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Therapeutic Musicians Bring Calm and Comfort

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LEVINDALE HEBREW GERIATRIC CENTER & HOSPITAL

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MUSIC SOOTHES THE RHYTHMS OF LIFE

Therapeutic musicians help calm agitated patients at the bedside.

Lisette Hilton



PHOTO BY KEITH WELLER

Carol Joy Loeb, RN, BSN, CMP (certified music practitioner), remembers the day she brought a patient out of a semicoma using her voice and a harp.

Loeb, who today is a certified music practitioner at Seasons Hospice & Palliative Care of Maryland, Baltimore, was doing a therapeutic music internship in a critical care unit when she came upon the patient with a subdural hematoma. The heavysset man was restrained, agitated, combative, and restless. The nurse caring for him had tried unsuccessfully, doing everything she could, to get his blood pressure down.

Loeb asked the nurse if she could try her hand at soothing the patient through music. She played her guitar and later a flute but didn't get a response. Not quite ready to give up on connecting with this patient who had nurses and doctors at their wits' end, Loeb pulled out a lap harp.

"I started playing it, and within about five minutes, the patient opened his eyes, looked at me directly, and said, 'What time is it?'" Loeb says. "The next thing I realized was his blood pressure had come down 10 points."

Loeb's music's potential became clear to her that day. "I had chills going up and down my spine," she says. "I had played for him for an hour and a half. When I left him, he was sleeping like a baby. There were no jerking movements. No agitation. No anxiety. They didn't need to restrain him."

Searching for a holistic fit

A nurse since 1975, Loeb's personal experience caring for her chronically ill daughter inspired her to find a way to blend her knowledge of traditional nursing with complementary practice. Experienced in ED and critical care, Loeb also has a strong background in the art of music. She minored in voice at Syracuse University, then studied intensively, and toured with an opera training company. She discovered the perfect blend for her practice: therapeutic music.

There are different ways to deliver live music in the health care setting, including through therapeutic music or music therapy. A credentialed and certified music therapist uses a variety of approaches to accomplish a therapeutic intervention with music, from playing music for patients to engaging patients in the actual work of writing songs or playing instruments. A therapeutic musician, on the other hand, simply uses live music at the bedside to do the work, according to Loeb.

"It's almost as if it's passive," Loeb says. "We don't try to engage the patient. If the patient wants to participate with us, that's fine."

These live therapeutic approaches are different than piped-in music or music from tapes or CDs, says Terry

Carol Joy Loeb, RN, certified music practitioner at Seasons Hospice & Palliative Care, Baltimore, Md., envisions music therapists working in every health care facility at some point in the future. Loeb is currently being interviewed for a National Public Radio (NPR) segment that will air in September 2005.

To learn more about Complementary Care go to www2.nursingspectrum.com/CE/Self-Study_modules/course_category.html?CID=7

Barrick, RN, charge nurse at Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital, Baltimore, Md. "This is interactive. [Our therapeutic musician] goes around from person to person and makes direct contact with them. The patients love it. No one ever refuses that activity."

Therapeutic musicians and music therapists work in a variety of health care settings, including hospice, long-term care, and acute care facilities.

Music and health care

Loeb sees her nursing background as a big plus in her new career. She uses it to help connect with patients as a therapeutic musician. The first thing she does when she enters a patient's room is get a feel for the patient's situation — checking his or her respiration, skin color, and levels of stress, anxiety, and pain. "I can get a sense for that just by [looking at] them," she says.

Loeb then sings and plays music according to the patient's situation. "If the patient is having rapid respirations or is on the cardiac monitor, and I can see that the pulse is rapid, I start off with a piece that might be a little faster, then gradually slow it down to 60 to 80 beats per minute," she says. "The patient's pulse rate and blood pressure will come down, and the pulse oxygen will go up. Those are all things that I've seen on the cardiac monitor while in the critical care unit."

Her goal, however, is not to positively affect a patient's vital signs; rather, it is to bring peace to that patient, whatever that may be, she says.

