

## “There’s Healing in Music”: Veteran Perceptions of Music Interventions for Their Chronic Musculoskeletal Pain

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**Background/Objective:** For veterans suffering from chronic musculoskeletal pain, finding alternative treatments to analgesics is critical for safer, more effective pain management. While music interventions have shown promise for acute pain, their acceptability for chronic pain and telehealth delivery needs more rigorous examination.

**Methods:** The Feasibility and Acceptability of Music Imagery and Listening Interventions for Analgesia (FAMILIA) study randomized 60 veterans with chronic musculoskeletal pain to receive usual care, telehealth music listening (ML), or telehealth music imagery (MI). ML involved independent listening to songs of each participant’s choosing, while MI consisted of one-on-one music therapist-led sessions combining ML, imagery, and verbal processing. To complement quantitative analysis of patient-reported outcomes, qualitative interviews of participants were conducted to understand perceived benefits, acceptability, barriers, and facilitators of study interventions. We analyzed 15 interviews

using thematic analysis to assess acceptability of the music interventions.

**Results:** All interviewees perceived mental-emotional benefits and almost all experienced physical pain relief during their music listening or therapy sessions. However, many noted that the pain relief was short term, and for some veterans randomized to ML, certain songs evoked negative associations. Participants also benefited from study participation and its formal structure, in contrast to their prior informal music listening experiences. Planned study activities like participant check-ins with staff and interactions with therapists fostered a deeper understanding of how music can be therapeutic and increased veterans’ confidence in their own ability to use music therapeutically. Study acceptability was further evidenced by interviewees’ intention to continue using music listening and imagery techniques after study completion and their strong support for expanding access to music interventions to other veterans.

**Conclusion/Implications:** The FAMILIA study not only supports telehealth music interventions as acceptable treatments for chronic musculoskeletal pain, but the reported physical pain and mental-emotional benefits necessitate a larger, fully powered study.

**General Excellence Award**  
**Claire Whalen**

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**Biggest takeaway:** As a musician and the relative of a veteran with chronic pain, this research was the perfect opportunity to learn more about non-opioid treatments for chronic pain, particularly in veterans. I was extremely encouraged by our findings that music therapy alleviated physical pain and provided mental-emotional benefits for research participants. I also learned so much from observing how Dr. Bair's research directly stemmed from his clinical compassion; he took the initiative to seek better options for a prevalent problem his patients experience. Ultimately, my IMPRS experience deepened my understanding of what research can be, excited me about the future of chronic pain management, and challenged me to think about how I could contribute to similar efforts as a future physician.

