

*FINDING COMMON GROUND.*

*ETHICAL MUSIC-BASED STRATEGIES IN COUNSELING*

# ETHICAL USE OF MUSIC IN COUNSELING: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, BOUNDARIES, AND CLINICAL DECISION MAKING

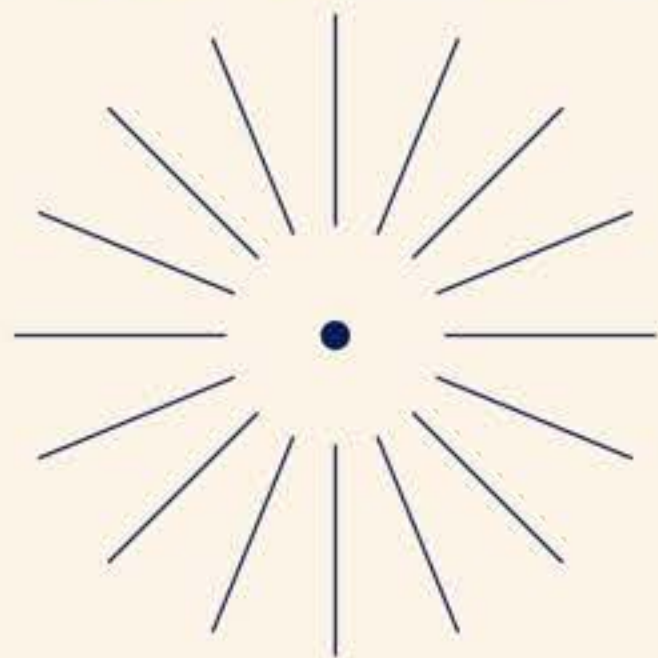


Presented by: **Dr. Jena Collins:** Support Specialist Coordinator, Full Spectrum Learning.

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**Hailey Mason:** Support Specialist, Full Spectrum Learning; Graduate Assistant.

# ABOUT OUR TEAM





# LEARNING OBJECTIVES



- Understand and apply ethics and scope of practice for using music in counseling
- Know the difference between counseling interventions vs. music therapy
- Identify appropriate music-based strategies for counseling
- Explore how music supports:
  - Emotions
  - Identity
  - Therapeutic relationships

## **Mission Statement**

To equip counselors with the ethical clarity, and awareness needed to intentionally integrate music into counseling — with an adaptable client-focused lens.



# Perspectives



# INTERVIEW FINDINGS: VOICES OF TENNESSEE PRACTITIONERS

Behavioral Health Clinician: Jakayla Littles, MHC  
Counseling Program Coordinator, APSU: Dr. Eva Gibson  
Music Therapist Assistant Professor: Lauren Edmonds, LMT  
Counseling Private Practice Owner: Stephanie Anderson, LPC

## Themes

## Quotes

- 🎵 Perceived Lack of Usage
- 🎵 Communication Deficits between Music Therapists and Clinical Counselors
- 🎵 Necessity of Specialized Training for Ethical Competence  
(skills training, multicultural and trauma informed considerations)
- 🎵 Clinical Purpose Distinctions  
(case conceptualization and *why* music is being used)



🎵 “Music therapist may unintentionally contribute to the divide when advocacy becomes territorial, creating the impression that counselors should avoid music altogether rather than use it when in appropriate limits” (L. Edmonds, personal communication, 2026).



🎵 “Music is discussed less often than other expressive approaches, such as play therapy or art therapy, within counselor training and professional conversations “ (E. Gibson, personal communication, 2026).

# PROBLEM

Music is underused in counseling due to uncertainty about ethics, scope of practice, professional boundaries, and training.

Music remains underused in counseling.

Counselors are not leveraging how clients already use music on their own.



# SOLUTION

Counselors should seek clearer ethical guidance, training, and their own competence to gain confidence when using music.

Counselors should address uncertainties about ethics, scope-of-practice, professional boundaries, and training.

Counselors should consider how to use music more intentionally as a culturally relevant and client-focused clinical tool.



# QUICK AUDIENCE POLL

“How many of you have used music in your own life, or within sessions with clients, to help regulate emotions, cope with stress, or build rapport?”

Suggested poll answers:

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never intentionally

Scan to answer, then look around the room for patterns.

