

Finding Your Rhythm

A Guide to Using Music for Mental Wellness

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This manual can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/finding-your-rhythm.asp>.
For a hardcopy of the manual, please contact VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov.

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Chapter 1

About This Guide

Music is for every day—It can make good moments even better and help you feel energized, focused, or joyful. Think of it like a mood booster you can reach for anytime.

This guide is for Veterans who want simple ways to use music to support their health. It's especially helpful for those living in rural areas, as many of the activities can be done anywhere. The best part? You don't need to be musical to benefit. The activities are simple and scientists have shown them to be helpful. You can do them at home by yourself or with family and friends.

Music can speak to you in many ways. This can include lyrics that put feelings into words or through sound, rhythm, and melody. It can help you feel calmer, more connected, and more in control of your emotions. If you're dealing with everyday stress or working through bigger challenges, music can be with you on that journey.

This guide is not music therapy. Music therapy is a service provided by a trained professional. This guide offers music therapy activities that you can do safely at home on your own. This guide does not provide treatment or replace therapy. The goal of this guide is to support your daily well-being and self-care.

If you are experiencing significant distress, worsening symptoms, or safety concerns, reach out to a clinician at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), or dial 988 and press 1 for the Veterans crisis line. Music-based practices are designed to go with clinical care, not substitute for it.

How To Use This Guide

Think of this guide as a menu. Look through the table of contents and pick a section that interests you. Try one activity and see how it goes. You don't need to read it front to back or do every activity.

If you're already using VHA resources like "Taking Charge of My Life and Health" or the Mindfulness Coach app, this guide can fit right alongside those tools. A music session is simply spending 5-30 minutes with music. This could be listening, humming, dancing, or playing. It can become part of your daily self-care, like when you are taking a walk or practicing deep breathing.

Music doesn't have to wait for a bad day. Many Veterans find it most helpful when they use it regularly. This could be as part of a morning mood boost, a midday reset, or an evening wind-down. You can start small: one song, once or twice a week. Notice how you feel. Over time, you can do more if you want. Strong emotions can sometimes come up when listening to music. If a song brings up something that feels too big, it's okay to turn it off, switch to something neutral, or take a break. You should never feel like you have to push through an activity that doesn't feel right.

Making It Work with Limited Resources

If you have limited access to the internet or technology, you can still benefit from music-based activities. Download songs when you have Wi-Fi. Use the radio or CDs. Your own voice is always available. You can hum, sing, or make up melodies. If you need help setting up playlists, ask a family member or friend.



Chapter 2

Introduction: Why Music Matters for Mental Health and Well-Being

The Role of Music in Mental Health

Music is a tool for your whole emotional range—not just the hard parts. It can actively improve how you feel on ordinary days and help good moments feel even better.

Your body reacts when you listen to music you enjoy. Your brain releases chemicals that improve your mood and reduce stress. Research shows that music can calm the parts of your brain that control fear and anxiety. It can also lower your heart rate and blood pressure, help you sleep better, and support mood over time. You can add music to other routines like regular movement, time outside, and social connection.

Upbeat and energizing music can increase motivation and focus. It can also create feelings of joy and connection. Listening to a favorite song with someone can deepen your bond with them. You can do this when you are together or play it at the same time if you're apart. Dancing or moving to music can lift your spirits and boost energy. Music can take you from feeling okay to feeling great.

Music is powerful because it touches us on many levels at once. It can bring back memories, stir emotions, and help us feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. Songs can bring up feelings of pride, belonging, or comfort. Sometimes feelings are hard to put into words. Music can offer a way to express and release them without needing to speak. Music-based activities can work well with your mental and physical healthcare. Music supports coping with many challenges Veterans commonly face. This includes stress, difficulty sleeping, low mood, chronic pain, and feelings of loneliness. Improvements in these areas often build on each other. For example, better sleep, can improve mood, which can make it easier to stay connected with others.

What This Guide Offers

Throughout this guide, you'll find simple, step-by-step exercises using listening, movement, relaxation, and songwriting. No musical skill is required—just curiosity! Each activity is designed to be flexible enough to fit it into your daily routine. Most exercises take between 10 and 30 minutes.

Chapter 8 includes tools for setting goals and tracking your progress over time. This can help you notice what works best for you.





Chapter 3

Getting Started: Creating Your Environment

Music Can Fit Into Your Day Anywhere

Music doesn't need any special setup. There are many ways to add music to your day. You could put on a playlist while you do the dishes, hum along to the radio on your way to the store, or turn on something upbeat while you work in the yard. These everyday moments count. You don't need to carve out time or create a perfect environment to start. If you would like to dive deeper into a music experience, you can set up for the experience.

