

Aprajita Saxena Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 72

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Tanya Griffiths 00:59

Hello, and thank you for tuning in to Discover Stories on Re-imagine Radio. My name is Tanya Griffiths, your host and a student intern with vans while completing my social justice practicum. Today I have the gift of talking with Aprajita Saxena. Aprajita is a certified music therapist and the manager for the music therapy center which is supported by the Canadian Music Therapy Fund. In her journey as a music therapist, she has had the opportunity to work with children and older adults with varying goals, mental health needs and cultural backgrounds. Her clinical work is rooted in a person centered approach that involves the use of music to connect and support individuals with their holistic wellness goals. Her recent research initiatives have focused on building advocacy around the use of creative art therapies for mental health in North America and India. Additionally, she is working towards incorporating Indian classical music and performative theory contexts to understand its impact on relaxation and emotional regulation within international audiences. Hi, Aprajita thank you for joining us today. How are you?

Aprajita Saxena 02:16

Hi, Tanya, thank you so much for having me today. It's my pleasure to be here and I'm feeling good. Yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 02:23

Wonderful. Okay, I love asking this question to music therapists because I feel like there's always something new and different that they have to add. So what does music therapy mean to you?

Aprajita Saxena 02:45

Yeah. Firstly, I love that you've interacted with other music therapists, because often when I speak to someone, they have not even heard about music therapy. So this is such a refreshing change. So I mean, while there is a very clinical definition that is used to describe music therapy by the Canadian Association of Music Therapists, for me personally, if I were to describe it, I would say that I consider music to be a powerful resource to develop human connection, that is not intrusive, yet to support emotional health, physical health, and overall well being. And so when music is used intentionally to encourage creative self expression and therapeutic settings, then it can help achieve clinical goals in our safe space. So that's what music therapy looks like, for me, personally.

Tanya Griffiths 03:44

Oh, that's so beautiful. Yeah, I love how you phrase that, and how that uniquely means for you in your relationship to music therapy to. Um, and I know that you've had quite the journey coming to Canada as well. So can you share more about what brought you to being a music therapist for the Music Therapy Center in Canada?

Aprajita Saxena 04:12

Yeah, so I think I moved my whole life from India to Canada to pursue music therapy, and practice and, but specifically to the Music Therapy Center. I mean, I was living in Montreal before this, and there were two reasons why I was interested to like work at a Music Therapy Center. And I've known about it all through while I was studying in Montreal, and just getting my degree and I've known about the center, but one of the main reasons was that it is a nonprofit clinic, which means that the Music Therapy Center is constantly trying to get financial grants so as to be able to offer fully funded or low cost sliding scale sessions to clients and caregivers that experience socioeconomic disadvantage. So that resonated deeply with me and my worldview, to be, you know, dismantling systemic barriers and making services inclusive as best as we can. And it's also fully accessible clinic in Toronto at a convenient location, which is further adds to the equity lens that I, you know, truly want to bring to my own personal and professional journey. So that was the main thing that struck me at first. And the second thing, I think one of the cool things about the Music Therapy Center is that it's a space where you get to meet other music therapists, which is not often possible, because usually the way our profession works, it's like music therapists are either working individual contracts in different hospices, long term care homes, educational settings, or doing virtual sessions or have their own private practice. So in that sense, it can be quite isolating, and not always have opportunities to interact

with other music therapists outside of conferences or workshops. So I just love that I can meet other music therapists while at work, and have peer supervision with them, share a meal, and just chat and just, you know, feel more supported in our network. So yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 06:23

Yeah! That definitely makes such a huge difference in the experience of being a therapist as well, of having that sense of community. I see how important it is for you to be able to offer services that can reach people who also need it, but might be at a socioeconomic disadvantage. So yeah, that sounds like you've found a place where you can, like, fulfill your values, and what's most important to you.

Aprajita Saxena 06:57

Absolutely, yeah, that's that's exactly how I feel. Yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 07:00

Oh, that's so beautiful. And it's so special to have too, because I feel like many people who are in private practice, don't get to experience that, especially that community sense, unless they already have, you know, very strong roots within the, like counselor community or psychology community within their own city, I guess.

