

## Doing More with your Music!

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*“Music gives a soul to the universe, Wings to the mind,  
Flight to the imagination, and Life to everything!” Plato (427-347 BCE)*

I would like to stress there is a lot of room at the table to use music to help people. Many levels of training and musicianship still can be very effective!

There are 3 basic levels of using music for healing and connecting with people.

**Music Therapists (MTs)** have college bachelor degrees in Music Therapy, and possibly a graduate degree as well. They learn to skillfully use music with prescribed, intended goals. That might involve listening to particular music with a client, having them play music, or playing music for and with them for various intended purposes. For Example, using music during PT (Physical Therapy) sessions to aid with keeping a rhythm in the exercises. They use clinical and evidence-based music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship.

They often lead music groups, i.e. drumming circles, to help people connect and heal. They have a wide scope of practice that may or may not include live music. Their training includes 1200 practicum hours! The American Music Therapy Association website has many details, as well as information on research in the field. <https://www.musictherapy.org/>

**Therapeutic Musicians (TMs)** have a certification, recognized by the National Standards Board of Therapeutic Musicians (NSBTM.org). TMs have taken a course of about 80 hours, and have about 45 practicum hours in their training. They have a narrow scope of practice, strictly limited to providing live music one on one, to help create a healing environment. They are taught to play for different patient conditions including, stabilizing, acute pain and actively dying.

Two popular TM programs are

- Music for Healing and Transitions Program (mhtp.org). Their graduates are called Certified Music Practitioners (CMPs)
- Harps for Healing ([www.harpforhealing.com](http://www.harpforhealing.com)). Their graduates are called “Certified Clinical Musicians (CCMs)

**Music Thanatologists** play very specific music for people actively dying.

The Chalice of Repose has an extensive training program. <https://chaliceofrepose.org>

Both MTs and TMs are required to have Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to maintain their certifications. They have specialized training and they probably also have liability insurance!

NOTE: One major difference is that MTs and TMs do not think of their music sessions as “performances”. It is never about the musician. The focus is on helping the patient they are working with or playing for. The music is a conduit for healing.

Often non-trained musicians think of providing a “performance” or “entertainment.” This of course can be extremely beneficial, uplifting, and healing too – but it is a radically different framework.

Then there is what people have done for millennia- used music to play for people to help them feel better. The musicians might be professional musicians or amateurs, paid or volunteer, but they do not have special training for working with patient conditions.

**Some volunteer organizations:**

**Musicians on Call** provides free bedtime performances at hospitals.

<https://www.musiciansoncall.org>

**Threshold Choirs** (a capella groups that sing for patients at the threshold of living and dying)

<https://www.thresholdchoir.org/>

Or you can make your own arrangements!

Places to play if you aren't trained:

- Retirement Homes and Senior Centers – love concerts or special music for holidays! especially ones that are for low-income

- Homeless Shelters

- Prisons

- Animal Shelters! – calming, solo music can be very helpful for distressed animals

- Hospital Lobbies, Cafeterias, and Waiting Rooms

- Hospices love volunteers and usually have general training programs for volunteers

Through all of these you will probably go through the Volunteer Coordinator. You might be required to take a training session, especially at a hospital or hospice. Hospitals often require annual TB testing and flu shots.

For some of these, concerts with varied music, including different tempos and sing-a-longs are best. If you are playing background music in a waiting room or in a hospital, quieter music played in moderate and slow tempos are better. Gentle music often unknowingly causes people to lower their voices and slow down a little, calming a busy ward.

Things to keep in mind:

If you are playing for ill and end of life people, less can be more. When you are sick you need simple, not gourmet, food. Music is no different. Simpler, slower melodies, and softer music is usually best. Non-familiar music is often more therapeutic than familiar, although familiar music can make people very happy. For people with memory issues – familiar music can help them connect.

Watch the patient/crowd! You might need to adapt what you are doing if they get agitated.

A short bibliography:

*This is Your Brain On Music*, Daniel Levitin, 2006

*The Power of Sound*, Joshua Leeds, 2001, updated in 2010

*Waking the Spirit*, Andrew Schulman, 2016

*Musicophilia*, Oliver Sacks, 2008, revised and expanded in 2012

*The Healing Musician*, Stella Benson, CMP, 1999

## Repertoire Ideas for Healing Music Work

Gentle music to soothe anxiety and help people sleep:

- Waltzes
  - O'Carolan repertoire and any Celtic airs
  - Slow down fiddle tunes then do these things:
    - Simplify the melody so it isn't as many eighth notes.
    - use more minor chords.
    - Substitute the relative minors (vi for the I chord and ii for the V chord).
    - Substitute the IV chord for the V or I chords (as long as the melody isn't the 7<sup>th</sup> note of the scale).
- Keep a pedal/ drone tone (usually the root note of the key you are in)  
Play a simple ostinato bass alternating between I and IV.  
Do not use V7 chords.

- Folk songs like
  - The Water is Wide
  - How Can I Keep from Singing
  - O Shenandoah

Do NOT play religious music and hymns unless you really know that is what the patient wants to hear!!

If you are playing for people with memory issues- and any time you are playing for seniors, include some familiar repertoire.

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### Some quotes from the hospital

*"Very soothing--Just what I needed!"* patient

*"Your music is like sunshine!"* patient

*"You're putting smiles on all our faces."* Nurse at Walter Reed

*"Your music is the loveliest part of Fridays."* Nurse in the PACU at Walter Reed

*"As my husband lay dying in Georgetown University Hospital a few months ago and struggled to while away the hours until he could go home, on two different occasions, once a charming violinist and on a second hospital stay, a cheerful dulcimer player came into his room to play for him. I thought perhaps that he would like to rest and be quiet, but no, as soon as they started playing, his face lit up and he smiled for the first time in many days. His mood stayed bright the whole time they were playing for him and for the rest of the afternoon.*

*I had of course heard how music was well received by hospital patients, but it was not until I witnessed it myself that I understood what a powerful force music can be in a hospital setting, a soothing comforting and healing mechanism. And not only that, but one tends to forget, amid all the cacophony of noise and pop music that clatters out of so many machines and clutters our mind's airwaves these days, what a balm to the soul a simple tune on a lone instrument played by a single musician can be. A lively song or a haunting melody can tap into a universal and ancient language embedded in every culture, a lullaby, religious anthems, songs of love and loss, or a caress to lift a mood, distract from pain and comfort distress."*