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Music Therapy: Self Expression Through Songwriting

The purpose of this paper is to describe how therapeutic self expression can be achieved through songwriting.

Music therapy defined: using music to achieve non-musical goals. When the music therapist works with a patient or family to encourage the expression of feelings and emotions through music, the goal is not to write a beautiful song but instead the goal is to simply involve the patient or family in the process of identifying feelings and emotions that otherwise would not be expressed. If a beautiful song is created, or if the patient plays piano on the recording, those outcomes are secondary to the primary goal of therapeutic self expression.

Many studies and observations have determined that songwriting is a powerful medium for self expression and personal growth. Ficken (1976), as cited in Freed (1987), identifies that “songwriting allows a person’s feelings to be validated by the therapist or others. Through this validation, individuals receive emotional support and feedback for their thoughts and feelings.” In *The Arts and Psychotherapy*, Karr (1976), as cited in Brodsky et al., 1986, speaks of the therapeutic effects of involving children in the music therapy process, identifying that “through music therapy, a youngster can develop feelings of improved self-worth within an environment that emphasizes success rather than disability.” Because expressing one’s feelings is often very personal, self-expression in the form of songwriting can feel less “risky” than talking or writing a letter. Sears (1968), reminds us that “music provides a means by which self-expression is socially acceptable.”

As it is talked about in the music therapy, palliative care literature, many clinical goals can be accomplished with the patient and family when song writing experiences are supported. An example of related goals are listed below.

Songwriting with a patient and/or their family can:

- be a positive diversion from physical and emotional pain
- be utilized as a productive vehicle for life review
- facilitate self expression
- decrease stress and promote relaxation
- stimulate positive reminiscence
- provide special music experiences that stimulate positive memories and make new (positive memories).
- perpetuate the continued involvement in music – even during end of life times
- involve the patient and family members in success oriented tasks
- produce lasting family mementoes in the form of original lyrics and music (in the form of CDs)
- support spirituality

The writing process:

Once the original lyrics are presented or written with the music therapist's support, the patient (or family) determines what style of music the therapist will write. The music therapist will then play early "drafts" of the song for the patient until all are happy with the completed composition. Lastly, the music therapist will record the song in his home studio. Often then, the art therapist is called to support the creation of art that can be the CD cover, or simply art work that accompanies the song project, again, adding to the creative self expressive process. Another scenario is when the patient (or family) is musical and write the music and lyrics themselves, and/or they play an instrument or sing on the final recording of the CD, all of which are supported by the music therapist.

The goal areas related to songwriting are listed above. To specifically reiterate, the patient and/or family benefit by being able to: engage in success oriented tasks; express feelings and emotions; take pride in the completion of a project; confirm and support spiritual commitment; produce lasting, life long memories in the form of lyrics (poems) and CD recordings – to name a few.

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