Setting Up Your Space

For relaxation, reflection, or stress relief, aim for a calm space with few distractions. A favorite chair, porch, or your bedroom can be a great place to start. Dimmed lights or a candle help some people settle in; others prefer natural light. Turn off the TV, put your phone on silent, and let others know you need some quiet time. Is there background noise that is distracting? Are the lights a little too bright? Is it a little chilly and you'd feel more cozy with a blanket? You can make any small changes in your control to make your space more comfortable. Your space does not need to be perfect for you to benefit. You may like different spaces for different activities.

There is no one “right” setting for everyone. These small steps signal to your brain that it’s time to slow down. If background noise is a problem, try closing a window or wearing headphones.

A note about emotional safety: Music can sometimes bring up strong memories or feelings. Consider what helps you feel steady if that happens. Some people prefer privacy; others feel safer near a supportive person. Having a reset plan—like switching to a neutral playlist or doing a grounding exercise (like looking around and naming five things you can see, four things you can feel, three sounds you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste)—can help.

What You’ll Need

All you need is a way to play music, like a smartphone, radio, or CD/record player. Streaming services work great if you have internet. If you don’t have internet, CDs or radio work just as well. If you use a free streaming service, ads can interrupt a relaxation activity. Downloading songs ahead of time can help avoid that.

Headphones can help you immerse yourself and block distractions. A notebook can be useful for jotting down how you feel before and after activities. Some activities involve rhythm. For those, you can use a drum, shaker, or household items like a wooden spoon and pot.

Picking the Right Time

Music activities can happen whenever it is convenient for you. Most people find that relaxation activities feel most natural in moments of downtime. However, on a busy day, even five minutes in the car or before bed can be enough to make a difference. Convenience matters, and the best time is time you can actually use.

Pay attention to when you feel most stressed, most energized, or most open to trying something new. Those are good starting points.

Addressing Hesitations

The activities here aren’t about performance or talent. They’re about expression and feeling. There’s no right or wrong way to respond to music.



Chapter 4

Personalization and Adaptation

Your Music Choices Matter

Choosing the right music for you is important. Not all music affects us the same way. The music that works best for you is music that feels safe, familiar, and meaningful.

Research shows that music we connect with during late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 18–25) often has a strong emotional impact. Songs from that time may remind you of friends, first loves, military service, or big life moments. If you are currently in this age range, notice which songs feel especially meaningful right now. Those may become powerful anchors over time.

Think about what you want music to do for you at the moment. Are you trying to calm down? Get energized? Feel happier? Feel connected? Build playlists for different purposes. Having these ready makes it easy to reach for the right music at the right moment. The kinds of music you want to hear might change, depending on what's going on in your life.

A note on safety: Listening to very intense music when you're already overwhelmed may make you feel worse instead of better. If an activity makes you feel worse, change the song. You can also try a grounding technique.

Integrating with VHA Tools and Supports

Music activities work even better when combined with other VHA Whole Health tools.

The Mindfulness Coach app, available for free through the VHA, can be used in specific ways. Before listening, try a guided breathing exercise to settle your body. After music, use the reflecting or journaling feature to track how the activity affected you.

