The Symphony of Life & Loss:

Music Therapy Techniques to Help with Grief and Life Post-Loss

By: D.J. Poplin, MT-BC

Introduction

- Undergraduate degree from Appalachian State University (2021)
- Internship at VNA Hospice of the Treasure Coast (2021-2022)
- Inpatient and outpatient services at a psychiatric hospital
- Now at Interim Hospice of the Upstate
- Hospice patients, substance abuse, mental health, geriatric, adolescents
- Mindfulness/relaxation, songwriting, legacy projects, coping skills
- Existential and person-centered approach

What is Music Therapy? Who Can Do It?

- "Music Therapy is the **clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship** " (A*merican Music Therapy Association*, 2025)
- Must hold a bachelor's degree in MT from an AMTA-approved university
- 1200 hours of supervised clinical hours
  - ➢ Including a six-month internship
- Pass the national board certification exam from the Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT)
- Complete 100 continuing education hours every 5 years to recertify

Music Enrichment vs. Music Therapy

- Not all uses of music are considered music therapy
- Music therapy requires an individualized plan of care with individualized goals
- Must be facilitated by a board-certified music therapist (MT-BC)
- Must address clinical needs and goals

Let's Figure Out the Difference...

Here's some examples...

- A choir singing on a hospital floor
  - Music Enrichment
- A piano player in a hospital lobby
  - Music Enrichment
- Utilizing music to help a patient with pain management
  - Music Therapy
- Playing live, patient-preferred music for someone in a nursing home to aid in neurologic stimulation and decrease isolation
  - Music Therapy
- Playing background music for patients on a CD
  - Music Enrichment
- Assisting a patient and their loved ones in writing a song as a life legacy project
  - Music Therapy

Music Therapy Clinical Areas

Common Music Therapy Needs Addressed in Hospice/Bereavement Include:

Pain/Symptom Management	Downward Iso-Principle; Providing comforting stimulation; music-assisted relaxation techniques (self-massage; deep breathing; meditation
Spiritual Support	Playing music that supports a patient or family's faith/belief system; facilitating discussion of faith
Grief/Anticipatory Grief	Facilitating lyrical analysis of songs about grief; share background on various songs or artists; life legacy projects (heartbeat recording; poetry; song composition; etc.)
Depression/Anxiety	Music-assisted mindfulness techniques; singing; playing instruments; lyrical analysis; improvisation (vocal, percussive, or instrumental)
Increased Autonomy	Giving patient song choices or stylistic choices; instrumental choices
Self-Expression	Improvisation; songwriting; musical composition; facilitating conversation
Isolation/Gain Sense of Universality	Group improvisation; group songwriting; discussion around feelings of grief; sharing stories of others dealing with loss

Music Therapy and Grief

- **Experiencing loss can be shown to negatively affect one's health**
- Increased risk for heart attacks and stroke
- Increased blood pressure
- Not dealing with grief and prolong these physical symptoms
- **Traditional talk therapies:**
- Difficulty expressing oneself in front of others
- Feel a sense of judgement from others
- Might feel unable to express themselves verbally
- Effectiveness is debatable

(Cheatley, Ackerman, Pease, & Moncur 2022)

- **"Grief includes the process of adapting to a world without the deceased whilst maintaining a place for them in [our] life"-** (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 2014; Worden 2018)
- **Art therapies like music therapy are shown to:**
- Enable self-expression
- Make sense of loss
- Continued connection with deceased
- **Creative songwriting can:**
- Explore experience of loss, terminal illness, or death
- Express grief in a structured and safe space
- Can be "**emotionally challenging and deeply thought provoking** "

Effects of Music Therapy on the Brain

Sensory Input

-Various elements of music help provide stimulation to all parts of the brain

Hypothalamus

-Emotional regulation
-Regulates the ANS
-Sleep-Wake Cycle
-Memory

Limbic System

-Processing emotions
-Decision-Making
-Motivation
-ANS (breathing, sweating, heart rate)

Comforting

-Increases sense of autonomy and control
-Promotes stimulation and relaxation
-strengthens communication

Music Therapy for Caregivers

- Gillespie, McConnell, Roulston, et al (2024)
- Looked at various studies on music therapy and its effects on caregivers
- Primarily focused on its effects on quality of life, mental health, and coping
- Most caregivers were dealing with dementia or cancer patients
- Sessions were for carer only, patient, or a group setting
- 1-20 sessions