**Keep this open and Wait for Presenter to go to next poll.**



POLL QR CODE

"How many of you have used music in your own life, or within sessions with clients, to help regulate emotions, cope with stress, or build rapport?"

Sometimes

1.



Often

2.



Rarely

3.



Never intentionally

4.



# CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN MUSIC THERAPY

- Music carries cultural identity, meaning, and history
- What is calming, motivating, or emotional varies across cultures
- **Spiritual/Religious**
  - Used for worship, healing, and connection (e.g., gospel, chanting)
- **Community-Based:**
  - Group music-making emphasizes connection over individual expression
- **Storytelling:**
  - Music used to pass down traditions, values, and history
- **Regulation & Ritual:**
  - Used in daily routines, transitions, or life events

## **Best Practices**

- Ask: “What kind of music is meaningful to you?”
- Incorporate client-preferred and culturally relevant music
- Be aware of cultural norms around expression, volume, and participation
- Collaborate with families when appropriate

# Why Music in Counseling?





## CONNECTION TO THEORY

Music is present in everyone's lives. These are two ways theory can be applied to support well-being in clients.

### Sensory Integration Theory

Dr. A. Jean Ayres

Effective sensory integration supports well-being through:

Regulation  
Learning  
Attention

### Self-Determination Theory

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan

Fulfilling psychological needs support well-being through:

Autonomy  
Relatedness  
Competence

Music = a multisensory stimulus that influences all of these areas.



# WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS IN COUNSELING

## Professional Relevance:

- Fields
- Awareness & Communication between
- Therapeutic Alliance & Client Engagement
- Integration of Theoretical Orientation
- Ethical Guidance

## Personal Relevance:

- Counselor Identity Development
- Therapeutic Reflection
- Preventing Burnout
  - Self-Care
  - Confidence
  - Humility



## Client Focus:

- Music as a Natural Clinical Entry Point
- Individualized & Holistic Treatment
  - Cultural Considerations
  - Active or Passive Interventions

# ETHICS OF USE & SCOPE OF PRACTICE

- 🎵 **Align with Code of Ethics**
- 🎵 **Harm Prevention**
- 🎵 **Staying Within Your Competence**

## Competence/Training

- **ACA Code of Ethics**
  - Section C: Professional Responsibility
  - Knowledge and Compliance with Standards
  - Professional Competence
    - Boundaries of Competence
    - New Specialty Areas
    - Consultations on Ethical Obligations
    - Continuing Education
  - Scientific Basis for Treatment
  - Accurate Advertising



## Client Consideration

- Client Interest and Preferred Tools
- Culture
- Trauma Informed Lens

# DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN COUNSELOR-LED MUSIC INTERVENTIONS AND CLINICAL MUSIC THERAPY

## COUNSELOR MUSIC INTERVENTIONS

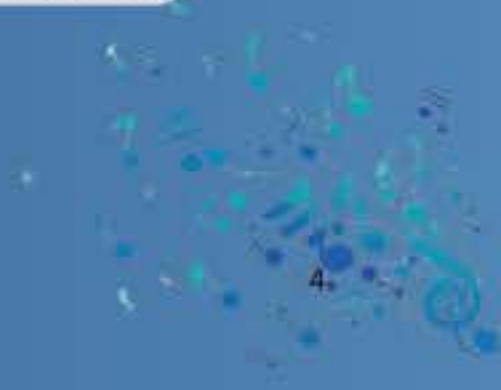
- Identify and Discuss Emotions
- Rapport and Reflection
- Emotional Expression
- Open Discussion
- Dependent on Client Needs
- Mental Processing Life Material

FENT ET AL. (2025)  
HSIAO (2014)

## MUSIC THERAPY

- Deeper Clinical Processing
- Explore Emotional and Relational Meaning
- Song writing and Music Making as Intervention
- Responses and Associations within Treatment
- Specialized Training
- Production, Reproduction, Reception Techniques

KANG ET AL. (2025)  
GLADDING (2021)