Emily Draper, MT-BC (music therapist-board certified), a music therapist at Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Hospital and Center, Baltimore, Md., and the daughter of two RNs, works full time at the facility, primarily in long-term care. She says the music is accessible to all patients, regardless of their abilities.

"You have people who may have more ability and are at a higher functioning level than others, and you may be able to get them to really open up. Maybe they have expressive aphasia — through song, they [often] can sing all the words coherently and sing the verses in order," Draper says.

Proof is in the anecdotes, science

In addition to the anecdotal evidence that therapeutic music calms patients and affects vital signs, there is the science to support the positive effects.

The Silver Spring, Md.-based American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) promotes music therapy research through its publications, the *Journal of Music Therapy* and *Music Therapy Perspectives*.

There are numerous studies in the literature indicating that music can lower blood pressure, basal metabolism, and respiration rates. It can increase endorphin production to block pain and immunoglobulin to speed healing. Music has also been shown to reduce infection, lower stress, and control heart rate, according to the Music Healing and Transition Program (MHTP) website, www.mhtp.org.

Anecdotally, Leah Rabinowitz, RN, CHPN, hospice case manager at Seasons Hospice, Baltimore, says the differences with and without live music are noticeable.

"Especially at the very end of their lives, when patients are actively dying and their vital signs are unstable and their breathing is rapid, the effect of the music is amazing," she says. "Patient response is hard to put your finger on. There is a slowing of the breathing and heart rate — a general calmness that is not medication-induced, but music-induced."

Staff, family like it, too

Loeb has used therapeutic music to help family members and staff deal with difficult times, including taking their loved ones and patients off ventilators. She'll play music, helping the family members to grieve without agitation or frazzled nerves.

Staff love the music, too, according to Barrick. "When you're working, sometimes all you hear is the business of nurses working. But if you hear someone singing and see the responses of the patients, it affects everyone positively," Barrick says.

Rabinowitz says she notices that when therapeutic musicians are on the floor, the noise and agitation levels go down. "It's an amazing thing to see," she says.

Patients and nurses in the acute care setting also benefit from having someone in the units singing and strumming a harp or other instrument, says Sister Elizabeth Ann Lingg, Daughters of Charity, pastoral care director at St. Agnes HealthCare, Baltimore.

Volunteers come to St. Agnes and circulate throughout the hospital, including the oncology unit. "My observation with regard to music is it provides an ambience of restfulness and peace and quiet, which in itself, has healing qualities," Lingg says. "If you're in a situation where there is a lot of confusion, it also has a positive effect not only on patients, but also on the staff. You can see the calmer way the staff perform their duties. Having soothing music in the background almost touches the soul."

Families benefit, according to Rabinowitz. "It's not like a pill that one patient swallows. It helps the whole environment and makes a more conducive, caring, calming environment," she says.

Dean Smith, RN, BSN, director of nursing, Northwest Hospital Center, Randallstown, Md., says his staff was taken aback by having music on the hospice unit at first. "They didn't understand it and what the purpose of it was [but embraced it] once they really got to see what it was about. They saw how it truly helps the patients and the families, and even themselves, to cope with really difficult situations. It makes the grieving process for the hospice patients and families smoother and easier," he says.

Nursing's essence

Loeb says becoming a therapeutic musician has brought her back to why she went into nursing in the first place: to embrace healing for the patients, families, other staff members, and herself.

"When I play in a patient's room, the music just [flows] out to the nurse's station and creates such calm in their day. They beg me to stay," Loeb says. "We all need the peace and serenity and healing in our lives that we've lost because we've become such a fast-paced society. Knowing I can bring it to other people in a medical environment that is so taxed right now makes me feel like I'm doing true nursing."

Lisette Hilton is a freelance health care writer. To comment on this story, send an e-mail to pmredith@nursingspectrum.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about music and medicine visit the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) website at www.Musictherapy.org or call (301) 589-3300 or go to Music Healing and Transition Program website at www.mhtp.org.