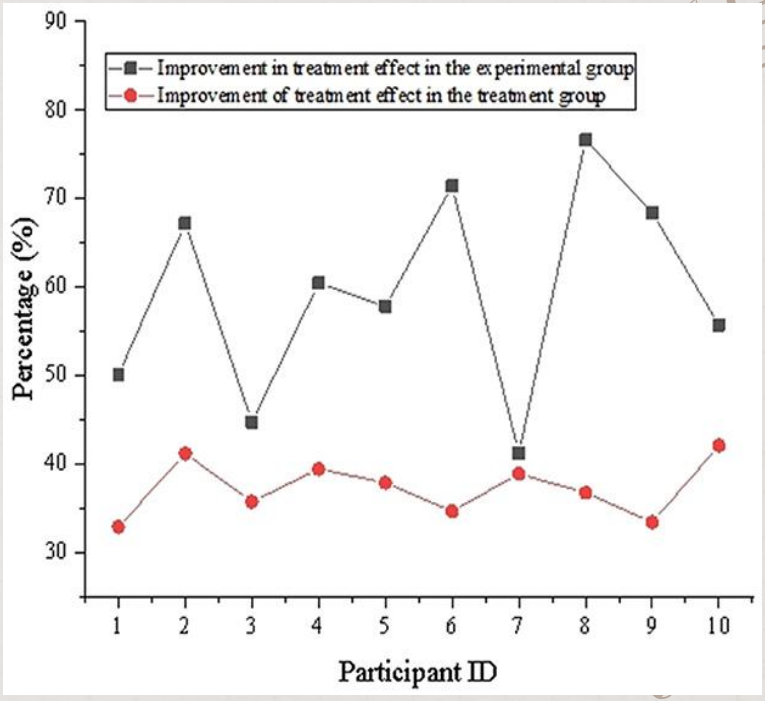
Music Therapy for Caregivers continued...

- Five studies showed that carers reported improved quality of life
- Gallagher et al. reported that 83% of carers reported improved quality of life (50 family members included)
- Six studies reported a decrease in caregiver burden (only two included statistics)
- Majority showed small-moderate increase in mental wellbeing
- Gallagher et al- 92% improved mood
- Hanser et al- "significant improvement in relaxation, comfort, and happiness"

- Group songwriting showed to provide social connectedness
- Judgement-free space
- Sense of universality
- **"A cathartic effect, eliciting and providing a safe channel for [caregivers] to experience, process, and communicate a range of grief-related emotions"**
- Providing increased connection to the deceased; supporting spirituality

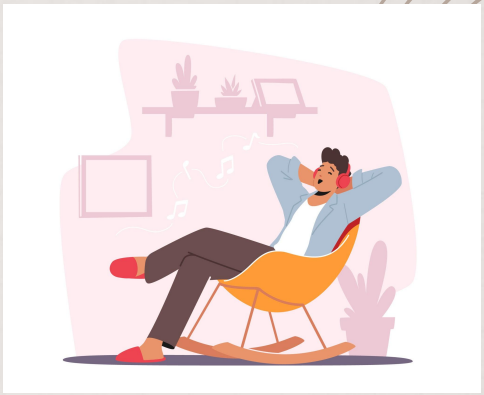
Music Therapy for Caregivers (final)

- Wang, Guan, Li, & Dong (2024)
- Focused on families in China losing a child (one-child policy)
- Psychological trauma
- 480 participants
- One music therapy group, one control group
- Classical piano; focus on emotional responses and relaxation techniques
- Felt improvement after music therapy interventions
- More significant for women and those younger than 40



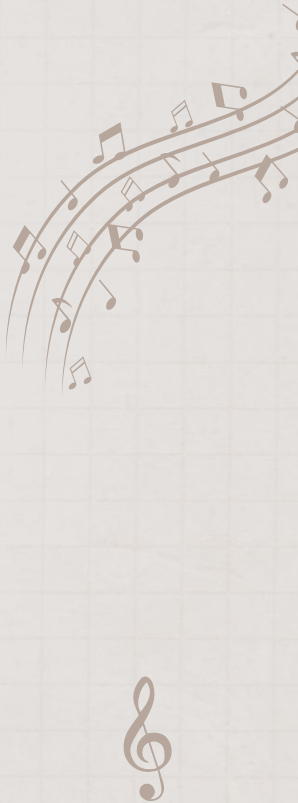
Coping Skills for Caregivers

- Music listening with intention
- Mood Playlist
  - Happy, sad, angry, lonely, etc.
  - Don't sit in feelings too long
  - Stabilize at the end
- Music for relaxation
- Music-assisted mindfulness
  - Meditations, breathing exercises, imagery
  - Progressive Muscle Relaxation- PMR



