

How Caregivers Can Use Music That Heals

By James Schaller C.M.P. © 2005

What is Healing Music?

Music is an often-overlooked resource that can be of great use to caregivers. The dictionary defines *healer* as “any person or thing that heals, relieves, or comforts.” The word heal is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *hal* which means *whole*. To be healed is to be made whole. In the context of this work we can also define healing as coming to peace with a situation. As caregivers we are all healers and many of us search for the tools to increase our skill as healers.

Curing can be defined as a return to a former state that existed before the disease. It is important that we understand the difference. Does music heal or enhance the healing process? Yes, most definitely. Research consistently demonstrates music’s profound effects. Specific benefits include (but are not limited to): deep relaxation, distraction, supports pain management, reduces stress, reduces blood pressure, increases release of beta endorphins and elevates the immune system.

How Therapeutic Music Can Benefit Someone Who is Sick?

Regular rhythm or tempo is a primary element in music for recovery and is beneficial for patients in the Intensive Care Unit, post-surgical recovery, or someone who is in an ongoing therapeutic program. Therapeutic music (in the context of relieving pain and anxiety) is designed with the following features:

- Unfamiliar music has no attached emotional memories.
- Instrumental music requires no language processing.
- Acoustic instruments offer a rich, harmonic content and can be listened to for longer periods of time.
- Slower tempos are restful.
- Simple musical textures and melodies are easier for the brain to process and engage the listener.
- Reduced dynamic changes will not startle the listener.
- The sequence of music played gradually slows the tempo and varies the emotional content of the music.

Who Can Benefit From Therapeutic Music?

Therapeutic music delivered at the bedside can benefit the chronically ill. Music can help to relieve the pain and anxiety that often accompanies the visit of a caregiver that needs to perform an invasive procedure (i.e. change a wound dressing).

Patients who are preparing for surgery often find that music calms their anxiety before the operation and improves recovery time. Patients who are

recovering from surgery are in need of rest and positive support. Music can soothe the anxiety and pain that often is present and can help to stabilize vital signs while affording the patient with the opportunity to access deep rest. Rest is often what many patients find elusive in the hospital where noise levels have become obtrusive and clinical routines can keep the patient from needed deep rest.

For patients who suffer from dementia music can bring benefits that include reduction in anxiety. Playing peaceful music in the late afternoon can reduce the restlessness of sundowner's syndrome. Family members can use music that was familiar to the patient in their youth to help re-stimulate neuro-pathways.

Children can benefit from music when you need them to rest. Carefully choosing music that calms and soothes will help your child rest when either anxiety or environmental stimulus keeps them from sleep.

Patients who are near the end of life (and their families) can greatly benefit from therapeutic music. Music can be used in palliative care to reduce patient pain and anxiety as it comforts family members. Music can facilitate emotional healing at this difficult time.

When Can You Use Music?

Music can be used when you need to visit with a sick family member, or maybe visit with someone in a nursing home. Music can support many types of clinical visits. Even seasoned chaplains have commented that when they use music during their visits, they do not feel that they need to talk to 'fill the silence'. They can let the music carry and 'hold the space'.

You can use therapeutic music to create a background of empathy at a vigil when a patient is close to transition. Music that meets the therapeutic qualifications listed above and that is played with no-rhythm can be especially effective at this time.

This comment is typical of those we receive about using music at a vigil: *"As soon as the CD arrived my sister, who is a nurse, put on the music. It played continuously for the last three days of my mother's life. It dramatically eased her pain, comforted family and staff, and brought dignity and calm to those last days. I can't thank you enough."* (J.A. NYC)

Who Can Use Music?

You may be challenged by the need to visit someone who is seriously ill. Most of us are not experienced in this work and it can make us fearful. You will be empowered because you were able to do something effective even when you've been told "There's nothing more anyone can do."

If you are a caregiver to a parent, child, relative or friend, you will find music a dependable ally. As a parent you can use music to enhance a child's recovery from illness. If you have undertaken the care of an elderly parent, music can help to comfort them in times when they are anxious or in discomfort. As a friend you can use music to support your visits and care. Professional caregivers will find therapeutic music an innovative tool that complements other healing and/or pain-relieving modalities.

How Do People Respond to Therapeutic Music?

You will find that anxiety levels will be decreased as the breath and heart rate lowers and stabilizes. The patient will often relax and fall into a light sleep.

