

# REFUGEE PROJECTS IN MUSIC THERAPY: SHORT GUIDE AND CONSIDERATIONS



We are conscious that each refugee accommodation is different, and refugees' needs differ as well, so the following statements are general guidelines to offer support in this difficult situation. Please always make sure to ask for the necessary permissions before you start to work!

by EMTC



The refugee journey holds many adversities for people fleeing their home in search of safety. This results in many refugees arriving traumatized and with a possibility of developing mental health problems. It is widely known that music therapy as a non-verbal, strengths-based approach can offer an important addition to medical and psychological/ psychotherapeutic care, especially in cases when verbal communication is difficult.



Treating traumatized people requires a safe framework, most places where we work with refugees do not offer this. Psychological First Aid (PFA) principles can guide music therapy in refugee camps and shelters. These PFA components include promoting a sense of safety, calmness, self and collective efficacy, connection, and hope.



This situation leads to consequences for concepts and practice of music therapy services: consider the **temporary nature** of the situation and the **uncertain and unpredictable framework!**



Many music therapists describe their work in refugee aid as “projects” not as “treatment” and place it in the overlapping area between therapy, artistic activity, and pedagogy.



Objectives of music therapy related to the individual like psychological stabilization, relationship competence, self-efficacy are complemented by social objectives such as fostering the community, intercultural learning and overcoming the language barriers. In addition, some of the projects are oriented towards the artistic medium itself and place music as a non-verbal and non-threatening medium at the center of the work.



The music therapeutic support of refugees is a field with a high need for action. It needs flexibility, courage, and tolerance for mistakes to get involved in a process with “many unknowns”. Especially for children, music therapy groups can transform the strange and often hostile refugee camp environment to a more friendly one.



Finding an appropriate space for music therapy can be quite difficult within a transit refugee camp, so one needs to be creative on ways to delimit the required area and to eliminate distractions.



As qualified music therapists we bring a **specific know-how** to our work that helps us to survive in uncertain situations: we are **experts in improvisation**, the musical handling of the unpredictable; we consider spaces for reflection such as **supervision** as an important part of our work; we have a sensitivity for trauma symptoms and dynamics; we **know about the limits** of our effectiveness and competence. Even if we do not describe our offer as therapeutic in the clinical sense the “therapy” remains as an attitude and professional background in these non-clinical contexts.



It is important to think carefully about where help can start in a constructive, culturally sensitive, and ethically reflected while acknowledging the professional boundaries and ethical considerations in all the therapeutic support and services provided.



The characteristic of music plays the central role here: it is strongly subjective – we can anchor ourselves deeply and intimately in our own person and biography when listening and playing “our” music, and it is universal – music has the potential to connect people across temporal, cultural, and biographical boundaries.



As professionals, it is important to aim for therapeutic stabilising after traumatic experiences and exhibit unconditional acceptance for all kind of expressions of emotions, concerns, and needs.



When entering the refugee field as a music therapist, it is important to keep in mind that the refugees we meet might not have basic needs met, so we should help attend to those needs first and then proceed with music therapy services. As professionals, it is also important to seek further consultation (if applicable/available) in order to prevent possible cumulative health issues.



In case we work with refugee children, we should keep in mind that it is helpful to adopt a trauma-informed approach in our practice to enhance resiliency, well-being and hope.



Self-care is important for music therapists providing in refugee settings as well as calming down and releasing the overall stress caused by the situation at hand and the experiences shared.