

Aprajita Saxena Pt. 2 | Discover Stories Episode 73

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Tanya Griffiths 01:00

There's like lots of components to it too. And I see that you're like a facilitator within that group. And all at the same time, you're, you're trying to be considerate of all these experiences and hold space for all these experiences and also accommodate too and, and be prepared for when things come up that, you know, as they do. But that is such a gift to have, like music as this medium to share with a group of people and how that acts as something that can bring people together. Even though they, you know, individually, they might be different, come from different backgrounds. Music is also I'd say, something that invites people into the present. I'd love to experience that because I've never, up until like, late last year, I never really considered music therapy as something that I'd want to experience. But the more I've talked about it with music therapists, the more it's actually inviting. And the more it's like, Oh, it doesn't necessarily have to be about like, unpacking all of your trauma through words or, you know, through all these different techniques that you need to be doing by yourself. But it can also be within community and through a medium such as music. That is also very powerful. So, that's incredible that you get to do that work.

Aprajita Saxena 03:00

Yeah, I think, you know, just a little bit of self disclosure. For me, too, personally, when I did talk therapy, it was so valuable, for sure. But I think I also come from a context where mental health is stigmatized so much that I actually ended up taking my first therapy session only when I moved to Canada. And also because it was a prerequisite for me, as I was applying to my degree. And I talked about this even in my interview for for the music

therapy program. And after a few years I, I tried to do, I decided to do a music therapy session for myself and go for one and I realized, you know, like talk therapy took me so many sessions to actually authentically reveal myself because I had internalized at an unconscious level, the stigma that it was so hard for me to talk about things. But music immediately unleashed everything. And, you know, that's where I felt the power that it was a, it was actually the facilitator between the music therapist and me that had the therapist to not do it in an intrusive way. And for me to just do it in a comfortable way. And yeah, I just feel like and that's why I continue to engage in that process, because it's, it's just, I wish I could quantify that experience in you know, in a logical way, but it's just, it's been so impactful in my life.

Tanya Griffiths 04:34

Yeah, wow. It's - sorry, I keep saying the word wow - and that really is because I'm just so amazed, because they feel like this is a new world for me and I'm still exploring it. But I can see that I could see how that difference between talk therapy and music therapy for you. Also I really relate to that too with being from the Philippines and it being hard to verbally talk about our issues without being labeled as too complaining or lazy or ungrateful. It was such an experience for me to come to Canada as well and go to therapy and use words, within a safe space too. Talk therapy has been important for me, especially in the beginning of my, my journey, being a client within therapeutic setting, and soon being the psychotherapist in the therapeutic setting. But I, I also recognize how coming from India, and also growing up, like probably watching hundreds of Bollywood movies, and it just being embedded in like pastime and culture, maybe even like get together, and being part of that, I think it also embeds that into the subconscious to have relating feelings to that. And from the handful of Bollywood movies that I've watched, like you really feel it too when the character is sad and somber, and like really going through it, that the music reflects that. Like in its core, I think how music therapy has been a part of your journey, too. It definitely, yeah, reflects the cultural context of what you've grown up in, and how that plays a role in who you are now, as a music therapist.

Aprajita Saxena 06:53

Yeah, for sure. And I agree, like talk therapy has been so valuable for me, like now, I'm advocating it back home to all my friends, everybody, you know, because music therapy is still growing. And like there isn't much access easily. Even talk therapy still growing in India, but still, there's more access to it. So, you know, I I agree. And that's just the meshing of these two worlds can bring so much change. And I think the collective mental health of individuals across the world.

Tanya Griffiths 07:31

Do you have clients as well in India? Or is it predominantly just mostly in Toronto?

Aprajita Saxena 07:40

So I did have until last year, and I do sometimes I work with an NGO back in India as well. And I do monthly sessions, sometimes wellness sessions. And sometimes I go back, and when I go back to India, I try to go for at least four weeks. So sometimes I connect in person with some clients. But currently, I don't have anyone in India. But that is also part of my goal that I want to be able to see clients, both in India and Canada. And also thanks to the virtual world that is possible.

Tanya Griffiths 08:17

That's incredible that you get to be within like both contexts, because I think it's something that, like, I'd love to have as well and be able to offer as well. And speaking of that, are there any stories you can share that have stayed with you and have been impactful to you personally and your career?