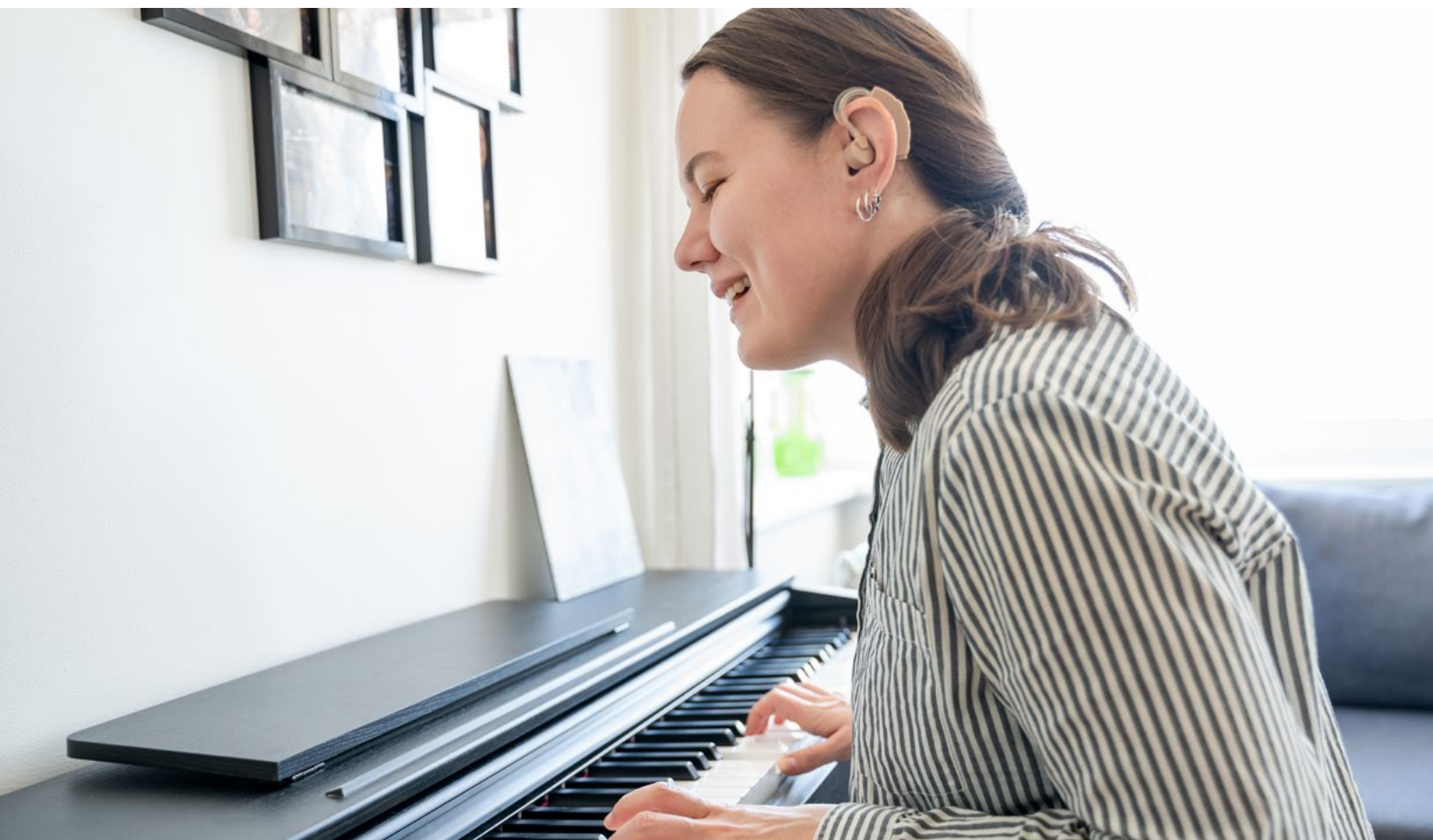
You can also use music before or during everyday stressful situations. This can include when you are stuck in traffic, before you begin a difficult conversation, or while you do chores.

Connecting with Others

Music can also be shared in many types of groups, including family gatherings, religious or spiritual communities, friend groups or social circles, or Veteran peer groups.

Adapting for Hard of Hearing or Deafness

You can modify activities to suit your physical abilities. If you have hearing difficulties, focus on rhythm and vibration. Many people with hearing loss can still feel rhythm.





Chapter 5

Noticing What Works for You

One of the most valuable parts of music-based self-help is noticing what works for you. The practices in this chapter will help you become more aware of how music affects you. Pay attention to patterns over time and know when you might benefit from more time with music.

Why Reflection Matters

When you notice how you feel before and after music activities, you create awareness. Maybe certain types of music always calm you down. Maybe drumming helps more with anger than sadness. This can make your practice more effective over time. So the next time you are overwhelmed, angry, or want to boost happiness, you know what tool to use.

Reflection also helps you recognize progress. Small improvements in sleep, mood, or stress levels can add up over weeks and months. This process is about learning, not judging yourself.

Reflection Prompts To Use After the Session

After each music activity, take a few minutes to check in with yourself. You can think through these questions silently, jot down a few words in a notebook, or record a voice memo on your phone.

- How did the music make me feel before, during, and after?
- Did my mood improve, did I feel energized or more positive than before?
- What body sensations did I notice? Did my shoulders relax? Did my breathing change?
- What memories or images came up?
- Did anything surprise me emotionally?

You don't need to answer each question every time. Even just rating your mood on a simple 1–10 scale before and after can be helpful.

Tracking Over Time

Consider keeping a simple log over days and weeks:

- A calendar or notebook where you write down a few words like:
 - Listened to country music—slept better
 - Took part in a drum circle—felt connected
 - Danced while putting away laundry—felt silly and happy
- The Mindfulness Coach app or VHA Whole Health tracking sheets.
- A simple 1–10 scale for mood, sleep quality, or stress level. Keep it quick (less than a minute).
- Notes showing when music made a good moment even better, not just when it helped with a hard one.