# **BENEFITS OF MUSIC ENGAGEMENT FOR CLIENTS**

## **Emotional expression and identity meaning-making:**

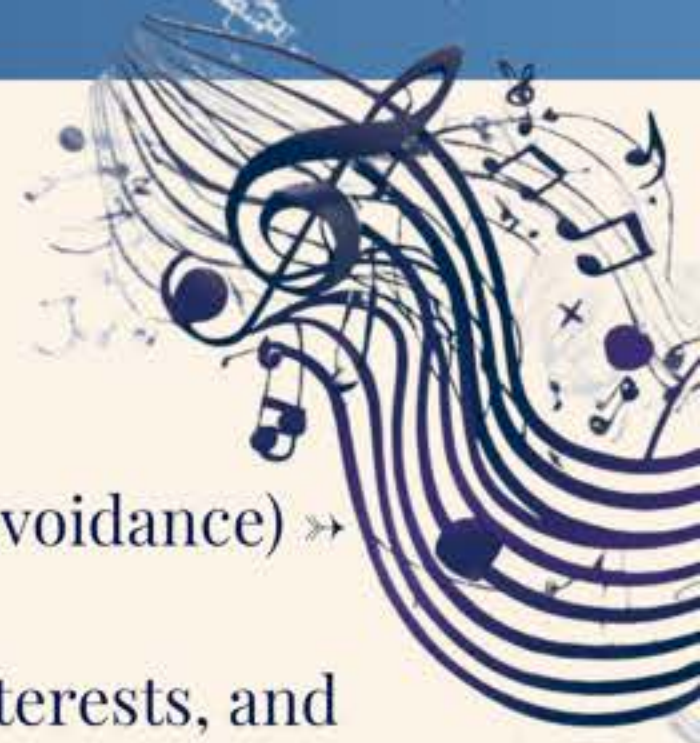
Supports therapeutic outcomes by giving clients a way to express emotions, connect personal experiences to meaning and strengthen self-understanding through listening or playlist creation (Kang et al., 2025).

## **Physiological Calming:**

Music can influence stress and arousal through relaxation, reduced tension, and nervous-system regulation, which may support emotional stability and symptom reduction (Kang et al., 2025).



# BARRIERS & LIMITATIONS



## Professional System Barriers

- **No standardized ethical code**
  - Unclear ethics & scope → hesitation
- **Limited research** → no manualized approach
- **Communication gaps** → between counselors and music therapists
- **Education and Formal Training**
  - → Limited graduate programs include arts-based training for Mental Health Counselors
- **Risk of scope-of-practice violations** → when uninformed

## Potential Risks


- **Maladaptive use** (rumination, avoidance) → increase in anxiety/depression
- **Impacts vary** by personality, interests, and sensory needs
- Solitary engagement may limit social benefits
- Can lead to negative impacts when the person does not have much **control** over when, where and how they interact with the music

## Bridging the Gap: Addressing these barriers

- **Hesitation and Lack of Clarity-**
  - Research - Advocate - Discuss
- **Lack of training-**
  - CEUs are offered online, in-person, local, and national conferences.
  - Consult other professionals that use music in counseling, music therapists, and supervisors.
- **Accessibility-** Stay creative.
  - Music can be created with many low-cost items and listened to on many free platforms.



# Practical Use of Therapeutic Music



This creativity lives between disciplines—counseling and music therapy.  
The question is not which side but how we hold both with integrity  
(Estrella, 2023).

# INTEGRATING MUSIC INTO YOUR PRACTICE

## – PASSIVE –



### DEFINITION

Clients listen or interact with existing music without changing or creating it.

### PURPOSE

- Emotional Regulation/ Processing,
- Stress Reduction,
- Self-Awareness,
- Insight,
- Mood Regulation

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Counselor not imposing music taste or values.
- Music can be associated with trauma.

### POPULATIONS

- Applicable to Diverse Populations
- Limited Resource Settings



### EXAMPLES

Mood awareness with songs, Lyric analysis, Mindfulness with music, Client meaningful song sharing, Background music

# Passive Music Activity

THERAPY PRINTABLES



## MUSIC THERAPY

Mental health resources that use the power of music to connect with and understand your emotions and experiences.

ACTIVITIES CREATED BY  
A MENTAL HEALTH  
COUNSELOR.



**PART 1 BUNDLE**

# INTEGRATING MUSIC INTO YOUR PRACTICE

## – ACTIVE –



### DEFINITION

Clients directly, physically, and emotionally engage in music-making or curating.



