

# Role of Music Therapy in Integrative Oncology

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## ABSTRACT

Music therapy is an evidence-based complementary therapy that enhances quality of life in cancer patients and their caregivers. The role of music therapy in integrative oncology encompasses care and treatment of patients and family members, ongoing collaboration with the health care team, and the provision of music therapy services that may benefit the cancer center community. Clinical work includes ongoing assessment and the implementation of specific music therapy techniques aimed at reducing challenging symptoms and enhancing overall well-being and quality of life. This article outlines music therapy methods and the role that the music therapist has in integrative oncology programs.

**KEY WORDS:** cancer, complementary therapy, music, music therapy, oncology

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Music therapy is a formalized profession that is used in settings around the world to effect meaningful change in psychosocial and physiologic processes. Although music was used as a healing agent in indigenous cultures throughout time, it has become widely recognized internationally as an evidence-based approach in the care and treatment of challenging clinical problems.

Music therapy is a complementary therapy commonly used in integrative oncology treatment programs.<sup>1</sup> Music therapists work in conjunction with multidisciplinary team members as partners in the care of patients and families, complementing mainstream treatment and goals while also working to address the physiologic, psycho-emotional, and spiritual needs and issues presented by patients, family members, and caregivers.<sup>2</sup> The aims are to facilitate well-being and improve quality of life through music-therapeutic relationships within which people can express, explore, improve communication, and process issues concerning living and dying.<sup>2,3</sup> Music therapy relies on the therapeutic benefits of human contact and the supportive, caring presence of the music therapist. Thus, a significant aspect of music therapy is the role assumed by the therapist in establishing a compassionate, attentive, and creative milieu with-

in which patients and caregivers can regain a sense of dignity and existential meaning.<sup>3-5</sup>

Music therapy in integrative oncology is used to treat multiple symptoms such as pain,<sup>6,7</sup> mood disturbances,<sup>8,9</sup> and communication issues.<sup>10,11</sup> Music can ameliorate pain and symptoms of fear, anxiety, depression, frustration, and loneliness.<sup>12-14</sup> Music therapy reduces the effects of noxious stimuli while enhancing mood and overall feelings of comfort and sense of control.

The key functions of the music therapist are twofold: (1) to provide quality care through careful, ongoing assessment, implementation of appropriate treatment, and follow-up services as needed; and (2) to participate as a contributing, collaborative member of the health care team. Music therapists also provide educational services and conduct research to help further scientific knowledge about music therapy in integrative oncology.<sup>2</sup>

During sessions, the music and the presence of the music therapist help facilitate significant change. The sounds of the music and the compassion conveyed by the therapist infiltrate the environment, reaching family members, staff caregivers, and the broader hospital community.<sup>2</sup> Owing to the emotional content of music and the severity and complexity of cancer patient needs, the music therapist's observations and assessment skills are fundamental in this work. Techniques and interventions offered are based on patient preferences and therapist and staff assessments.

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## ASSESSMENT

The initial and ongoing assessment of patients and family members includes a careful review of the multidimension-

al components of their overall experiences.<sup>15</sup> This involves consultation with collaborating staff and the music therapist's observation and gentle questioning about physical and psycho-emotional status; cultural, spiritual, and social needs; values; and preferences. The patient's decision-making capacity, cognitive function, level of orientation, prior and current coping strategies, prior musical experiences, and aspects of social support are all considered by the music therapist in making initial and ongoing assessment of the patient and family.<sup>3</sup>

The therapist assesses and responds to the patient's physical, psychosocial, and spiritual issues in each session. The patient's diverse and multifaceted needs are attended to, whether these needs involve the pain relief, relaxation, emotional support, or control. The music therapist is trained to be sensitive to the needs of patients and caregivers so as not to overwhelm them with the potent and evocative medium of music. Techniques and interventions are sensitively and purposefully employed to foster improved comfort and a sense of control. There are times when a patient may lack the strength or coping capacity to deal with emotions.<sup>3</sup> In such cases, gently uplifting music with peaceful, hopeful lyrics are applied. Conversely, music may be inappropriate at times if the therapist feels it may create sensory and emotional overload. Close monitoring and continual assessment is required.<sup>4</sup>

## **MUSIC THERAPY TECHNIQUES**

Techniques are selected from a variety of options based on patient and family needs and expressed preferences, as well as on the music therapist's assessment.