I often hear from staff members that patients do not require as much pain medication after my music visits or when they play recorded, therapeutic music. The music always settles the room and you can feel the anxiety decrease.

Sometimes a patient will become comfortable and begin to talk with a family member. That's OK. This is not a concert and the patient is not expected to listen with rapt attention.

Why Should You Use Music to Ease Anxiety and Pain?

Recorded music CDs are inexpensive and portable. A small portable CD player or Walkman with headphones and CDs can easily be carried anywhere. Music is non-invasive and can be used privately in a multi-patient room without disturbing other patients. Music also can be used to support other pain relieving modalities with no contraindications. Music is effective and once the patient is at ease, your work will be easier. Music also is beneficial to the caregiver as it can help to relax and re-center oneself.

What Kinds of Music Can You Use to Ease Pain?

Music designed to be therapeutic is the best choice for relieving pain and anxiety. Therapeutic music within the context of relieving pain and anxiety is most effective when it exhibits the following design features:

- The tempos are generally moderate to slow with tempos that are the same as the heart rate when engaged in light activity (80-90 BPM) and move to slower rates of 50-65 BPM.
- Research has shown that people can listen to acoustic instruments for longer periods of time versus electronic instruments. Hence music performed by acoustic instruments is a good choice. (These are general guidelines. Often a combination of acoustic instruments supported by electronic instruments can be effective.)

- Instrumental, unfamiliar music is well suited for this application as the brain does not have to process the language/lyric, and unfamiliar music generally will not evoke a strong emotional response that familiar music can often elicit.
- Simple melodies and even dynamics (no sudden loud phrases or sections) are effective.
- The music's tone centers, melodic and harmonic elements are varied, thus avoiding too much music with the same emotional energy.
- The sequence of the musical selections moves gradually to slower tempos over the length of the recording.

Other types of music (such as a favorite performer, song or hymn) can improve a patient's mood and their elevate spirits. By all means use whatever resources you can find! The features listed above are those of music designed to reduce pain and anxiety and support healing.

What Types of Pain are Affected?

Many types of pain are heightened by anxiety. My experience has been that if something can be done to reduce patient anxiety and facilitate rest, their experience of pain often decreases. Distraught family members who are around a patient that is suffering can also benefit from the soothing sounds of therapeutic music.

Occasionally I encounter a stressful situation where the patient is in a panic because they are having difficulty breathing. Family and staff are crowded into the room assisting the patient.

I begin to play softly outside the room. After about 7-10 minutes a couple of family members (who looked fatigued) sit in the area where I am playing and close their eyes. I can feel the connection with them as they really let go and fall into a deep rest. Staff members calm down and often I hear someone asking the patient, "Can you hear the beautiful music?" "Do you hear the music?"

After about twenty minutes as the situation improves the family members who have been sitting with me open their eyes and say something like, "Thank you that was the best rest I've had in days!"

Music can bring about an emotional release. Occasionally after I begin to play a family member's eyes will tear and I then ask if they would prefer that I stop. They always answer, "No, please keep playing." And then they will sometimes speak of a memory or time shared with the patient. The experience is always positive and healing, and the healthcare facility often receives letters or comments that the music visits were very special. The facility usually has my

CDs, and the staff tells me that the patient and family requested that the music be played often.

When Should You Not Use Music?

Extreme pain and nausea require proper medical treatment. Music can be used to augment the treatments after the emergency has passed.

Some people simply do not want to hear music and their wishes should always be respected. In my own practice I have encountered a few people for whom any music or sound seemed to increase their discomfort.

Finally....

Music is an overlooked resource that can support a challenging visit to a sick friend or family member. It can create openings for emotional healing and support the recovery process. Clinical caregivers will find music can be used to reduce anxiety and pain in their patients and it is inexpensive and portable. As you integrate healing music into your work, you are continuing a healing tradition that has been recorded in every culture for thousands of years.

For more information and resources please visit our website at:
www.jamesschaller.com

James Schaller is a Certified Music Practitioner and is trained to play music at the bedside in medical situations including hospitals, hospices and nursing homes. James is the founder and executive director of Sound Covenant, a not-for-profit corporation whose mission is to equip caregivers to understand and use music to serve and comfort people who are sick, infirm or near the end of life at home or in institutions.

This article describes how home, volunteer and professional caregivers can use therapeutic music to relieve pain and anxiety in patients of all ages and support healing.

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