



What is the Bonny Method of Guided Music and Imagery?

The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) was developed in the 1970s by Helen Bonny, a music therapist and researcher working in the USA, as a form of depth psychotherapy. It is used to help clients with wide ranging of psychological and emotional difficulties where verbal counselling of psychotherapy would be an alternative form of treatment (and where GIM can in fact also be integrated within verbal psychotherapy as a way to access and work with the creative unconscious).

The method involves the client imaging whilst listening to a 30 - 45 minute programme of classical music in a relaxed state, eyes closed, lying down. Whilst it's possible to have a shorter period of music listening (to accommodate the therapeutic hour, for example) and use other types of music, in practice the richness and range of classical music makes it especially suitable, with full length sessions lasting 1.5 to 2 hours and generally being held every two to three weeks.

Some of the core aspects of the work are outlined below. The focus is on the Bonny Method of GIM in its traditional form. This continues to be widely used along with various other forms of GIM and simpler Music and Imagery (MI) methods. These latter allow work to be undertaken with clients with wide ranging difficulties including those who have severe mental health problems and other conditions, where the Bonny Method in its original form may not be suitable ([click here for an overview of the spectrum of contemporary practice and clinical applications](#)). For ease of exposition, the client is referred to as she and the therapist as he.

Session structure

Opening discussion

The therapist helps the client identify and begin to explore his current issues and feelings. This is so as to prepare to work on them more deeply with the music.

Relaxation induction

The therapist helps the client relax deeply as she lies down on a reclining chair or couch, eyes closed. Different types of progressive body relaxation may be used depending on the kind of issue and emotion to be worked with.



Focus

The idea is for the client to be deeply relaxed but at the same time focused as she images whilst listening to the music, an experience not unlike dreaming awake. To help with this, the therapist suggests an opening image (often agreed with the client beforehand) which gives the process a suitable starting point. This could be a path representing the journey through life, to give one of many different possibilities. The therapist does not prescribe the detail of the image (what the path is like, where the client is, what the weather is like, who else is there etc.), but rather encourages the client to connect with the music to help the image to form. He then suggests to "let the music take you where you need to go".

Music travel



As the client listens to the sequence of music selected, the therapist asks open questions to support the unfolding of the client's imagery experience: e.g. "what are you experiencing now", "can you describe it (an image that has emerged)", "how are you feeling", "how does the music sound"?

The therapist's role is to support the client to become as fully and deeply involved in the experience as she can, actively engaged in it so that the process can do the rest. Whilst the therapist has an important role to play, it's important that he doesn't interfere with the process, trying to rescue the client when she is

struggling with something, for example (except in extreme circumstances). Rather, he supports the client to find her own solutions. This tends to involve her needing to stay with the experience she is having until a solution emerges authentically from within, often accessed through the experience of the music in some way. The therapist writes down what the client says (the transcript).

Creative and verbal processing

Mandala drawing or other forms of creative expression may be used afterwards to help consolidate the experience. In verbal discussion of it, the focus is on what was most important from the client's perspective. The therapist encourages the client to remain connected to the experience in thinking about its meaning. Indeed, in GIM it is most often the experience itself that transforms and heals ([click here for a video description of a imagery experience in GIM that emphasises this](#)), whilst the insights gained from reflecting on the experience can also be very important. The therapist helps the client think about how she may be able to take the experience and any insights gained into everyday life. He gives her a copy of the transcript of her imagery experience to take away.



Imagery

Clients image in different ways so that the experience is not necessarily or exclusively a visual one. It can involve other modalities such as smell or touch or be more body based. Sometimes the experience of the music itself is the main focus. There are many different levels of imagery experience, ranging from that featuring interaction with a familiar person, for example, to that which is more mythic or transpersonal in nature.

The process in GIM

The client's imagery experience emerges as a manifestation of her inner process as this unfolds in response to the music. In a deeply relaxed state, the unconscious seems able to scan the client's inner world for what needs working on, and use the music to help get the client to the places she needs to go internally to do her work. This might involve her discovering inner resources, or working through emotionally laden interpersonal issues experienced as a child, as an adult or even in the anticipated future. Healing and transformation can occur, the felt reality of which stays with the client long after therapy is finished.

Typically imagery emerges spontaneously that represents the client's core issues in metaphorical form, which is then transformed over a series of sessions, with one issue or set of interrelated issues being worked on at a time as the process gradually unfolds, driven from within with the help of the music. The experience may take place in times and places utterly beyond the realms of the client's everyday experience. It might involve becoming an animal at times, for example, or opening to the spiritual dimension of experience at other times. The unconscious seems to be endlessly creative in finding ways to explore and work on issues in GIM.

Music

A sequence of music is selected by the therapist that is intended to help the client work on her difficulties. In GIM training the music is explored in depth giving the therapist a sense of the potential of many different pieces and sequences of music (music programmes) in the work and how clients can be helped to make use of what the music has to offer. There are many different aspects to this, including helping the client work with the transference dynamics that can be generated by the experience of the music, for example.

Many of the deeper experiences in GIM occur when the client is not only very involved in the imagery process but also deeply connected to the music. This is where the music acts as a kind of dynamic archetypal container for the client's experience, allowing her to work on difficulties and experience healing and transformation as she may not otherwise, which is often in unexpected ways that yet have an authenticity and inevitability for her. In this, the music is remarkably malleable in the way it can be creatively engaged with by the client in GIM, the same music having the potential to be experienced in endless different ways as the client needs on different occasions, for example.

Guiding: a non-directive approach

The use of the word guided in the name of the therapy sometimes leads to misunderstandings. The therapist's role is to support (or guide) the unfolding of the client's imagery experience in a non-directive way, helping the client make use of the opportunities the music provides for working on problems as discussed. He doesn't tell her what to imagine as in other much simpler forms of guided

imagery and visualization. [For an article that discusses more about what guiding means in the work and the music's role in the process, please click here.](#)

Resources

[Articles about GIM including case studies](#)

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