



Hitting the Right Note

Music therapy in oncology

by Andrew Stewart, MTBC

The American Medical Association describes the music therapist's role as addressing the "physical, psychological, cognitive and social needs" of a patient. As a music therapist working in a cancer center, I participate in many of the multidisciplinary teams that bring comprehensive care to patients.

Oncology patients often face lengthy treatment regimens involving many visits to the cancer center. During the course of treatment a patient's needs change. Music therapy is a flexible medium that can accommodate the rapid ebb and flow of patient needs.

When possible, music therapists work using live music, allowing for improvisation to meet a patient's changing needs.

As with any therapy, the most important aspect of music therapy is the development of a therapeutic relationship between the patient/client and the therapist. The therapeutic relationship involves assessment, the development of a treatment plan, and the validation of outcomes.

Feel the Beat

Rhythm is the one aspect of music that is universal. We all respond to rhythm in the same way because we all have heartbeats and respiratory rates. In fact, the autonomic nervous system is highly responsive to outside stimuli such as increasing or decreasing tempo. For example, if a musical piece starts at or near the tempo of an anxious patient's accelerated heart rate, and then the tempo of the music is slowly decreased, the patient's heart rate will most often also decrease. This process, known as entrainment, is very influential in the field of oncology music therapy.

I have used music therapy at the bedside during bone marrow aspira-

tions, spinal taps, needle-guided biopsies, and conscious sedations. Music therapy has been shown to reduce the amount of sedative needed to perform a procedure as well as reduce the amount of pain medication.¹

During chemotherapy I work chair or bedside while the patient receives the treatment. Music therapy has also been shown to prolong the onset and reduce the duration of nausea.²

In both the procedural and treatment setting, I usually create live music by playing a portable keyboard, a guitar, hand drums/percussion, and/or singing/toning. The music typically has no specific style, i.e., it's not "easy listening," country, classical, or R&B. Instead, I develop basic musical gestures that create expectations unconsciously and then fulfill them to give the patient a feeling of constant reassurance. To understand what I mean, try singing the entire melody to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" without singing the last note. Notice how much tension this creates and how the tension is resolved when you finally sing that last note.

During radiation treatments, I work with the patients via microphone and video camera from the control area. I can watch their respiratory rates and try to match and lower them accordingly. In the case of head and neck cancers, when patients have to wear a mesh mask, even the most stoic patient can feel some degree of claustrophobia. With these patients, I use an old film-scoring technique to create music with large, open intervals to unconsciously suggest wide-open spaces.

As an adjunct to supportive care, I invite patients to participate in music making, even to play solo. Music therapy can be used to assess

and assist in the treatment of depression, low self-esteem, poor ego-strength, and poor coping skills. I have used music therapy on many occasions to help patients gain closure at the end of life, during the active dying process, as well as to ease the bereavement of family members, friends, and loved ones.

Staff Benefits

Music therapy can have a positive effect on staff as well. Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals have told me that they've benefited from the music and the resulting calmer environment.

Music has a natural way of pulling people together. I have used music therapy strategies to assist the staff in team building, to break down communication barriers, and to infuse meaning into new management objectives.

Music therapy is an important and powerful medium that can be used to build bridges between the medical staff and the patient, the patient and their loved ones, and among the medical staff itself. In the oncology setting, music therapy can help remind everyone—doctors, nurses, patients, and family members, that we are all human, we are all fragile, and yet we are all capable of both overcoming great obstacles and embracing those that we cannot.

Andrew Stewart, MTBC, is a music therapist with the Van Elslander Cancer Center in Detroit, Michigan.

References

¹Koch ME, Kain ZN, Ayoub C, et al. The sedative and analgesic sparing effect of music. *Anesthesiology*. 1998; 89(2):300-6.

²Standley JM. Clinical applications of music and chemotherapy: The effects on nausea and emesis. *Music Therapy Perspectives*. 1992; 10(1):27-35.