### ***Vocal Techniques, With or Without Accompanying Instruments***

Vocal techniques involve pre-composed songs, lyric improvisation and songwriting, and chanting and toning:

- Pre-composed songs. It is common for individuals to use song content as a method of expressing that which is otherwise difficult to express. In addition, the presence of the human voice in sessions can serve to help reduce anxiety and a sense of isolation. Song selection can improve a sense of control since patients are actively involved.
- Lyric improvisation and songwriting. Patients and family members may include their own words in pre-composed or spontaneously improvised melodies. This personalized use of lyrics further enhances self-expression and communication between patients and families.
- Chanting and toning. Repetition of vocal intonations, with or without words, is a way to focus attention and

can reduce fatigue, increase relaxation, improve breath flow, and enhance expression.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Instrumental Techniques: With or Without the Voice***

Instrumental techniques are improvisation, music listening, and music meditation:

- Improvisation. The music therapist, patient, and family members often participate in the spontaneous playing of instruments. Improvisation can improve self-expression and communication. The unfamiliarity of the music is helpful to patients who may become overwhelmed with reminiscent music.<sup>15</sup> Improvisation can facilitate a sense of control as patients play an active role in creating the sounds and in setting the rhythm and mood of the music.
- Music listening. Patients may elect to quietly listen to selections of instrumental music played by the therapist or recordings of music carefully chosen to meet specific needs. Music listening can act as a distraction technique, helping to relieve pain and discomfort. This technique is also beneficial for unresponsive patients as music, especially live music, may reach levels of consciousness that afford caregivers opportunities to communicate meaningfully with their loved one.<sup>2</sup>
- Music meditation. Live music can be used to create a mood of peace. Patients may select mantras or words that refer to peace and as a way to focus thoughts, increase feelings of inner strength, and enhance their sense of control. This technique redirects patients' thoughts, increases relaxation, and improves levels of comfort.

## **MUSIC THERAPY BENEFITS FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS**

At Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, the pre- and posttreatment assessment scores of 90 patients who received music therapy were reviewed. These scores reflected patient reports of pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and nausea before and after sessions with a music therapist. A review of these data indicated large differences between pre- and post-music therapy scores, with an important improvement for each symptom, including marked improvement in depression scores. These pre-post patient self-report scores suggest the potential benefits of music therapy in treating common cancer-related physical and emotional symptoms, although we do not know from this information whether the benefit seen immediately postintervention persisted over hours or days.

Music therapy can play an important role in enhancing the well-being of family members. They often feel helpless and overwhelmed as they struggle with feelings of loss and the stresses of managing commitments at home and work in addition to coping with a very ill loved one. It is common for family members to experience symptoms similar to those reported by the patient, such as fatigue, insomnia, depression, and feelings of isolation. The music therapist involves patients and their family members in active participation when appropriate, such as in song selection or songwriting and the playing of instruments. This facilitates sharing and interaction between patients and family members, enabling intimate moments of quality communication.

It is also common for family members to indicate feelings of helplessness as they observe their loved ones in pain or discomfort. The music therapist can demonstrate methods to care for the patient through the use of their voices, as in singing softly and humming or playing preferred recorded music when symptoms exacerbate. The support received can have lasting impressions on those closest to the patient as family members witness the patient being soothed and comforted and learn ways to commune more closely with one another.

The staff at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center demonstrate interest in music therapy and report benefiting from direct or peripheral involvement in patients' music therapy sessions. Staff note feeling calmer and more relaxed with music therapy in the environment and also appreciate witnessing patients being soothed by music therapy. Staff also can benefit from direct participation in music therapy through staff music therapy sessions or activities such as a staff chorus or drum circle.

Spiritual concerns are commonly raised in music therapy sessions. Patients often reflect on existential meaning and their sense of purpose through songs, songwriting, and other creative expressive techniques. It is common for patients to reflect on their lives when faced with the potential loss of life, and this process is facilitated by the reminiscent qualities of music and music's ability to evoke memories of beauty, nature, and the universal or infinite.<sup>16</sup> Patients and family members report regaining a sense of hope and faith as they hear music that stirs thoughts about the value of relationships and the essence of human life.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The benefits of music therapy are multiple, with immediate and sometimes lasting effects on patients, family members, and staff caregivers. The sounds of music penetrate physical and emotional barriers and draw people to one another, reducing isolation and increasing social interac-

tions and expressiveness. The several techniques available to the music therapist can meet a range of cancer patient needs. The music therapist employs assessment skills throughout the course of individual sessions and during the course of therapy over time.

Music therapy is an effective complementary modality that can improve quality of life for the entire cancer center community—patients, families, and staff—and enhance the overall hospital environment. With the compassion and support of the music therapist, vocal and instrumental techniques offer support through times of loss and help patients and caregivers gather a sense of meaning in their life. Music therapy provides a means of transcending to moments and places of peace, beauty, and inspiration. Music therapy can help those facing cancer achieve intimate and memorable moments of communication, sharing, and love.

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