

Coda

For many of us, music is a lifelong companion. When we are confronted with the end of life and find ourselves in palliative care, our listening and music-making choices can enable us to keep connected with who we are and the life we have lived. It can also help us to truly live right to the end.

“Coming to terms with our own mortality can be difficult,” says Melbourne music therapist, Karen Bolger. “Even though it will happen to all of us, preparing for end of life can feel unfamiliar and foreign.”

Karen works as part of the Community Palliative Care team at Calvary Health Care Bethlehem, which supports patients with life-limiting illnesses to remain at home for end of life care. Karen uses music to support patients and their families as they navigate the many physical, emotional and spiritual challenges that may arise at the end of life.

“It’s about having a reason to get out of bed in the morning, having a reason to live.”

“We have close to 200 patients who live in surrounding suburbs with terminal conditions such as advanced cancer, heart and lung conditions or late-stage dementia. Many have chosen to die at home with the support of community palliative care. These services begin when an illness is no longer curable and for some people that can mean a relationship forms with their music therapist over a long period of time.”

For self-described ‘ageing hippy’, 61 year old Alan, music therapy has become an essential part of his palliative care. “Music has always been fundamental to my being,” says Alan “so I was interested to see what music therapy might offer me at this stage of my life.”



As anyone who sings or plays a musical instrument will tell you, making music, especially with others, is great for the mind, body and soul. And the benefits flow whether you are an accomplished musician or an enthusiastic amateur. In music therapy trained health professionals – registered music therapists – draw on the

benefits of music to help people of all ages and abilities to attain and maintain good health and wellbeing. Music therapists work in a range of places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools and the community, delivering tailor-made programs to meet specific needs.

Music therapy can play an important role in the care of people living with a life-threatening or terminal illness. Working with their colleagues such as doctors, nurses and social workers, music therapists use their clinical and musical skills to support patients and their families on their journey with their illness, helping improve quality of life through physical, social, emotional and spiritual health.

Common methods used by music therapists in hospitals and in palliative care include playing live and/or recorded music, facilitating song choice, active music making and improvisation, and ‘musical life review’ where patients and/or their loved ones make compilation CDs of music meaningful to them. The therapist may also use a special technique in which music is improvised to match and slow a patient’s breathing rate, to help reduce anxiety and lessen the need for medication. Music and guided imagery relaxation techniques can be used to reduce pain and anxiety. Guided song writing can also provide a role in helping patients resolve emotional issues that stand in the way of wellbeing, as well as create a legacy for loved ones.

When she first met Alan, it was clear to Karen that music was an important part of his life.

“His home was filled with all kinds of music-related things including an extensive record collection, a keyboard and a synthesizer which he had hooked up to his computer. He had worked in sound production and dabbled in music his entire life. I was struck by his very broad musical tastes – everything from classical to Frank Zappa, Brian Eno and Led Zeppelin. He has a very analytical mind and he is interested in how music works including intervals, melodies and the mechanics of music. He has always wanted to learn to play the piano so, when he feels well enough, we incorporate piano lessons into our music therapy sessions.”

Alan's interest in learning the piano has little to do with whether he will pass an exam or take to the concert stage. Rather than giving up on living, Alan is using the time he has left to do things he has always wanted to do.

"My sessions involve a whole range of things from learning a few songs on the keyboard, listening to Karen singing songs, to relaxation with music," says Alan. "Just being able to talk about music and have intelligent conversation in and around music is fabulous. It lifts my spirits."

One of the benefits of the music therapy sessions is that Alan has been able to form a closer relationship with his two grandsons - who are learning music at school - sharing music together, playing piano and jamming to computer-programmed beats. There's a deeply motivating element in music for Alan, too: "staying alive gets to be damn hard work sometimes, so it's about having a reason to get out of bed in the morning, having a reason to live."

It is when Alan experiences inevitable setbacks in his health, that Karen's expertise as a music therapist is most evident. "Some days can be exceptionally hard for Alan. I often tell how well he is by his choice of music therapy. When he is experiencing difficult symptoms such as pain or nausea, it can be hard to maintain motivation to practice the piano, so I encourage him to use music in different ways. Alan has created a playlist of songs that he takes with him when he goes to hospital for treatment or appointments. There have also been days where I have just sung to him to help him relax and take his mind off all that's happening in his life. Often after these sessions, he'll say: 'well, you've done it again, you never fail to leave me in better shape than you found me.'"

As Alan's health changes, his music therapy with Karen will evolve as well. As he is currently relatively well, he is able to participate in more active music making. As his illness progresses, the music therapy may focus on music listening to assist with pain management, anxiety or to promote sleep. Alan may also want to create something for his family, either through songwriting or by putting together a collection of songs which are meaningful to him.

"People often think it must be sad to work with people who are dying," says Karen. "But I find it actually affirms life. Music has this amazing

ability to bring out a whole range of emotions. I have wonderful sessions with Alan where we have laughed, joked and shared stories through music. We have also explored some intense emotions about the experience of living with the knowledge that you are dying. It is such a privilege to accompany someone through the final stage of their life. Every day I am reminded of how precious life is."



what we know about...

music at the end of life

"Music is a mirror that reflects different aspects of our lives, such as the things we like and our social groups, over our past, present and future. Music helps us to recall significant events in our lives and draws on the emotions and relationships associated with those experiences. It helps us express our identity in the choices about what music we share with others and how we choose to engage with music. Identity is not a process relegated to the young and is an experience that is continually revisited over a lifetime, marked by significant experiences of growth and also of suffering. Because music is equally associated with emotions such as happiness and longing, it can become particularly relevant in the face of adversity. Positive responses induced by musical engagement can trigger processes in the brain that function like an analgesia, disguising and distracting from ongoing and moderate experiences of pain and anxiety. In addition, musical participation can provide a source of interest and satisfaction whilst also validating that some parts of life are manageable and in control. The capacity of music to bridge joy and suffering, as well as the past and the present has led to its prominent role in ceremonies celebrating both death and marriage, as well as other significant events."

Dr Katrina McFerran, University of Melbourne



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