Aprajita Saxena 07:26

Yeah, and especially in your early years, as a music therapist, or as a therapist in general, these factors can really help shape your journey and for you to feel fulfilled and like lead a purposeful, professional journey and experience.

Tanya Griffiths 07:41

Yeah. And did you say that you were in Montreal before this? Like, did you just move for the job?

Aprajita Saxena 07:49

That's right, like I moved to Toronto, because I had to because I don't speak French. And it was going to be a little bit of a challenge. And especially in therapy, you know, it's important to be able to speak the language that people connect with. Even though therapists are constantly learning music from different cultures and different languages. But just taking the medium of interaction was slightly difficult to navigate in that sense. So

yeah, it was my roots. I moved to Toronto without a job. But I started looking and yeah, that's how this worked out for me.

Tanya Griffiths 08:29

Okay. Oh, amazing. And I love the way you ended that, because that actually brings a good segue into my next question, which is you incorporate Indian classical music to your approach and music therapy. And I think it's incredible and intriguing, as you're intentionally embodying and integrating parts of your culture into a therapeutic approach within the Canadian landscape, which is seen as a multicultural society. So can you expand more on this part of your story that you get to experience and share with your clients?

Aprajita Saxena 09:05

Yeah. I really appreciate that question, because it's not often that I get to talk about this or even bring it in my practice. So my training has, as a musician, primarily been in North Indian classical singing back in India and I continue to take training with my guru or my mentor, based in India, I do it virtually now. But whenever I go back, we do it in person. And so I do feel most connected to this music and have used it as my own tool for emotional regulation and relaxation, I think in times of stress and difficulty. So just having that personal experience with it as I grew up in India, and now as an adult in a different part of the world. I have been very curious as to how Western audiences would associate with this sort of music, which is so deeply rooted in my life. So I have had the opportunity to, you know, use it in workshops and wellness sessions and with a few of my clients in Canada who have not been exposed to this type of music. And it's been very interesting as to how people from other parts of the world engage with it. So you know, just to get into a little bit of technicality. Like, let's say there are seven notes in a major scale. And these seven notes sound different, like they would sound different if it's sung in a Western classical setting, and it would sound - like if I were to sing it, just the do - re - mi, you know, the way it would sound would be like *[SINGS A DEMO: do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do]*, but if I were to sing just these seven notes in the north Indian classical style, it would sound something like *[SINGS A DEMO]*. Oh, so it's just a seven notes, but it's approached so differently. You know, even though one may not know why it's sounding different, one can automatically hear that, you know, it sounds different. So just in Indian classical music, there are many different scales and many different modes that associate with a certain emotional value. There is an emotional quality attached to it, like some notes may generate a feeling of love, some might be more melancholic. And this is more general, it's not to say that people will always feel that emotion. But it's safe to say in general, that people in North India who would listen

to it might feel these emotions, because that's how we've been conditioned to receive it. And so I was interested to see how people who have no background whatsoever in this music and how would they connect with it? If they were to hear an improvisation? Or if they were to engage in an improvisation, then how would they experience this? And, you know, how, what kind of emotions are evoked for them? Where does it land in their body, what kind of images if any, come up for them? And all of these initiatives are done with the purpose of bringing people to a space of self regulation and relaxation, because research has shown that Indian classical music has the ability to provide that. But again, the audience within the research is more, you know, the North Indian population. And, again, this music can also be triggering, which is why it's important that these experiences are explored in the presence of a certified music therapist, you know, who can hold space in a safe way, validate these tough emotions and find a way to redirect them into feeling grounded. So in all of the little experiences I've had, so far, I've had such unique conversations with people after these improvisational experiences. And, you know, even though they might have felt very different emotions, than the one I might be feeling, many different images might have come up for them. But they've all been able to say that they can use it as a tool for relaxation and for feeling grounded. So of course, these are very qualitative feedback, and very limited, but yeah, this is why I'm on a journey to try this more and see how people feel about it.

