### **Facilitating Techniques for Songwriting**

One concern in facilitating songwriting is the provision of adequate structure for the experience. This section describes several possible techniques: (a) creating a nonthreatening environment; (b) lead-in activities; (c) the cloze procedure technique (fill-in-the-blank method); and (d) writing new words to pre-existing melodies. Particular recommendations will be made for facilitating personal disclosure and maximizing interaction.

#### ***Creating a Nonthreatening Environment***

Because low self-esteem and fear of failure are characteristic of the chemically dependent, it proves beneficial to make the songwriting procedure as nonthreatening as possible, regardless of the technique used. The music therapist can facilitate this by assuring clients of the following: (a) as long as they are honest with themselves, anything written will be acceptable; (b) the therapist will assist at any time; (c) songwriters will not have to perform their songs; (d) they need not worry about spelling or phrasing; and (e) the song does not have to be perfect to have value or to be therapeutic. The focus should be on the person, not the product (Lippin, 1983).

#### ***Lead-in Activities***

In addition to the music therapist's creating a nonthreatening environment, lead-in activities and specific topic sug-

gestions made by the therapist (Schmidt, 1983) also serve to prepare chemically dependent clients for songwriting. Lead-in activities may take a variety of forms, including the following: (a) a lyric analysis of a pre-existing song; (b) a discussion on a specific issue concerning chemical dependency; or (c) a listening exercise that encourages listeners to express their opinions, as well as their feelings, which are elicited by the music. Lead-in activities help to establish rapport, to promote self-expression, and to provide clients with possible ideas for their songs. For example, *Life in the Fast Lane* by the Eagles (which depicts the lifestyle of a cocaine abuser) is an effective song to use for lyric analysis prior to songwriting. Because many substance abusers like the song, it provides an enjoyable listening experience in addition to stimulating discussion about a drug dependent existence. Once group members have heard the song, the music therapist can facilitate the discussion by asking questions such as: (a) What words describe the person who is singing?; (b) What type of lifestyle is described in the song?; (c) What feelings are associated with that lifestyle?; (d) What losses are being suffered because of it?; and (e) What are the steps to changing one's lifestyle (Barnes, 1983)? Answers to these questions may be written down for the client's reference when writing his or her own song.

Once chemically dependent people have "practiced" self-expression and interacted with the group and/or the music therapist through a lead-in activity, they are ready for primary songwriting experiences such as those described below.

#### Cloze Procedure (Fill-in-the-Blank)

The music therapist can implement the cloze procedure by directing substance abusers to fill in the blanks, writing the song about themselves, their situations, and their feelings. Spontaneity can be encouraged by instructing individuals to write the first thought that comes to mind, followed by assurance that the lyrics can be changed if the authors are not satisfied with them. It should be emphasized that the fill-in-the-blank sheet is only a framework, and the individual is free to change the words given on the sheet. The music therapist can further insure a positive experience by suggesting to the individuals that they need not be concerned with how well their versions will fit the original melody. These recommendations all require flexibility and spontaneity of the music therapist.

The cloze procedure is recommended by Ficken (1976) and Schmidt (1983) because it provides structure for a nonthreatening songwriting experience, and it can be done on an individual basis (Schmidt, 1983).

The least threatening form of cloze procedure requires the individual to substitute his or her own lyrics for specific words in a popular song (Ficken, 1976). Popular songs may be selected according to (a) the person's musical preferences, (b) the person's age, and (c) how appropriately blanks can be substituted for original lyrics, thus providing a framework which will aid personal disclosure. The fill-in-the-blank songwriting technique can be made more meaningful to chemically dependent

individuals by utilizing lead-in sentences (designed by the music therapist) which encourage people to describe themselves, identify feelings and needs, and reinforce knowledge gained in treatment. As Example One demonstrates, this technique can encourage self-disclosure. Lead-in sentences can also serve to stimulate thought from the past to present and foster hope for the future (Radocy & Boyle, 1979).