After a few weeks, look back to see if there are patterns.

Make sure to notice and celebrate small improvements. These moments matter. Give yourself credit for showing up and trying new things.

When To Seek Additional Help

Music-based self-help is a valuable tool for maintaining wellness. It's not a replacement for professional mental health care when you need it. Signs you might need more help:

- Music consistently brings up overwhelming emotions.
- Symptoms of anxiety, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder are worsening.
- You're having thoughts of hurting yourself or others.
(Seek immediate help. Dial 988 then press 1.)
- Music or stress is interfering with daily functioning.

Resources for Additional Support

- Talk to your VHA clinician about music therapy programs or other mental health services.
- Connect with a peer specialist who can help you navigate VHA services and provide connection with other Veterans.

If you're in crisis, use the Veterans Crisis Line:

Phone: Dial 988, then press 1

Text: 838255

Online Chat: www.veteranscrisisline.net



The Crisis Line is staffed 24/7 by trained responders who understand military experience. They're there to help, not to judge. Reaching out is a sign of strength.





Chapter 6

Music Activities To Use at Home

Activity 1: Music-Guided Relaxation and Body Awareness

Talk to a medical professional before performing this exercise if there is any concern about safety.

In this activity, music is used as a guide to help you tune into your body and release physical tension. The activity is inspired by progressive muscle relaxation (releasing tension in one group of muscles at a time). Here the focus is on using music to support awareness and relaxation.

What it helps: This activity may help reduce physical tension and support relaxation.

What you need:

- A comfortable place to sit or lie down
- Calming, instrumental music (no words)
- About 15-20 minutes

How to do it:

Find a comfortable position, either sitting in a chair or lying down on your back. Start playing slow, calming music at a comfortable volume. Let the music set the pace.

Close your eyes if that feels okay. Take a few deep breaths to settle in. You're going to tense and then relax different muscle groups in your body. Start at your feet and move up to your head. The music is soothing and helps you stay focused.

Start with your feet. Curl your toes tightly and hold that tension for about five seconds. Then release completely. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Take a breath and let the music wash over you. Move up to your calves, thighs, stomach, chest, hands and arms, shoulders, neck, and face. With each release, imagine the tension flowing out of your body.

When you've worked through your whole body, spend a few minutes lying or sitting still, breathing naturally. When you're ready to finish, wiggle your fingers and toes gently. Take a deep breath. Open your eyes slowly and give yourself a moment before moving on.



Tips for success:

- Start with just a few muscle groups if doing your whole body feels like too much.
- Try to do this at the same time each day to establish a routine.
- If you notice increased anxiety or discomfort during body-focused exercises, open your eyes, shift positions, or stop. Some people with trauma in their past may find body awareness practices activating. This is useful information. If this happens, switch to a less body-focused activity (like listening only) or use a grounding strategy.

Activity 2: Mood-Matching Music Listening

This activity works for difficult emotions and for mood-boosting. You can use it to move from anxious to calm, from sad to hopeful, or just from feeling okay to feeling great.

This activity is based on something called the “iso principle” in music therapy. The idea is simple. You start with music that matches your mood. Then slowly shift to music that helps you get to the way you want to feel. It’s like meeting yourself where you are, then gently guiding yourself forward.

What it helps: This activity may support helping you notice and move through emotions over time.

What you need:

- A way to play different types of music
- About 20–30 minutes

How to do it:

First, check in with yourself. How are you feeling right now? Think about music you know that matches that feeling. Play that music first. Let yourself feel whatever comes up. Sit with that music for about one to three songs.

After sitting with mood-matching music, move to music that’s slightly more positive or energizing. Don’t jump straight to happy music if you’re feeling very sad. That can feel jarring. Instead, move in steps. Continue this shift over several songs. Slowly move to music making you feel how you want to feel.

If you’re already feeling good, you can use this activity to move from good to great, calm to energized, or okay to joyful. Build a mood-boost playlist of songs that lifts your spirits. You can use it throughout your day.

If you feel more overwhelmed instead of understood with intense music, stop and switch to a grounding activity or a neutral, calming playlist.



Tips for success:

- Include at least five to seven songs in each list.
- Add a “mood-boost” playlist for days when you just want to feel even better.
- If shifting feels too hard, it’s okay to stay with mood-matching music. This may help you feel understood, even if it doesn’t improve mood. Over time, you can experiment with small shifts when ready.

