



FROM CHAOS TO CALM

LAURA SEYMOUR



USING MUSIC THERAPY FOR EMOTIONAL
REGULATION IN ADHD

Made with **GAMMA**

From Chaos to Calm

Using Music Therapy for Emotional Regulation in ADHD

Music has a unique power to soothe, connect, and transform. For children and adults with ADHD, it can be a gentle bridge between overwhelm and calm, between chaos and clarity. This booklet offers practical, evidence-informed guidance for parents, carers, educators, and professionals who wish to support emotional wellbeing through the transformative power of music.

Written by **Laura Seymour** | Serenity Sensory Music | www.serenitysensorymusic.co.uk

Table of Contents

This booklet is designed to guide you gently through the world of ADHD, emotional regulation, and the remarkable power of music. Each chapter builds on the last, offering understanding, evidence, and practical strategies you can use at home, in school, or in therapeutic settings.

01	02
Introduction	Chapter 1
Understanding ADHD, emotional overwhelm, and how music can help	Understanding ADHD and Emotional Regulation
03	04
Chapter 2	Chapter 3
Why Music Works for ADHD Brains	Practical Music Therapy Strategies for Everyday Life
05	06
Chapter 4	Conclusion
Creating Your Personal Calm Toolkit	Finding Your Rhythm

❏ **Did You Know?** Music Therapy is a well-established allied health profession in the UK, regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). It is used in schools, hospitals, and community settings across the country.



Introduction

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects attention, impulse control, emotional regulation, and sensory processing. It is not a deficit of character or willpower. It is a difference in how the brain is wired, and like all neurological differences, it comes with both challenges and remarkable strengths.

For many children and adults with ADHD, emotions can feel bigger, louder, and harder to manage. A small frustration can quickly escalate. A moment of rejection can feel devastating. Transitions between activities can trigger anxiety or overwhelm. These experiences are real, valid, and deeply challenging for individuals and those who care for them.

Music offers something truly special. It meets people where they are, without judgement. It can calm an overstimulated nervous system, provide a safe outlet for big feelings, and create moments of connection and joy. Within UK Music Therapy practice, therapeutic music-making has been shown to support emotional growth, self-awareness, and wellbeing in meaningful and lasting ways.

"Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything."
Attributed to Plato

③ **Reflection Question:** Think about a moment when music has helped you or someone you care for feel calmer. What was happening? What made the difference?



Chapter 1: Understanding ADHD and Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to our ability to manage and respond to our feelings in a way that is appropriate and helpful. For people with ADHD, this can be considerably more complex. The ADHD brain processes emotions with greater intensity, and the executive functioning skills needed to manage those emotions, such as impulse control and flexible thinking, often develop differently.

Signs Someone May Be Emotionally Overloaded

- Withdrawing or becoming very quiet
- Increased irritability or tearfulness
- Difficulty concentrating or following instructions
- Physical restlessness or fidgeting
- Overreacting to small changes or requests
- Complaining of feeling overwhelmed or "too much"
- Sensitivity to noise, light, or touch increasing

Why Emotions Feel Bigger with ADHD

Research suggests that the emotional centres of the ADHD brain can be more reactive. This means feelings of frustration, excitement, sadness, or joy may be experienced more intensely than for neurotypical individuals.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), a common experience for people with ADHD, can make perceived criticism or rejection feel overwhelming and deeply painful. Understanding this helps carers and educators respond with compassion rather than frustration.

📌 **Key Insight:** Co-regulation, where a calm adult helps regulate a child's emotions through their own presence, tone, and rhythm, comes before self-regulation. You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Common Triggers for Emotional Overwhelm

Transitions between tasks, unexpected changes to routine, sensory overload, hunger or fatigue, perceived criticism, and unstructured time can all act as triggers. Recognising these patterns is the first step towards supporting regulation.

Chapter 1 Key Takeaway

Emotional intensity in ADHD is not a behavioural problem. It is a neurological reality that requires understanding, patience, and the right tools, including music, to navigate effectively.

Chapter 2: Why Music Works for ADHD Brains

Music is not simply entertainment. It is a powerful neurological stimulus that engages multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, including those involved in emotion, memory, movement, and attention. For the ADHD brain, this makes music a uniquely effective therapeutic tool.