#### ***The cloze procedure elicits literal, concrete responses as well as symbolic or metaphoric responses.***

Example One, written by the fill-in-the-blank procedure, is an illustration of a song which transpired from the above lead-in activity. The underlined sections represent blanks in the original worksheet which were filled in by the chemically dependent person.

#### Example One

This is written to the tune of *Heart of Gold*, original music and lyrics by Neil Young.

1. I've been a loser and I've been a fraud  
I've always known it and I am sad  
I felt like running whenever I hurt  
But now I know that running won't work  
'Cause you can't hide from yourself  
I want to live my life from day to day  
I'll have to work and I'll have to pay.
2. I need to learn, I need to feel  
I know I can, I want to make happiness real  
When I think back I feel sorrow and I feel pain  
But now I feel different. It's time to change  
I hope to be happy and never be sad  
When I leave here I'll try the best that I can  
I'll use my time to love and I'll use my time to feel.

Example Two is an instance of a song written by a chemically dependent person using the cloze procedure, including lead-in sentences constructed by the music therapist. Once again, the underlined sections represent blanks in the original worksheet.

#### Example Two

*Dust in the Wind*, original music and lyrics by Kerry Livgren, is the tune which was used.

1. Before I came here, I felt like life was nothing but a thunderstorm  
I used to believe that the sun was never going to shine again  
Then I felt the light from above was shining down on me  
I didn't feel the thunderstorm would be there forever
2. I'm learning how to believe that the bad things could be made good again



I feel that way because of a new awakening I've found  
within

When I go home, I'll keep searching for the happy life

I'll be able to see everything in a more peaceful way

3. I won't hang on to that endless thunderstorm

Because if I do I'll be lost in the darkness again

I'll never come back

And others will say he should have followed the sunshine  
instead.

As these first two examples demonstrate, the cloze procedure elicits literal, concrete responses as well as symbolic or metaphoric responses. Further, this format encourages the chemically dependent person to view the future in terms of projecting hope and setting goals, while still stressing the "one day at a time" philosophy of AA and NA.

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***Through the process of analyzing their original lyrics, individuals learn new coping strategies, and they receive validation for their feelings.***

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#### *New Words to Pre-existing Melodies*

A more unstructured approach to songwriting involves writing complete verses to pre-existing melodies. This technique is beneficial because many chemically dependent people are not familiar with the manipulations of rhythmic and melodic components (Ficken, 1976). This songwriting process may be done in small groups. It encourages interaction among group members, as they share experiences and feelings, while working toward a common goal: using pre-existing melodies as a framework to write lyrics which reflect their lives.

Implementation of this technique requires a plan to guide the small groups. The music therapist can provide the following steps on a chalkboard: (a) divide into small groups; (b) as a group, choose one song from a songbook (to be distributed) for which everyone in the small group knows the tune; (c) using the board for ideas (suggestions from a lead-in activity), change most of the words in the song to make it treatment related; (d) the song will be sung and discussed in the large group; and (e) the music therapist will sing the song if any small group feels uncomfortable performing its own song.

Example Three is a song written by a small group of four chemically dependent persons to the tune of *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*.

#### *Example Three*

1. I drank up all the everclear, I toked upon the bong  
I partied every day and night and that's where I went wrong  
I wrecked my car, I went to jail. From heaven the message came  
To change my life completely, I'd no longer be the same.
2. I went to seek the help I'd need, to live life day by day  
To give up booze, the pot, the drugs, and try a sober way  
To help with all the suffering and find life has more to give  
And live my life soberly, that's the way I want to live.

Using this same process, a large group can also work toward a common goal. The group as a whole can choose a pre-existing melody, then divide into smaller groups with each group assigned to write a verse concerning a topic which originated from the lead-in activity and/or previous music therapy sessions. The song would be sung in its entirety once all the verses were completed.

Example Four was written by the method described above. Topics for the verses as they appear in the example are (a) losses suffered, (b) feelings, (c) relationships, (d) topic of choice for chorus, and (e) treatment.

#### *Example Four*

Lyrics written to the tune of *The Gambler*, original music and lyrics by Don Schlitz.