Activity 3: Rhythmic Breathing with Music

This activity combines the power of music with the proven benefits of deep breathing. When you sync your breath with music, it becomes easier to maintain a steady breathing rhythm and stay focused. This is one of the simplest and most effective ways to calm your nervous system quickly.

What it helps: Calms your nervous system, reduces anxiety, helps you feel centered.

What you need:

- Music with a steady, slow beat (around 50–80 beats per minute) examples include:
 - Taylor Swift, “Lover”
 - Selena, “I Could Fall in Love”
 - Eagles, “Hotel California”
 - Kendrick Lamar, “LOVE.”
 - Frank Sinatra, “Young at Heart”
 - Chris Stapleton, “Tennessee Whiskey”
 - Alicia Keys, “Fallin’”
- A comfortable seated position
- About 10–15 minutes

How to do it:

Find a comfortable seated position with your feet flat on the floor and your back supported. Start playing music that has a slow, steady beat; this is about the pace of a resting heartbeat.

Close your eyes or lower your gaze. Take a few natural breaths without trying to control them. Notice the rhythm of the music. Begin to coordinate your breathing with it: breathe in for four beats, hold for two, breathe out for six, hold for two. The longer out-breath activates your body’s relaxation response.

If counting feels too complicated, match your breathing to the rhythm in a way that feels natural. Try this for at least ten minutes.

When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the music and your breath. You’re not trying to empty your mind. You’re practicing returning your attention again and again. As you continue, you might notice your body becoming more relaxed. Your shoulders might drop, your jaw might unclench, your heartbeat might slow.



Tips for success:

- Use the same piece of music each time you practice so your body begins to connect it with relaxation.
- If you feel lightheaded, slow down or return to breathing naturally.
- This pairs beautifully with breathing exercises from the Mindfulness Coach app.

Activity 4: Songwriting for Emotional Expression

Songwriting is simply putting your thoughts and feelings into words and rhythm. You don't need to be an experienced songwriter. Many Veterans find that creating their own songs gives them a sense of control and helps them process difficult experiences.

This activity is inspired by therapeutic songwriting techniques used in music therapy. In a clinical setting, the therapist would help guide the songwriting exercise, using fill-in-the-blank or prewritten songs. This would help process difficult feelings and emotions like stress and anxiety that can come up with song writing.

What it helps: Expresses difficult emotions, helps to process experiences, creates a sense of control.

What you need:

- Paper and pen or a phone, tablet, or computer
- Optional: a recording device (a smartphone works fine)
- About 20–30 minutes

How to do it:

Start by choosing what you want to write about. Choose a specific memory, feeling, or observation about your day. Begin with free writing. Set a timer for five minutes, and write whatever comes to mind. Don't worry about rhyming or making sense. Just write.

Look at what you wrote. Circle phrases that stand out. These will become the building blocks to your song. Choose a simple structure: verses tell the story; the chorus captures the main feeling and repeats. For your first song, try four lines for a verse and two to four lines for a chorus.

Don't worry about melody yet. Read your lines aloud. Do they flow? You can use rhymes if you want, but you don't have to. If you want to add a melody, try humming or speaking your lines with different tones. There's no wrong way to do this.

Example simple structure:

Verse: Four lines describing what you're feeling or experiencing

Chorus: Two lines that capture the main emotion (repeat this twice)

Verse: Four more lines going deeper or showing another angle

Chorus: Repeat of the same two chorus lines



Tips for success:

- Don't judge your work; this is for you, not an audience.
- If you get stuck, return to free writing for another five minutes.
- Save your songs in a journal or on your phone.

If writing brings up emotions that feel too intense to manage alone, pause and reach out for support.

Activity 5: Music-Assisted Life Review

Looking back on your life through the lens of music can help you connect with important memories and appreciate the journey you've been on. This activity uses songs from different periods of your life to spark reflection and storytelling.

What it helps: Connects you with your identity, helps you process life experiences reduces isolation.

What you need:

- Music from different decades of your life
- Optional: a notebook to write down memories
- A comfortable place to sit
- About 30–45 minutes

How to do it:

Create a playlist with songs from different periods of your life: childhood, teenage years, young adulthood, midlife, and recent years. Include at least one or two songs from each decade. If you are younger or want to create a more detailed playlist, you could include a song a grandparent used to sing, a song from your favorite movie, a song from your first favorite band, and one from a family vacation. Choose songs that you remember connecting with and finding special.

Find a comfortable place to sit and listen to your playlist, starting with the oldest song. As each song plays, let it transport you to that time. What memories come up? Who were you with? What brought you joy? What values were you living by? Who were you then?