### PURPOSE

- Express emotions,
- Build engagement, social connection, and alliance,
- Improve attention and self-regulation,
- Increase positive mood,
- Somatic Nervous System regulation

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Requires more training and competence,
- Risk of pressuring client to engage,
- Discerning when to refer to a music therapist

### POPULATIONS

- Youth/Play Therapy,
- Non-Verbal,
- Group Settings,
- Clients who express explicit interest



### EXAMPLES

Drumming, Singing, Creating Playlists (Emotion, Motivation, Narrative, etc), Writing Music



# Active Music Intervention Example Drumming Feelings | Social & Emotional Learning



# Theoretical Orientation and Music Activity

Theoretical Orientation	Type	Music Activity	Purpose
<b>Adlerian Theory</b>	Active	1. Narrative Playlist of Life Stages 2. Transforming Lifestyle with Dancing Mindfulness	1. Promote insight, growth, social connection, and reorientation 2. Explore distorted beliefs and process emotion through movement
<b>Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)</b>	Passive	Empowerment Over Hurtful Words	Challenge automatic negative thoughts and create balanced self-statements
<b>Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)</b>	Passive	Mindful Music Listening	Notice and label emotions without judgment; reduce emotional reactivity
<b>Existential Theory</b>	Passive	Musical Dialogues (Individual/Group)	Broaden self-awareness, social connection, non-verbal communication, increase self-confidence
<b>Feminist Theory</b>	Passive	A Musical Chronology & Emerging Life Song	Identify disempowering beliefs and reauthor life narrative within social context
<b>Trauma-Informed / Somatic / Person-Centered</b>	Active	Therapeutic Community Drum Circle	Provide non-judgmental environment for free expression and belonging
<b>Intermodal Expressive Arts / Humanistic / Existential</b>	Active	Music-Inspired Poetic Sharing	Develop trust, empathy, and rapport through shared creative exchange
<b>Narrative Therapy</b>	Passive	1. Setting the Vibe 2. Connecting with Yourself Through Music	1. Externalize relationship with music and re-author empowering narrative 2. Explore personal narrative through a meaningful song
<b>Narrative Therapy + CBT</b>	Active	Mood Playlists	Identify emotions, examine thoughts, and author emotional story through playlists

# Developmentally Appropriate Applications



**KEY PRINCIPLE: MATCH THE ACTIVITY TO THE INDIVIDUAL'S DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL, SENSORY PROFILE, AND COMMUNICATION STYLE—NOT JUST AGE.**

## EARLY CHILDHOOD (AGES 3–5)

- Purpose: Regulation, engagement, communication
- Strategies:
  - Simple songs with repetition (hello/goodbye songs)
  - Movement + music (clapping, jumping, dancing)
  - Visual supports paired with songs

## ELEMENTARY (AGES 6–10)

- Purpose: Social skills, expression, structure
- Strategies:
  - Call-and-response songs
  - Rhythm games (turn-taking, imitation)
  - Songs for transitions (clean-up, focus time)

## HIGH SCHOOL (AGES 14–18)

- Purpose: Self-expression, coping skills, independence
- Strategies:
  - Journaling with music
  - Music for stress management (study playlists)
  - Discussing themes in music (identity, relationships)

## NEURODIVERSITY CONSIDERATIONS

- Offer sensory options (volume control, headphones, music choice)
- Use predictable structure + repetition
- Follow student preference (motivating & meaningful)
- Provide multiple ways to engage (listen, move, create)
- Respect opt-in participation (no forced engagement)

# OUR HANDS ON APPLICATION

## INTEGRATION WITH STUDENTS WITH AUTISM AND IN GROUP DYNAMICS

### MUSIC EMOTIONS:

Active Listening explored mood and emotional responses.  
Regulation: Used music to manage stress and other emotions.  
Discovery: Increased awareness of feelings.  
Expression: Provided a safe outlet for emotions.

### MUSIC IMPROVISATION:

Connection, independent and group exploration, non-verbal communication skills, and creative freedom without judgement.

### IN AND OUT PAITIENT GROUPS WITH ADOLSECENTS

Music Emotion Expression  
Music Worksheets  
Emotion Identity through Music.