Resources for Caregivers

- PMR- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyRoju2Rscs
- Deep Breathing- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZ-Z6Sg9Ypo
- Headspace
- Calm- free
- YouTube
- Acrostic songwriting (think of words that relatable)
- https://www.providence.org/-/media/Project/psjh/providence/wa/files/hospice-of-seattle/poetrywritingforgrievers.pdf?la=en&hash=710CB6965F02BBC64E6D1611237F6549

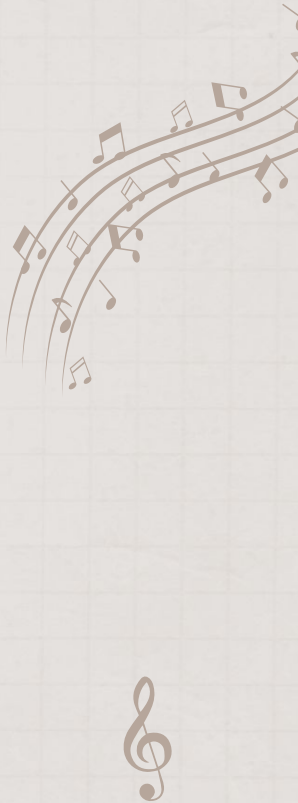


Now...

Time to try it ourselves...

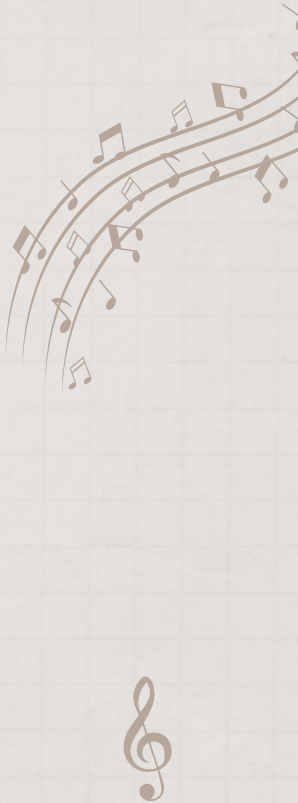
Instructions

-Write “HOPE” on paper
-Acrostic style
-Can write anything you want
-Does not have to rhyme or sound aesthetic
-Can work on this alone or with others
-Can write multiple for each letter; or just one



Guiding Questions

- What's something I love about them?
- What's something that reminds me of them?
- What's something I need to hear?
- Words of encouragement someone has told me?
- What am I feeling?
- What will help me remain resilient?
- Support system, hobbies, coping skills, etc.?



Example

H- How I miss your laugh, the smell of your home, and your funny texts

O- One day I know I will see you again; I feel like I can hear you when I'm having a hard day

P- Promise myself I will honor your life through how I treat others, and remind myself I need to treat myself with the same compassion and kindness you gave to so many people

E-Exercise, getting outside, and cooking help me cope and feel closer to you

Group Song-

H-

O-

P-

E-

“Grief, I’ve learned, is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go”

—Jamie Anderson, author

Resources

- American Music Therapy Association. (2025). *What you need to be a music therapist | Professional Requirements for Music Therapists | American Music Therapy Association (AMTA)*. Musictherapy.org. https://www.musictherapy.org/about/requirements/
- Potvin, N., Hicks, M., & Kronk, R. (2021). Music Therapy and Nursing Cotreatment in Integrative Hospice and Palliative Care. *Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing*, *23*(4). https://doi.org/10.1097/njh.0000000000000747
- Gillespie, K., McConnell, T., Roulston, A. *et al.* Music therapy for supporting informal carers of adults with life-threatening illness pre- and post-bereavement; a mixed-methods systematic review. *BMC Palliat Care* 23, 55 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12904-024-01364-z
- *Music therapy – creative support for the bereaved - Leukaemia Foundation.* (2020, September). Leukaemia Foundation. https://www.leukaemia.org.au/stories/music-therapy-creative-support-for-the-bereaved%E2%80%AF/

Resources continued

- Cheatley, L., Ackerman, M., Pease, A., & Moncur, W. (2022). Musical creativity support tools for bereavement support. *Digital Creativity*, *33*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2022.2034648
- Wang, Z., Guan, X., Li, E., & Dong, B. (2024). A study on music therapy aimed at psychological trauma recovery for bereaved families driven by artificial intelligence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1436324
- Google Stock Images

Thanks!

Are there any questions?