1. We all had some problems, we met up with unemployment  
The alcohol made me weak, my health went downhill  
I thought I needed drugs to help me through my stress  
Didn't have no money which led me to a life of crime
2. I was sick and I was tired, afraid, depressed and lonely  
Drying all my tears and looking at my life  
Deep down within me, I felt sad and I felt empty  
Self-pity was threatening the way I know is right
3. I was looking for true friendship but it seemed to be nowhere  
I turned to the bottle, It seemed my only friend  
'Cuz friends are hard to come by, living by these means  
And love is even harder when you're not truly being seen  
(Chorus)
4. You've got to know how to choose friends, know how to lose friends  
Learn about self-respect when you pick new friends  
There's no time for drinking when you're sittin' in AA  
There'll be time enough for sports when the counseling's done
5. I've finally found some trust and realize people care  
I'm on my way to recovery and things are looking fair  
I realize I have goodness buried deep inside  
Now I'm here in (hospital name)  
Feeling ready for the outside.

Using familiar tunes as a framework for songwriting has specific advantages: (a) this technique does not require extensive compositional skills, (b) the songs can be written within one session which is important in the chemically dependent setting where patients are being admitted and completing their treatments daily, and (c) songs written to familiar tunes can easily be performed by the group members or music therapist for immediate reinforcement. It is important for individuals to be provided with copies of the lyrics they have written,

not only for reinforcement, but also for future reference. Copies can also be collected to be shared with other chemically dependent persons in a sing-a-long.

While sound techniques are an important part of facilitation, even more central to the therapeutic process is the analysis of the lyrics written by chemically dependent people.

### Lyric Analysis

The purposes of lyric analysis are to focus on significant words that the chemically dependent person has written and to encourage expression of the feelings underlying those words (Lippin, 1983). Through the process of lyric analysis, individuals learn new coping strategies, and they receive validation for their feelings. According to Silverman (1983), writing, hearing or performing, and reacting to his or her own song makes the chemically dependent client feel liberated.

While approaches to lyric analysis may vary among music therapists, several basic skills are imperative to the process. They are (a) active listening skills, (b) sensitivity to patient needs, (c) ability to facilitate a discussion using open-ended questions, and (d) spontaneity. In addition to these basic skills, the music therapist must be flexible and should have an intuitive sense to explore feelings and pertinent topics for discussion as they surface.

Beyond the skills mentioned above, the music therapist should be aware of possible symbolic representations of feelings through the use of metaphors as well as themes which commonly arise among the chemically dependent.

### Use of Metaphors

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of idea is used in place of another idea to suggest a likeness between them (Guralnik, 1979). According to Lippin (1983), a therapist can gain insight into the client's feelings by the metaphors used. Example Two illustrates a song written by a chemically dependent person who expressed ideas through metaphors. She referred to her life as a thunderstorm and her feelings as light and darkness. The music therapist facilitated lyric analysis with questions such as: (a) How did you feel when you were caught in the thunderstorm?, (b) What was happening in your life at that time?, (c) What was life like when the sun was shining? How did it feel?, (d) Could you describe your idea of a happy life?, and (e) What steps can you take to improve the quality of your life? Through this process the young woman was able to clarify her feelings, identify some of her needs, and seek productive solutions to her problems.

### Prominent Themes for Discussion

There are a number of prominent themes which emerge in the songwriting of the chemically dependent. These include losses suffered, relationships, self-disclosure, and treatment reinforcements.

Confronting losses suffered plays an important part in breaking the pattern of denial, a characteristic of substance abusers (Barnes, 1983). The first verses of Examples Three and Four articulate some of those losses. A discussion was stimulated by questions such as: (a) What are some other losses which you have suffered?, (b) What can you do about those losses?, (c) Could you describe how those losses affected your state of mind?, and (d) How does one go about building self-esteem?

Along with receiving empathic understanding, individuals were reminded of the Serenity Prayer commonly used by AA and NA. They were encouraged to take responsibility for their behavior as well as accept the consequences of past behaviors. As a result of this interaction, each person shared what he or she hoped to gain from substance abuse treatment.