You don't have to force memories or try to interpret them deeply. Just let the music wash over you and notice what arises naturally. If you're keeping a notebook, jot down memories or feelings as they come. This activity can be done for any life stage you've experienced. If a memory involves someone, you can reach out to them and share the memory.



Tips for success:

- You can do this activity alone or with family members who might enjoy hearing your stories.
- If there are some very hard chapters in your life that you do not want to revisit, it is okay to skip that time.
- Consider doing this activity in shorter sessions, focusing on just one decade at a time.
- If distress continues after any activity, see “When to Seek Additional Help” in Chapter 8.



Chapter 7

Sound and Movement

This chapter focuses on activities that use sound and gentle movement. This supports overall wellness, body awareness, and stress regulation. The movement in this chapter can be dance or gentle like stretching. It can also include internal vibration like sound and breath. Both can influence relaxation.

Movement paired with music isn't just for relaxation—it can also be energizing and joyful. Whether you're gently stretching to calm down or dancing around the kitchen to lift your spirits, music and movement together are powerful mood tools.

The Connection Between Sound, Movement, and Relaxation

Your body holds tension in muscles and joints. When you combine gentle movement with music or sound, you allow your body to release tension. The rhythm of music naturally encourages movement. Your body wants to move with it. By giving yourself permission to sway, stretch, or shift gently with music, you tap into something instinctive.

Movement also works to elevate mood. Even a few minutes of moving to an upbeat song can shift your energy level, improve focus, and increase feelings of happiness. You don't need to do a full workout—a brief dance break can change how you feel.

Activity 1: Gentle Stretching with Music

Music guides the pace, flow, and type of movements. Focus on using sound to support awareness and release tension.

What it helps: Releases physical tension, improves body awareness, promotes relaxation.

What you need:

- Slow, calming music
- Comfortable clothes you can move in
- About 15-20 minutes
- Optional: a chair for support

How to do it:

Start your music and take a moment to stand or sit comfortably. Close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Notice where you're holding tension in your body.

Begin with your neck. Slowly drop your chin toward your chest and hold for a few breaths. Then gently tilt your head to the right, then the left. Let the music guide the pace. Move to your shoulders. Roll them back slowly five times, then forward five times. Reach your arms overhead and stretch toward the ceiling. Hold for a few breaths, then slowly lower your arms.

If you're standing, gently twist your body from side to side, letting your arms swing loosely. If you're sitting, you can still do gentle twists by rotating your upper body while keeping your hips facing forward.

Continue stretching different parts of your body like your back, your legs, your ankles. Move slowly and mindfully, always listening to what your body needs. If something hurts, reduce the range of motion. When the music ends, stand or sit still for a moment and notice how your body feels.



Tips for success:

- Never force a stretch; go only as far as feels comfortable.
- Adapt the stretches based on your mobility.
- Try different types of music to see what helps you move most naturally.
- If body-based movement increases anxiety instead of decreasing it, stop. You can just listen to the music or stop all together.

Activity 2: Sound Baths and Toning

A sound bath involves listening to constant tones from instruments such as singing bowls or gongs. Toning involves creating sustained vocal sounds yourself, such as humming or chanting. Both are presented here as optional self-care practices.

What they help: Reduce mental chatter, promote deep relaxation, can ease chronic pain.

What you need:

- Access to sound bath recordings online
- Or: an in-person sound bath session
- A comfortable place to lie down
- About 20–45 minute

How to do it:

