

By Sean Ridgeley
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Through music, Renee Morecombe figures she can enrich the lives of people with autism. So much so, she is trying to start a program at Shamrock Farm, an autism centre in St. John's.

If successful, Morecombe won't rely solely on her vocal or musical talents. As a music therapist, there are a number of methods she uses, including guided imagery and music, active listening, singing, music and movement, wheelchair dancing, and instrument playing.

Morecombe is one of the more than 300 accomplished musicians that make up the Canadian Association of Music Therapy. Members evaluate clients interested in music therapy and determine how to best serve them.

Research shows music therapy works for a host of reasons. For example, music with a tempo that matches the relaxed heart rate is proven to physiologically slow a person's heart rate and lower

their blood pressure. It is results like these that warrant the use of music in childbirth as well as pain and stress management.

“Music therapy works for a multitude of populations, people, and situations,” said Cathy Weldin of Truro, Nova Scotia, a music teacher and music therapist with a Master’s in music therapy.

“There isn’t a person I know who doesn’t respond to music.”

Including Morecombe, there are just two music therapists in Newfoundland and Labrador. While researching employment opportunities, she discovered many places could benefit from music therapy, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, and community-based programs. She decided to pursue it as a career, which required a six-month internship on top of a four-year music therapy degree.

“All music therapists are required to take several psychology courses, and human biology or anatomy courses as well as all the core music courses,” explains Cynthia Bruce, president of the Atlantic Association for Music Therapy.

“Our area of expertise is in how music affects human behaviour.”

Currently completing her internship at St. Patrick’s Mercy Home, Morecombe is negotiating with Shamrock Farm to implement a music therapy program there in January. She’s optimistic.

Years of research and utilization of music therapy have shown particularly extraordinary effects on those with autism.

For example, one individual may have trouble talking, so a music therapist may introduce singing. This can serve as a bridge to communicating with speech because the brain accesses it differently. In turn, the child may improve their ability to interact with others.

Morecombe says music acts as a motivator, reinforcer and mediator for many people, and can do the same for many more.

“I encourage people to evaluate the role music plays in their lives and look into how it can benefit them further.”

She figures more organizations and facilities haven't capitalized on music therapy because they aren't aware of it. She and her association hope to change that.

"I feel it's due to the lack of knowledge about creative arts therapies, such as music therapy, art and dance therapy," says Morecombe. "These are recognized allied health professions, but the awareness of them is minimal."

Explains Bruce: "As the numbers of accredited music therapists doing good work in the field increases, the acceptance of this therapeutic modality will increase."