Many chemically dependent people find themselves alienated from family and friends because of their addiction. In order to have a support system in times of need, substance abusing individuals must often rebuild old relationships and establish new ones with people who will support their recovery. In reference to Example Four, verses 3, 4, and 5 clearly describe the clients' desires to be loved, respected, and understood by others. Facilitating questions included: (a) What kind of people do you want to attract?, (b) Could you describe the kind of friend you want to be to others?, (c) What are some personal characteristics you would like to change or develop?, and (d) What are ways to meet new people? Through this process the individuals gained self-awareness and insight pertaining to interpersonal relations.

### *She referred to her life as a thunderstorm and her feelings as light and darkness.*

Songwriting techniques may be used to facilitate self-disclosure in addition to assessing self-concept and self-esteem in the process. The first verse of Example One reveals the substance abuser's poor self-image as well as related feelings. However, as the song progresses to the second verse, it is evident that this person was striving to feel more positive about himself and therefore had motivation to change. Processing the lyrics involved questions such as: (a) What image would you like to have of yourself?, (b) What specific changes do you need to make?, (c) How can you make those changes?, and (d) How can you build your self-esteem? As a result of lyric analysis, the substance abuser formulated short term goals concerning self-esteem.

### Treatment Reinforcements

Discussion of lyrics can easily be related to the Twelve Step recovery program of AA and NA. Many chemically dependent people directly incorporate these treatment philosophies into their songs. "One day at a time," an AA and NA recovery slogan (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1975), is indicated in Examples One and Three. In Example Three, the line, "to help with all

the suffering," refers to Step 12 (taking the message to other substance abusers).

When losses suffered by the chemically dependent client are addressed, the first three steps of the recovery program, which emphasize spirituality, may provide support. Self-assessment and personal improvement (Steps 4, 5, 6, 7, 10) provide reinforcement for building self-esteem and improving interpersonal relationships. Self-disclosure in the recovery process is supported as patients gain insight into steps 5, 9, and 10 which discuss honesty and making amends to others.

By incorporating the Twelve Steps into the songwriting process, including lyric analysis, chemically dependent individuals begin to internalize the recovery program, forming a personal philosophy which will improve the quality of their lives.

### Role of the Therapist

In the final analysis, the songwriting process will be limited only by the skills and personal characteristics of the music therapist. Several personal qualities are critical to the success of the songwriting procedure such as: (a) attitude, (b) openness, (c) sincerity, (d) courage, and (e) self-knowledge.

The attitude of the music therapist is of utmost importance when working with chemically dependent individuals (Kinney & Leaton, 1983). A positive attitude, including a belief that the songwriting process can have a productive outcome, conveys a sense of hope to the clients (Corey & Corey, 1982). When chemically dependent clients sense that the therapist has a sincere interest in their well-being and in their ability to develop in constructive ways, they will feel more comfortable expressing themselves (Corey, 1985). Trust and communication can also be established when the music therapist is open with him- or herself, as well as open to lifestyles and values that differ from his or her own (Corey & Corey, 1982). According to Corey and Corey (1982), this type of therapeutic relationship enables the music therapist to exercise courage by taking risks and empathically confronting patients who expose inconsistencies during the songwriting process. In addition, a healthy relationship allows the patients, in turn, to accept feedback which promotes honest and accurate self-reflection. Furthermore, the music therapist who has motivation to gain self-knowledge is more likely to have healthy self-esteem and provide a genuine role model for chemically dependent clients (Corey & Corey, 1982).

### Summary

With adequate understanding of the characteristics associated with the chemically dependent population, music therapists can incorporate therapeutic objectives into songwriting and lyric analysis in a manner consistent with the treatment philosophy of the facility. In order for songwriting to be successful, music therapists must be willing to risk and trust their own therapeutic techniques, with confidence that the songwriting process will enhance the self-esteem, self-expression, and interpersonal communication skills of chemically dependent individuals.

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