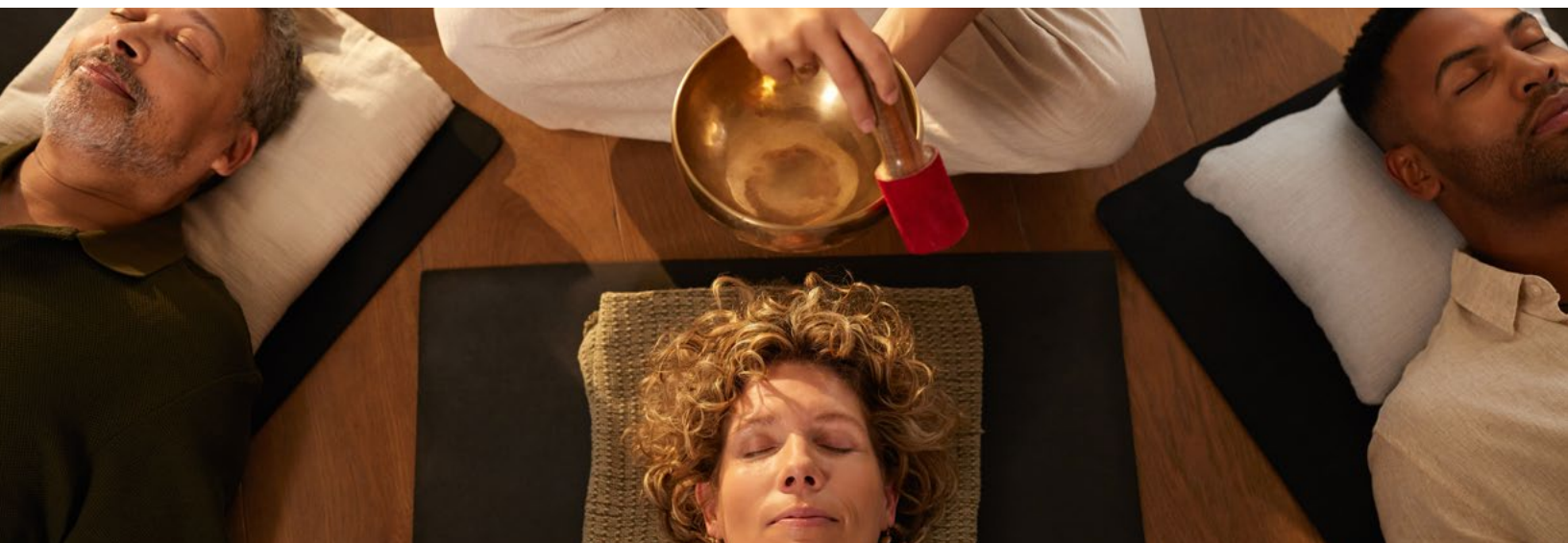
Find a comfortable place to lie down on your back. You might lie on a yoga mat, blanket, or bed. Have a pillow under your head. Start playing your sound bath recording. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. As the sounds begin, focus on the vibrations. You might feel them in your body even though you're listening. The tones often rise and fall, creating waves of sound. Let your thoughts drift away. When the sound bath ends, lie still for a few minutes before getting up.

If you notice yourself getting bothered or emotionally uncomfortable, stop the recording. You can open your eyes, sit upright, or focus on your breath. You can also try a grounding activity.

About toning:

Toning involves making a sustained vocal sound, often during a long exhale. There is no single “right” way to tone. The sound should feel comfortable and unforced. You can experiment with mouth open, gently closed (lips together), or teeth touching to feel vibration differently. There is no single “correct” way. Choose what feels comfortable.

To try toning, sit comfortably and take a deep breath. As you exhale, make a long “ahhh” or “ohm” sound. Keep it going as long as your breath lasts. Feel the vibration in your throat, chest, and head. Take another breath and repeat. Do this for five to ten minutes. This can help your body shift into a relaxed state by stimulating the vagus nerve.





Chapter 8

Music With Others: From Informal Jams to Guided Activities

Making music with others can take many forms, like singing with friends, playing an instrument casually, or joining a drum circle. Music-making can happen in more structured groups with clear guidelines and shared purpose.

The Benefits of Group Music Activities

Making music with others creates connection. It offers a way to express yourself without having to talk about your feelings directly. The music does some of that work for you.

Science shows that group music activities can reduce anxiety and depression while increasing feelings of social support. Music groups offer a chance to connect with others who share similar military experiences, and that shared military culture can make connection feel more natural and less of an effort.

Group music can simply be fun. Laughing, playing, and sharing songs together builds bonds and brightens the day.

Group music experiences are not automatically therapeutic. Without clear boundaries and mutual respect, they can become uncomfortable or emotionally overwhelming. Intention and structure matter.

Preparing for Group Music Experiences

Before starting a structured group activity, consider the following:

- Set simple ground rules:
 - Keep the experience confidential
 - Listen respectfully
 - Pass on a turn if you need to
 - Do not interrupt or offer advice unless invited to do so
- Let participants know that emotions may arise and that stepping outside or taking a break is always allowed.
- Identify a plan for support if someone becomes visibly distressed.
- Keep the tone supportive and voluntary—not pressured.

If you do not feel comfortable with others being emotional, choose informal music activities. This can be casual sing-alongs rather than structured sharing circles. That is completely okay. Not every gathering needs to become emotionally deep to be meaningful.





Activity 1: Drum Circle

A drum circle is simply a group of people sitting in a circle, playing drums or percussion instruments together. There's no conductor, no sheet music, and no performance pressure. Everyone contributes to creating a collective rhythm. One person may take on a light "facilitator" role. This can include starting/stopping or adjusting intensity while still allowing the group to co-create the music.

What this helps: This activity helps with building connection.