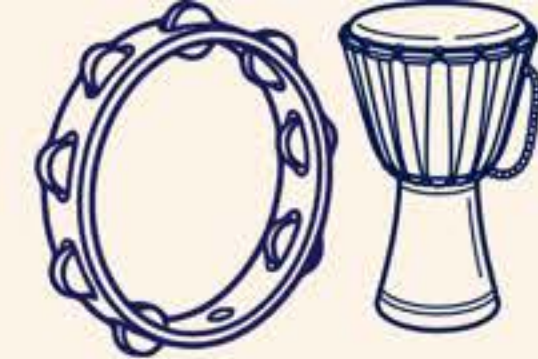
**FULL SPECTRUM LEARNING IS COMMITTED TO HELPING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER EMBRACE LIFELONG LEARNING SO THAT THEY CAN COMPLETE THEIR COLLEGE DEGREE**



**Full Spectrum Learning**



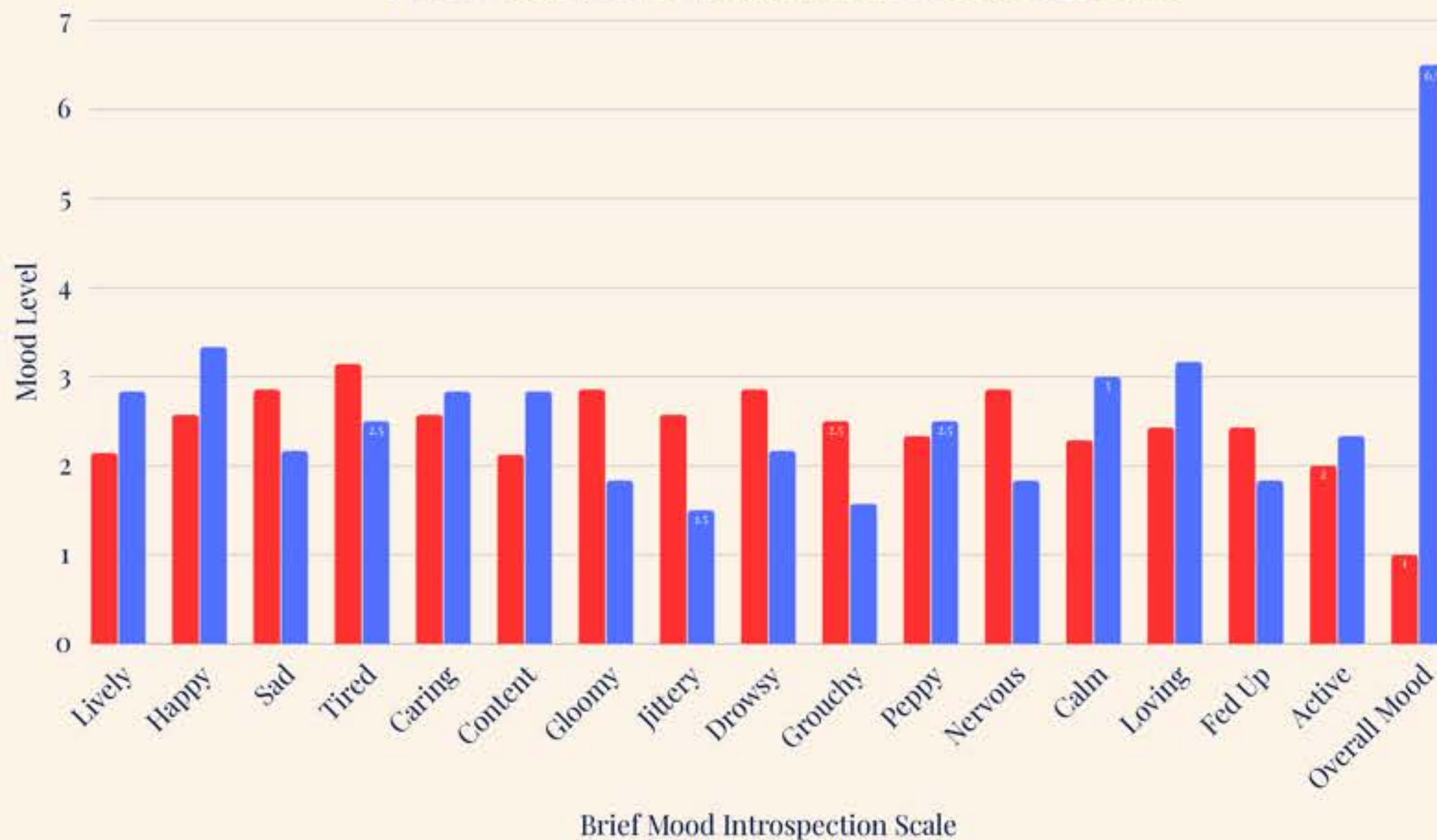
Before Event=Red



After Event=Blue

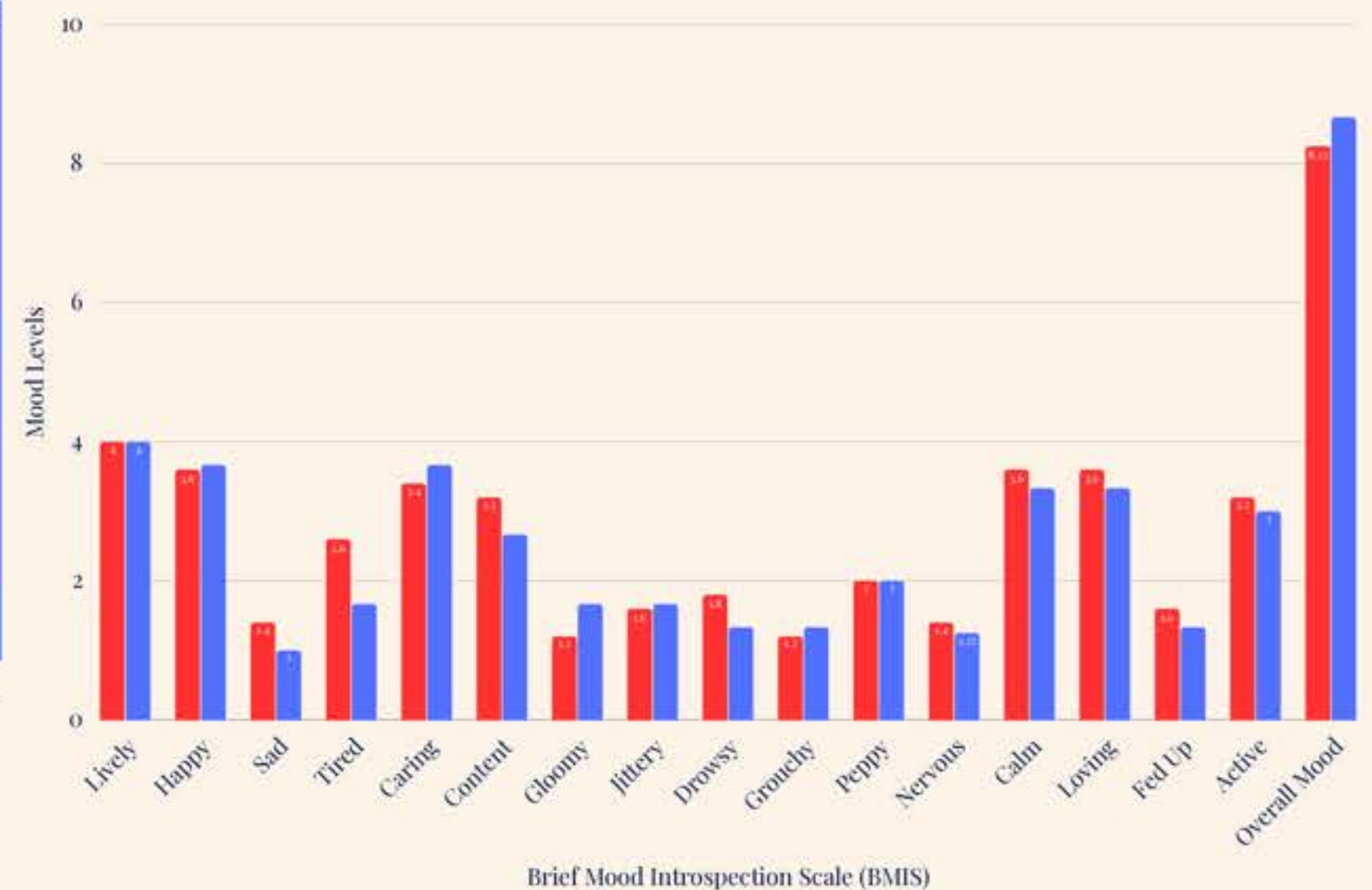
### Active Music Expression Data (Students)