Whole Brain Engagement

Listening to and making music activates the auditory cortex, motor cortex, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex all at once. This multi-sensory engagement helps integrate brain functions that can feel disconnected in ADHD.



Rhythm and Predictability

The predictable pulse of music provides a sense of safety and structure. For a brain that craves novelty yet struggles with uncertainty, rhythm offers the perfect balance of interest and reassurance.



Dopamine and Motivation

Music stimulates dopamine release, the neurotransmitter linked to motivation, reward, and pleasure. This is particularly significant for ADHD brains, which often have lower baseline dopamine levels.



Stress and Anxiety Reduction

Slow, structured music can lower cortisol levels, reduce heart rate, and calm the nervous system. Research from the British Association for Music Therapy supports music's role in reducing anxiety across age groups.



The ADHD Brain and the Power of Rhythm: Rhythm acts as an external organiser for the ADHD brain. When we move or breathe in time with a steady beat, the brain's internal chaos can begin to settle. This is why drumming, clapping games, and rhythmic movement are so effective for regulation. The beat becomes an anchor.



Chapter 3: Practical Music Therapy Strategies for Everyday Life

You do not need to be a musician or a qualified Music Therapist to use music therapeutically at home or in school. The strategies below are accessible, evidence-informed, and designed to fit into everyday routines. Start small, observe what works, and build gradually.



Regulation Playlists

Create personalised playlists for different emotional states. A "calm down" playlist might include slow instrumental pieces, whilst an "energy boost" playlist could feature upbeat, rhythmic tracks. Involve the individual in choosing their songs.



Movement and Rhythm Breaks

Short bursts of rhythmic movement, such as clapping, stomping, or dancing, can reset an overwhelmed nervous system. Try 2 to 5 minutes of structured movement between tasks or during transitions.



Singing for Self-Expression

Singing, even quietly, engages the vagus nerve and promotes calm. Simple songs with repetitive lyrics can be especially soothing. Encourage humming or singing along to familiar tunes during stressful moments.



Drumming for Emotional Release

Drumming provides a safe, physical outlet for frustration, anger, or excess energy. A simple hand drum or even tapping on a table in time with music can help release tension and restore emotional balance.

Musical Routines for Morning and Bedtime

Consistent musical routines signal safety and predictability to the brain. A gentle wake-up song or a calming bedtime playlist can transform daily transitions from battlegrounds into moments of connection.

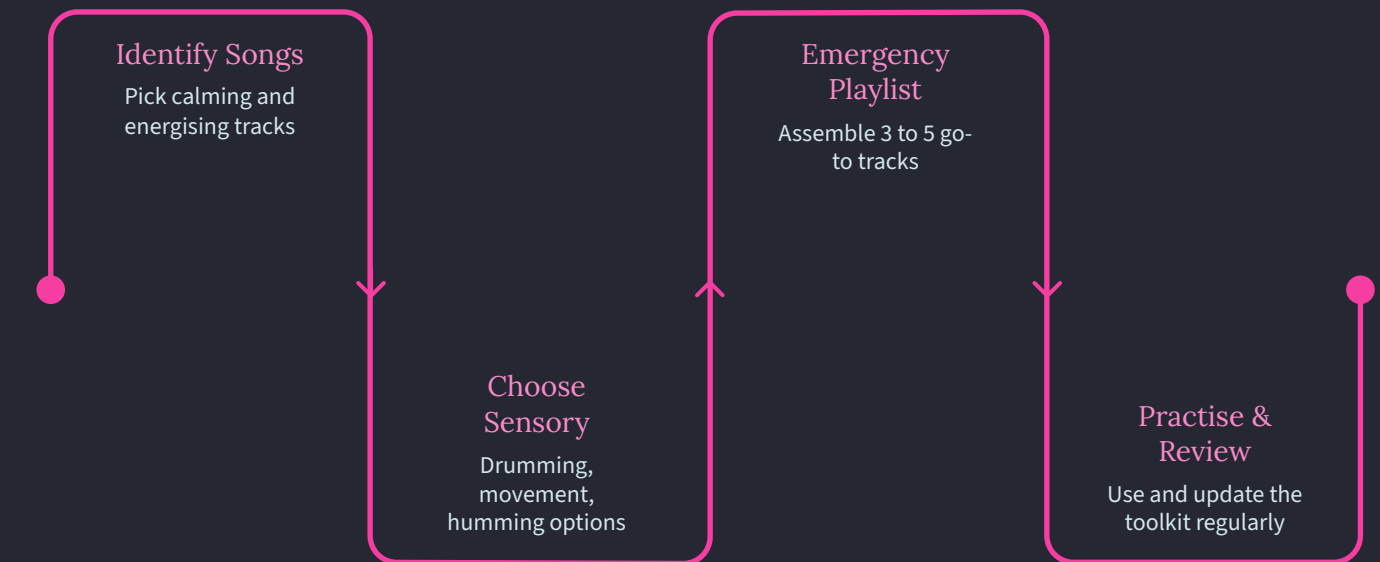
- Use the same song each morning to signal the start of the day
- Play low-tempo instrumental music during homework time
- Create a 10-minute wind-down playlist before bed