What you need:

- Drums or other percussion instruments like tambourines and maracas. If you don't have any, you can use things like buckets, pots, or hands on thighs.
- A group of 3 to 12 people
- A space large enough for everyone to sit in a circle
- About 30–60 minutes, based on group size

How to do it:

Place chairs in a circle. If a person does not have an instrument, they can clap hands or tap feet. Start by having everyone find the pulse together. Keep the first few minutes simple. A predictable rhythm creates safety and group cohesion.

Once the group feels comfortable, someone may experiment gently with changes in rhythm or volume. Listen to each other—the music emerges from the group, not from one leader. If the group becomes very loud or intense, the coordinator can gently lower the volume or slow down the tempo. End by slowing down to a natural close; then take a few moments of silence.

Optional reflection should be brief and voluntary. Don't pressure participants to process emotionally.



Tips for success:

- Keep the focus on listening to each other rather than impressing each other.
- Remind everyone that there's no wrong way to participate.
- Start simple.
- Have a plan to close the session (for example, play a very upbeat song or the group's favorite) rather than ending abruptly.



Activity 2: Song Sharing Circle

A song sharing circle is a simple gathering in which all members share a meaningful song with the group. They can then talk about why it matters to them. It's part music listening and part storytelling. It can create deep connections quickly.

What it helps: Reduces isolation, encourages storytelling, builds understanding between group members.

What you need:

- A way to play music for the group
- A group of at least three people and no more than eight people
- A facilitator (formal or informal) who helps guide timing, emotional safety, and transitions
- A comfortable space to sit together
- About 30–60 minutes, depending on group size

How to do it:

Before the gathering, ask each person to select one or two meaningful songs. When you gather, sit in a circle. One person plays a song; everyone listens without interruption. After the song finishes, the person shares the reason for choosing it.

Before beginning, clearly state that:

- Sharing your song and/or its meaning is optional.
- Participants can pass without explanation.
- Stories should stay within the group.
- This is not a debate or advice session.

Keep shares to about five minutes so everyone has time. After each share, others may respond briefly and supportively if they wish. If a story becomes very heavy or trauma-focused, you can gently thank the person for sharing and can redirect the group toward grounding (for example, “Let’s all take a breath together before we continue.”).



Tips for success:

- Remind everyone that they can pass if they don’t feel like sharing.
- End with a grounding activity such as taking collective breath, singing a short calming song, or reflecting quietly.

Activity 3: Group Sing-Along

Singing together is one of the oldest forms of human bonding. You don't need to be a good singer to benefit.

What it helps: Builds connection, improves mood, creates group cohesion.

What you need:

- Lyrics to familiar songs (printed or displayed where everyone can read)
- Optional: a guitar or piano, or recorded backing tracks
- A group of at least three people
- About 45-60 minutes

How to do it:

Choose songs that most people in the group will know. Start with something familiar and encourage participation at any level. The goal is shared experience, not performance. Sing-alongs are usually lower risk emotionally than storytelling circles. However, some songs associated with military service or personal memories can still evoke strong feelings.

After each song, take a brief pause. How does everyone feel? Lighter? More energized? Then move to the next song. Plan for about six to eight songs in an hour-long session. End intentionally—with a final song, moment of silence, or brief check-in.

Starting a Music Group in Your Community

Reach out through local Veteran networks, community centers, or informal connections to find participants. Decide on a format: drum circles, song sharing, sing-alongs, or rotating activities. Set a regular schedule and choose a comfortable space with few distractions. You don't need to act as a therapist; connection and shared experience are enough. If someone appears in significant distress, encourage professional support. Group music can support wellness and connection. It should never replace professional mental health care when someone needs that care.



Tips for success:

- Have lyrics available so people don't have to worry about forgetting words.
- Start with easier songs to build confidence before moving to more challenging ones.
- Avoid pushing emotional themes unless participants clearly request it.



Chapter 9

Conclusion

Music is a powerful companion on the journey toward better mental wellness and increasing moments of positivity. It's always available, requires no special training, and can fit into even the busiest schedule. For Veterans, music can be a flexible and accessible way to support wellness in daily life. And it's not just for hard times. Music can brighten ordinary days, fuel your energy, deepen your joy, and help you feel more alive. Some days music will feel like a miracle. Other days it might not help much. Both are okay.

Think of music as a flexible tool, something to use to support yourself during difficult moments and to enhance good ones. Pay attention to what works for you, and return to those experiences over time.

Your mental health matters. Your wellness matters. The time you spend with music is time well spent taking care of yourself.

Keep finding your rhythm, one song at a time.



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