

Get Attuned to Music Therapy for Cancer Care

An interview with Karen Popkin, a board-certified music therapist and a licensed creative arts therapist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City

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What is music therapy for cancer patients?

It's an interpersonal approach where we use different types of musical experiences to create a space for coming together. The cancer patient has an opportunity to use music to benefit their mental health and their physical health. We can focus on relaxation and also explore meaning and promote communication.

Can you tell us more about the types of activities that can be part of music therapy?

We may start with something that allows a person to simply relax into the experience. It may be music-based meditation, for example. Or we may employ shared listening experiences, like listening to music together and discussing its meaning and significance. Sometimes the music that we most love and that resonates with us can be a gateway to being able to communicate more about how we feel and what is important to us. Then we can move into more active experiences of playing different instruments, becoming familiar with learning to play something and maybe getting into improvisation and songwriting.

Do patients need experience with music to do this therapy?

No. We welcome people at all experience levels to try music therapy, and it's the job of the therapist to guide an experience that's appropriate for each person. We don't focus on performance; rather, we focus on the process of experiencing something together.

What benefits do you see for your cancer patients?

We've done a lot of work around helping people manage and cope with anxiety or depressed mood. We've done some work at the bedside—when people are feeling especially sick or vulnerable—helping to transform the hospital environment by welcoming in friends and family to join a session. In a study that we've been conducting, we've been focused primarily on anxiety, but along with that, we have found that many cancer survivors are at a point in their life where their sense of identity has undergone some changes. The creative work that we can do together really helps people to solidify where they want to go next with their life.

Do you see patients on all stages of the cancer journey?

Yes. We're currently piloting individual music therapy in our outpatient center, and so we have some people who are in the survivorship phase who have been coming in.

How can patients find a music therapist near them?

The American Music Therapy Association website has a section called "How to Find a Music Therapist." Another way may be to check with a hospital or university in the area that provides training for music therapists.

And finally, what inspires you in your work?

It's really the opportunity to spend time with people who are so ready to move into their next phase of life. The work can be very joyful at times. It's a privilege that people put their trust in me when we are working together. I love the fact that no two days are the same and there's unlimited beauty and creativity in the work.