Aprajita Saxena 08:41

Yeah, I think all my clients inspire me, like, even without that being the intention, it's just the privilege to experience sessions with them. It's, yeah, like that all of them have been so inspiring. But I think there's this one, one client that I worked with, who is an eight year old boy, and had severe behavioral disorder, and so had a lot of violent tendencies and was removed from school because, you know, he was just being violent and had ADHD and was just being treated as someone who cannot fit in this regular school, as I put in quotations. So lots of problematic things over there. But he was referred to music therapy, and he didn't have any, any experience with music, but they thought that he's young, and he might benefit from maybe just trying to learn an instrument in a therapeutic setting or just trying to do something with music as a distraction. So that's how he was referred to music therapy and we had the opportunity to work for a year together. And at that point, he was going to school once a week. And the rest of the days, he was not sort of allowed to be there unless he exhibited certain behaviors. And so of course, he was also in other different therapies, simultaneously, but music was another one that I had the opportunity to offer him. And, you know, after a few assessment sessions, we realized that he really loved just sitting on the piano and playing certain notes. And that's how we started to meet in sessions, he would come, he would sit on the piano, and he would start playing. And slowly, I would start to like, Okay, I would like put little sticker notes on, let's say, a blue

scale, and I'd be like, you want to just try playing these sticker notes. And I would, you know, expose him to different sounds like the blue scale, or the Lydian mode, just different sounds, and he would, he would be very eager to try improvising. And I saw that slowly, he started to take risks, you know, he was playing notes that were even outside of the stickers. And before that, he would not even play all of the sticker notes, he would just play one or two, because he was scared. And, you know, soon it became sort of clear that the reason for his violent tendencies was because of a lack of self esteem. And really, to sort of build that to the music and how he can find something where he's feeling validated, he's feeling successful, and it's set up for him in a way that's accessible, and he feels connected to it. And so he would come every time. And then his parents would tell me like, "Oh, my God, he wants a keyboard. Is it worth it? Like, are you teaching him something?" I'm like, "No, we're just playing. and he's playing music." And finally, over the years, he ended up creating three pieces of piano. And all by himself, like he improvised, and I supported him on the drums, and it was just him. And he, he had very powerful names for each of those, you know, and just for the sake of confidentiality, I wouldn't reveal them. But he named each of them and they all signified things that were important to him and things that he had unlocked in his own experience. And he, and he actually gave it names in his own language - another language that he spoke. And that actually showed me that, you know, I don't know how much an eight year old boy understands culture, at least, at this point, or the context that this is his context and how he makes meaning of it. But the fact that he chose to not name it in English, even though all of our sessions are in English, he chose to name them, he chose to name his album, in that language. You know, just showed to me, especially because for me, it's so important - my cultural identity. It just showed to me that it's interesting that at just that age, you know, even though we haven't even talked about it at all, it's coming up. And it was just valuable for me to just experience that. And he finally integrated back into school, three days a week after one year of our sessions. And it happened organically, it went from one day to two days to three days. And then finally, he was at four days. So while those are the tangible, visible wins, I think the other wins were that, you know, he felt confident to just navigate friendships, he was not violent with his friendships, he was more tolerant at home as his parents were seeing or he was able to communicate his emotions. And when he was not feeling regulated, he would just ask for the keyboard like, I just want to play music. And even his parents understood that that is his way of regulating himself. So I think it was truly a wholesome experience for me, and which, you know, I will hold on to, as I continue on.

Tanya Griffiths 14:08

What a beautiful story that is so heartwarming and wholesome, and really speaks to the power of having a therapeutic relationship that's rooted in values of, for example, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. And, yeah, the power of music, too. I was so touched, when you're talking about how he ended up naming it in a different language that he spoke in. And seeing how like those parts of himself were also coming up through the way he interacted with the music and those sessions with you. It's such a beautiful journey too. And to sit here and to listen to that story is also such a privilege and such a gift and something that we get to share with our audience. Yeah, I I'm kind of speechless right now, to be honest. Haha!

