

## **How You Can Use the Healing Energy of Music By James Schaller C.M.P. © 2005**

*Imagine ...*It is Sunday afternoon and your older sister stricken with multiple sclerosis, lies in nursing home exhausted from a pain-filled night exacerbated by fear and loneliness.

Into the room walks a volunteer who carries a portable CD player. The overworked nursing home staff warmly welcomes her. The volunteer plays therapeutic music specifically designed to help relieve pain and anxiety. As the music plays, the volunteer asks the patient how she is feeling, and simply keeps the conversation focused on the needs of the patient. Healing words of encouragement and empathy ride gently upon the music and your sister's face relaxes into a smile as her breathing deepens. After thirty minutes she says her pain is reduced and she drifts into a restful, sweet sleep.

In a hospice a distraught family hovers near the bed of their uncle moaning amid the beeps and clicks of monitoring equipment. A volunteer enters the room and again plays recorded music that is gentle, restful and therapeutic. The music brings sweet peace into the room as it surrounds the uncle, his family and the staff

The volunteer visits for thirty minutes. During that time the uncle's breathing becomes slower as he drifts into a restful sleep. Vital signs stabilize, and the family is comforted as everyone gets needed relief from the cacophony of beeps and clicks emitting from the monitoring equipment.

The next day their uncle dies peacefully. The family is grateful for the sweet respite both they and their loved one received before transition. They are deeply moved by the act of compassion that brought a volunteer with music to help ease the final hours for the entire family.

The use of therapeutic (healing) music has been documented (and prescribed) for over 2,500 years. As a Certified Music Practitioner I have trained caregivers and volunteers to take healing music to the bedside and have played for hundreds of hospice and hospital patients. I have witnessed the ability of therapeutic music to support healing energy and reduce pain and anxiety.

### **What is Healing Music?**

Music is an often-overlooked resource that can be of great use to caregivers and healers. 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. And the music can be beautiful!

### **How Music Can Benefit Someone Who is Sick?**

Music that can produce these benefits supports the healing process and can be considered therapeutic. 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.

### **What Kinds of Music Can You Use to Ease Pain?**

Music designed to be therapeutic is the best choice for relieving pain and anxiety, and 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 person'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.

### **Are You a New Caregiver?**

Perhaps you are challenged in the new role of caregiver for someone who is seriously ill. Or possibly you are a long-term caregiver in need of new solutions to caring for another.

Often when a family member becomes seriously ill we are faced for the first time with the need to reach out to them in new ways. For many of us that first challenge arrives when we face the loss of a parent. For some of us, who have already suffered through the loss of a parent or family member, we want to improve our care-giving skills for other loved ones.

You may want to find a better way to be present for someone in great need. Then again you may have a child who is sick and you want to create a healing environment to support their recovery. You may want to volunteer at a hospital, nursing home or hospice, but need to learn the skills that support your efforts.

### **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 will be 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.

### **Who Can Benefit From Healing Music?**

Therapeutic music delivered at the bedside can benefit the chronically ill. Music can help to relieve chronic pain and the 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 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.

With 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 getting the rest they need.

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 headings at this difficult time.

We can use healing music to achieve restful, meditative states where energy can flow unrestricted throughout our physiology. You do not have to be sick to enjoy the benefits of healing music!

### **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. And music can assist us to keep healthy on life's journey. As you integrate healing music into your life, 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](http://www.jamesschaller.com)

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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.

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