Top Tips for Parents and Carers

- Keep headphones accessible for moments of overwhelm
- Use music to signal transitions, not just verbal instructions
- Notice which songs calm or energise your child
- Join in with movement and singing when you can
- Be consistent but flexible, routines matter, but so does responsiveness
- Celebrate small moments of regulation, they all count

Chapter 4: Creating Your Personal Calm Toolkit

A Personal Calm Toolkit is a collection of music-based strategies, songs, and activities that an individual can turn to when they feel overwhelmed, dysregulated, or in need of support. It is personal, portable, and empowering. Building it together with a child or young person increases ownership and likelihood of use.



Building a toolkit is not a one-time activity. It evolves as the individual grows, their preferences change, and new strategies are discovered. Regular check-ins help keep the toolkit relevant and effective.

What to Include in Your Toolkit

- **Favourite calming songs:** Slow tempo, predictable structure, familiar lyrics or instrumental
- **Favourite energising songs:** Upbeat, rhythmic, motivating tracks for low-energy moments
- **Sensory music activities:** Drumming, shaking instruments, humming, or listening with headphones
- **Movement activities:** Dancing, swaying, clapping, or rhythmic walking
- **Mindfulness through listening:** Focused listening exercises, noticing instruments, tempo, and mood
- **Musical self-care strategies:** Singing in the shower, playing an instrument, or creating playlists

Emergency Regulation Playlist

Choose 3 to 5 tracks that reliably help during moments of high stress or overwhelm. These should be songs that feel safe, familiar, and grounding. Keep this playlist easily accessible on a phone, tablet, or music player at all times.

Tip: Ask the individual: "What song makes you feel like everything will be okay?" That song belongs in the emergency playlist.

Reflection Activity: Take five minutes to jot down three songs that calm you, two that energise you, and one sensory music activity you enjoy. You have just started building your toolkit.

Conclusion: Finding Your Rhythm

Emotional regulation is not about eliminating difficult feelings or achieving a state of constant calm. It is about learning to navigate the full spectrum of human emotion safely, effectively, and with self-compassion. For people with ADHD, this journey can feel particularly complex, but it is also deeply worthwhile.

Music offers a unique and accessible pathway. Whether it is the steady pulse of a drum, the gentle swell of a string section, the familiarity of a favourite song, or the joy of singing together, music meets us where we are and helps us find our way forward.

"Every child, every adult, every person deserves to find their own rhythm. Music is not a reward for good behaviour. It is a right, a resource, and a relationship that can transform lives." *Laura Seymour, Serenity Sensory Music*

Understand

ADHD affects emotional intensity. This is neurological, not behavioural. Compassion is the foundation.

Connect

Music builds bridges between people and within ourselves. Co-regulation comes first.

Experiment

Try different strategies. Observe what works. Build a toolkit that is personal and meaningful.

Thrive

ADHD comes with extraordinary strengths. Music helps those strengths shine.

✅ **Key Takeaway:** You do not need to be perfect. You need to be present, curious, and willing to try. Every small step towards regulation is a victory worth celebrating.

