

**Therapeutic Music Can Ease the Pain  
by James Schaller C.M.P. © 2005**

**Imagine...**

It is Sunday afternoon and a 56-year-old woman stricken with multiple sclerosis lies in a nursing home exhausted from a pain-filled night exacerbated by fear and loneliness. Into the room walks two volunteers; one carries a portable CD player.

The volunteers play music that is restful, simple and therapeutic. As the music plays, one volunteer asks the patient if she would like prayer. Healing words of encouragement, faith and empathy ride gently upon the music and the woman's face relaxes into a smile as her breathing deepens. After thirty minutes the woman says her pain is reduced and she drifts into a restful, sweet sleep.

Sound Covenant (a non-profit organization) is founded on the premise that music can be used to reduce pain and suffering. Its mission is to encourage and teach people how to visit those who are sick or near the end of life with music that heals and comforts, and to introduce live therapeutic music programs into hospices. Professional caregivers benefit as they learn a valuable visitation tool. And the fabric of family care giving is strengthened through the use of therapeutic music in the home.

The use of therapeutic music has been documented (and prescribed) for over 2,500 years. As a Certified Music Practitioner I have played at the bedside for hundreds of hospice and hospital patients, and witnessed the ability of therapeutic music to reduce pain and anxiety. A key benefit is that music can safely be used to support most other pain reduction modalities

**How Music Affects our Physiology**

Music can overwhelm the left side of our brain that processes language, thus allowing the right side (the image processing side) to be dominant. Music affects the Limbic System that regulates and governs deep emotions and many involuntary physical operations and reactions. (Pulse & blood pressure, fight/flight response, pain perception and response).

Music can change the rhythms of our body such as our heartbeat and breath rate. Music can energize and/or influence our thought processes by imposing an 'order' upon our brain and cause neurons to fire faster. This effect has been the subject of extensive research with children' and their learning processes.

Psychologists believe the sound of music evokes conditioned relaxation in much the same way as the sound of a dentist's drill evokes conditioned nervousness. Some scientists cite the "gate control" theory of pain. Only a

limited number of neural pathways can transmit pain impulses. Clog these pathways with music, and there will be fewer left to respond to pain.

Some physiologists believe that listening to music coaxes the body to release its own endorphins. These molecules provide a measure of built-in pain relief and are the same molecules that give runners their "high" after a race.

To choose therapeutic music to reduce pain and anxiety look for the music with the following characteristics then play the music softly alone or with other pain reduction modalities.

- Instrumental
- Acoustic instruments
- Simple texture
- Slow to medium tempo
- Unfamiliar
- Limited dynamic range.

Below is a research resource and two examples of thousands of studies that support the use of music in therapeutic applications.

CD: **Music Therapy Association on Research** Ck website.  
<http://www.musictherapy.org/research.html> and <http://www.ingenta.com>

Gardner, W. J., Licklider, J. C. & Weisz, A. Z. "**Suppression of Pain by Sound.**"  
*Science* 132: 32-33

Gatewood, E.L., "**The Psychology of Music in Relation to Anesthesia,**"  
*American Journal of Surgery, Anesthesia Supplement* 35: 47-50

Author and composer James Schaller is a Certified Music Practitioner who has mentored thousands of volunteers, clinicians and caregivers in hospices, hospitals, churches, nursing homes and community service organizations to use therapeutic music to relieve pain and suffering.

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