

Healing With Music

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For centuries people have written of music's power to aid in healing the body and soul. More recently studies have established impressive data showing the effects of music in various medical situations, in alleviating conditions from anxiety to chronic pain to post-operative side effects.

As a musician, my experience with cancer, combined with my natural curiosity, has led to some exciting projects involving music and healing. I read a lot about how music can be used to help people with life-threatening illness, by promoting relaxation, helping ease some of the pain and discomfort, and reducing anxiety during stressful hospital stays and procedures. It seemed like an important new direction to be moving in, and one that was closer to what music was originally intended for - as a healing tool used in many cultures by priests, healers and shamans.

Healing is different from curing; curing refers to the medical interventions which treat a disease and try to eliminate the symptoms, whereas healing comes from within the individual and has to do with a sense of balance and wholeness, an integration of body, mind and spirit, a space from which even death can be more readily accepted.

In offering healing music, the ultimate goal is entrainment, a process intended to synchronize the patient's vital signs with the music,. When we play for a patient who is very agitated, starting with slow music in an effort to calm them may not work. We begin with a piece whose rhythm matches the patient's energy, then after a few minutes slow it down gradually, observing the patient's breathing slow down and vital signs stabilize. Conversely, if a patient needs to be stimulated, we start off with music that is slow and matches their mood, then gradually speed it up, so their vital signs have time to adjust to the new rhythm.

Each person receives the music differently, and on a variety of levels: physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. Studies show it can lower blood pressure and respiration rates and it increases endorphin production, which reduces pain. Most patients drift off into a deep sleep, finding relief that even the morphine drip sometimes cannot guarantee. Hospice patients report that music also decreases their anxiety, anger and fear, and helps them accept their impending death.

Much of the repertoire of music for relaxation and transition comes from the medieval chant repertoire, with its modal melodies and free rhythm. Modal scales don't have a sense of drive and direction like major/minor scales, and are therefore more calming. Improvisation and toning are increasingly used at the bedside to reduce stress and invoke a space free from expectation and stress.

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