Aprajita Saxena 15:15

Like, I feel that yeah, because for me too, it was an honor to be, you know, a music therapist and his journey and, and, and to see how he independently chose to use the music. There were times when he would come so angry and would just want to angrily hit the keys and and you know that there was space for that I was like, "Oh, that's interesting, your music sounds angry" and he said, "I am angry." And I'm like, is the piano helping? And he's like, I don't think so I think I need something louder. Like, "here's the drums," you know, and then he would move to the drums and he'd be like, okay, yeah. And then talk about what made him angry without me even asking him you know, he just let it all out. So, you know, the music was speaking, I didn't even like, you know, he just came and chose to play angrily or like that was anger for him - playing loudly - let's say was anger in his definition. So, yeah, so many layers that I got to experience. And yeah, I also, I just feel so lucky to have that.

Tanya Griffiths 16:20

And for him to also experience a space where he's allowed to be himself as he is. Because I can imagine as an eight year old, being in school, which is very structured, like being part of an institution, it's very, like, morality is very cutthroat, very black and white. And then, you know, him being categorized as something that wasn't up to a certain standard, I think is also disheartening for an eight year old child. And then coming to you, and then being just allowed to, to hit the drums or hit the keyboards and to just let it all out, must be liberating for him. And even as you shared earlier about how a lot of his violent behavior was, because he felt insecure, and not as confident, and then him building a sense of self through music. I think I honestly don't know how old this this kid is now, but I think that it must have stuck with him, and it was a pivotal time in his life too.

Aprajita Saxena 17:41

Yeah, I feel that and I hope that stays.

Tanya Griffiths 17:48

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that. Well, this is kind of a pivot from the previous topics you've been talking about. But as I mentioned earlier, the Music Therapy Center is supported by the Canadian Music Therapy Fund. Can you tell us more about this fund and how people may receive granting through it?

Aprajita Saxena 18:12

Yeah, so the Canadian Music Therapy fund is based out of Toronto, but we do, we do offer grants, twice a year to music therapists who might be creating certain programs. And that's across Canada. And we do offer some granting support for that. If there are people who want to avail music therapy services, and you know, may not have the financial resources to pay market rate, and that's absolutely okay. They can just reach us at our website, or to our Instagram or LinkedIn, wherever they find themselves mostly, you know, scouting for, like their own ways to like, look for therapy, you can please visit us online. And we can we have programs, we have sessions that we can offer that are fully funded or low cost. And because we are constantly raising funds and writing for grants through family foundations or government organizations, we also have individual donors just like you or me, you know, who donate and we do, like, some fundraising events to the year so that, you know, we can continue to offer fully funded and low cost sessions. And we also have, you know, clients who just pay US market rate when they can and support us and being able to support others. So, that's a little bit about how the grants and the funding at the Music Therapy Fund works currently.

Tanya Griffiths 19:53

Okay. Amazing. It's great that there are a handful of ways to sort of get involved or to receive support from from the Fund because I also know that there's a handful of us from Vancouver Adapted Music Society that actually didn't know it existed. Until I heard about you through a friend. So yeah, I'm glad it exists, I'm glad people can have access to it. And hopefully, if anybody who's tuning in would like to try it out, and who experience barriers to receiving the support that they deserve and need, then you can also reach out. We'll make sure to put the your website link in the description box so that people can find that easily. And as we move on towards the end of our conversation, I just wanted to hold space, if there was anything else that we haven't talked about, that you'd like to express with our audience.

Aprajita Saxena 21:00

I mean, nothing that I can think of. But I truly want to thank you, Tanya, for having this discussion, for inviting me. I think it's so important to talk about music therapy and advocate for it. So we always feel grateful as a community to be able to have spaces where we can talk about it and how it can support mental health and overall health goals and holistic living. So just thank you so much for inviting that today.

Tanya Griffiths 21:33

Yeah, thank you, too. Thank you so much Aprajita, like, I'm so moved. Honestly, I feel like so many changes were made in my, I don't know, neurons, in my brain chemistry. And, in terms of my body I feel this, this gratitude too for for music therapy, even though I haven't experienced it - how it's changing people's lives and creating community and inclusivity and a space for people to be themselves. I think that's incredible. And you're right, like it's still growing. So I hope there's more of that, like talk and consideration of, of music therapists and music therapy. So thank you, thank you so much. And thank you for being here too. Thank you for putting in the time towards this conversation.

Aprajita Saxena 22:31

Absolutely. It was all my pleasure. Thank you so much, Tanya.