Tanya Griffiths 13:55

Wow, I am just in awe, really, of this and of your work. And I'm so glad that you even shared just that scale and just that like comparison, because I was so moved, when you shared the Indian classical scale. It was just it was such a different experience for me and for my body to hear that. There are these memories that came up of watching Bollywood movies. And it was just like so beautiful to like to sit with that because there's this like flow, or like there's this like connection between all of those notes. My music experience has been somewhat limited even though I practiced piano for 10 years growing up, I kind of fell out of it. I don't think I ever really loved it too, as a as a child, it was sort of, like, encouraged to do that by my parents. So my jargon and music is limited, but I was just like, so, so moved by it. And I think that it holds this, as you said, like this depth of emotion in each of those notes. And, and what that elicits out of a client, for example, can be very specific to their worldview, or their upbringing and their cultural contexts. So I can see how there's so much to uncover within those notes. And how bringing that into a space, you would definitely need a certified music therapist, because there's so much that can come up because of it without even knowing that it could. So I yeah, I'm, I'm just so amazed, honestly.

Aprajita Saxena 16:09

Thank you for sharing your own experience. I mean, if it were a different setting, you know, we could have, we would have gone deeper with that, because there's so much value and just what you're experiencing why and how that connects with the way you navigate life. And yeah, so thanks for sharing that. Yeah, of

Tanya Griffiths 16:26

Yeah, of course, I was. Yeah, I was just very moved - so, so moved, when, when all you did was just do the scale - that's all you did. Also very beautifully, by the way. You have such a beautiful voice.

Aprajita Saxena 16:39

Thank you so much, Tanya. You're so kind. Thank you.

Tanya Griffiths 16:42

Of course, wow. Oof! Okay, um, I'm gonna sit with this emotion later on. Because this is not about me, this is about you. But yeah, wow. I guess this question sort of integrates this conversation as well. But in one of our earlier conversations, you shared how being an immigrant woman, bilingual, a visible minority, and having a Buddhist practice are salient aspects of your identity. In what ways do you see music therapy serving as a bridge between different cultural communities, and how do you foster inclusivity and connection through your work?

Aprajita Saxena 17:23

Yeah. I think I'd like to talk a little bit about my Buddhist practice here. It's a philosophy that I've been practicing for over nine years, in India, and now in Canada. And so I've had the chance to meet a lot of people who practice this philosophy, but come from very different cultural backgrounds, identify with different religions, gender identities, belief systems. But practicing this philosophy was one of my early experiences to just come together as a community of different people. And also, it reveals to me how people who are so different from each other, can still engage in dialogue to understand how in our own unique ways, we can be altruistic and contribute to our society, just as we are and where we are. And so because of my other parallel, important connection with music, I've always thought of how music can be used in dialogue, in an accessible way for all. So I think one unique aspect about music therapy from traditional talk therapy is that it can be done in group settings. And a group music therapy session automatically means individuals coming together from all walks of life. Again, possibly very different cultural backgrounds, social classes to

especially you know, when we provide funding for sessions, so even that aspect can be very different. People can be from different social classes, ethnicities, even clinical backgrounds and diagnosis could vary a little bit, depending on what the group goals are. People can have different political views and and just, you know, people are so different from each other. And so, I think here's an immediate opportunity in a group music therapy setting to use music in a way that's purposeful, inclusive, respectful to each participating member. And, at the same time encouraging for each of them to lean into the process of, you know, expressing themselves. That involves music making, involves improvisation, it involves listening to music together, and feeling safe and held through all of it. So it is important to structure the sessions in a way that can limit disruptions in because, of course, with such varied backgrounds coming together, it's it's hard to predict what the session flow could be like, and it could be a negative experience for someone. So, you know, sometimes using improvising as an intervention, you know, improvising music offers a creative, nonverbal way of expressing thoughts and feelings. And it's a, it's a non judgmental space, it can be easily approached with the way you set up the sessions, the kind of instruments you've put in place for the participants that are not hard to play that might have one way of playing so that everyone is feeling not scared, but actually excited to participate in the music making, because it can be intimidating for people who have no musical background, and with so many other people in the room, so of course, a music therapist would find a way to make sure while you're structuring sessions, that all of these aspects are taken into consideration. And of course, not to say that it's bad to have a negative experience, you know, all of the experiences are welcomed. And even if there is a negative experience, then how does a music therapist use music as a structure within the group and how as a group, we can hold space for these negative feelings to just empower one another through music and I guess just humanity.