

## ***Improvising Connections: Inclusive Online Music-Making for Individuals with Aphasia***

By: Natalie Marozzo; supervised by: Dr. Jesse Stewart

**Introduction:** As someone who cared for my grandmother with Global aphasia following a severe stroke, I witnessed firsthand the shortage of inclusive musical activities for individuals with aphasia, especially musical opportunities offered online. This scarcity contributed to my grandmother experiencing feelings of isolation, a decline in her mental and cognitive health, an inability to explore alternate communication pathways through music, and a lack of social connections. Currently, there still remains a lack of inclusive and accessible musical activities as well as limited scholarship examining how participatory musical opportunities can create a creative, supportive, inclusive, and accessible space for aphasic individuals. Despite the increase in popularity of choosing virtual platforms (such as video conferences) since the start of the COVID pandemic, online musical opportunities remain rare. Thus, my research study seeks to examine how online music-making might function as both a supportive and inclusive space for individuals with aphasia.

**Methods:** In collaboration with my project supervisor Dr. Jesse Stewart and the Aphasia Centre of Ottawa (ACO), we recruited eight participants with *mild to moderate* aphasia for this study. Participants were not required to have a music background or any musical training to participate. With the help of Dr. Stewart and Emilia Perri, an ACO Communicative Disorders Assistants (CDA), we facilitated eight weekly 90-minute music sessions using a virtual platform called OnCall Health which uses a custom implementation of Zoom. Each session was divided into *three* parts:

1. The *first* part was devoted to participant check-in, their own engagement with music during the week, and 1 focus group question to obtain participant feedback.
  2. The *second* part was devoted to 3-4 musical activities which included improvisational music-making, music-listening practices, and participant sing-alongs.
  3. The *third* part was devoted to further musical discussion, participants' reflection on the session, and 1-3 focus group questions to obtain further feedback from the group.
- Each participant consented to video recorded sessions for the purpose of qualitative analysis to examine patterns of interaction, engagement, communication strategies, and feedback.

**Findings:** The participants in this study found that they were able to take part in a musical space which provided them comfort, inclusivity, support, community, and virtual accessibility. A few of the participants even emphasized that by participating in this 8-week study, they were able to "be themselves" without having to discuss their aphasia, participate in a positive environment, and immerse themselves in a creative and musical community. Although most of the participants have not participated in online music-making before this study, the group was engaged and supported through our online music journey as a collective. Several key themes arose from the participant interactions, engagement, and feedback within this group (which are further discussed in my research paper). These themes included creativity, inclusivity, health benefits, accessibility, and community, demonstrating how online music-making *can* provide a supportive and inclusive space for those with aphasia in many positive ways.