7 Nerodiverse Students Participants



### Active Music Expression Data (Student Workers)

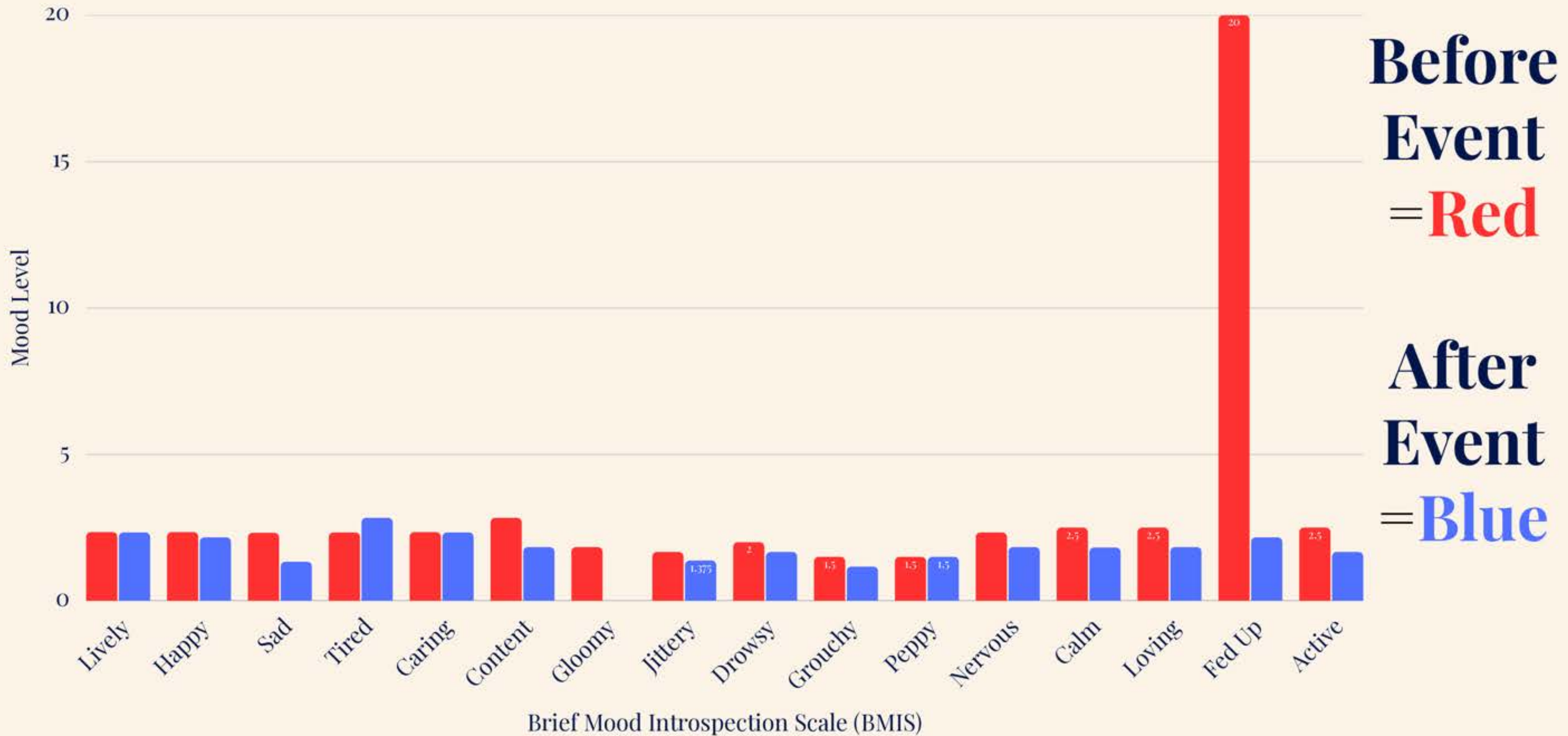
5 Nerotypical Participants





# Passive Music Listening (Students)

7 Neurodiverse Participants





**Supplemental Resources**  
**Scan QR Code.**

*Thank You!*

*Any Questions?*



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