

The Use of Sound Therapy in Palliative Care

Four and a half years ago I joined a hospice complementary therapy team as a crystal and spiritual healer and to play music to patients. The hospice environment was totally new to me and I had no idea how the patients would respond or how I would apply my skills. Prior to this I had been a social worker practising healing and experimenting with music and sound on various instruments. I have recently completed a qualification with the College of Sound Healing. I had no idea at the point of starting how beneficial and diverse my work with sound would become. I would like to share some of these experiences and the different methods I have used on working with sound.

My personal understanding is that everything in creation is vibration and that each person vibrates at their unique rate. This is influenced by their experiences throughout life: their fluctuating thoughts, diet, environment, beliefs, general wellbeing and so on. When we play an instrument or use our voice then our vibration will continue to resonate through that instrument and be received by the others who are open. It is therefore essential that the sound therapist has an understanding and awareness of the level and quality of their own vibration. I am sure that this is true for any therapist, whatever they are practising. With this factor in mind I work on my own development to improve the quality of my own resonance and strengthen my intention in order to give maximum benefit the patient.

INTENTION + SOUND/VIBRATION = HEALING

My intention varies, depending on how I am working, but whether it is to bring joy, peace, compassion, love, acceptance, healing, sacredness or whatever feels appropriate, I focus my intention accordingly. I have total trust that I will be guided to do whatever work is needed during my time there and my experiences have certainly confirmed this.

As far as the practical application of sound and music is concerned, I will explain the different methods that I have used.

GROUP SINGING – I play a 12 string acoustic guitar for these sessions together with a squeeze box (melodeon), drum and mandolin. They are excellent for rallying and uplifting the patients. I try to select songs that the patients will know and sometimes song sheets are given out and the patients are offered various percussion instruments to play. Obviously one has to be aware that some patients may feel too unwell to participate so the noise level needs to be matched appropriately. However these sessions have proven to be very popular and are often organised spontaneously. The energy created in the group becomes infectious, with staff joining in. Laughter, joy and often tears where patients have been able to release emotional tensions. The



sessions are also carried out in an amateurish way with mistakes in playing. Just like you would have a session in your own home, and this adds to their success. On occasions we have introduced poems between songs.

GUITAR SESSION – For this I play relaxing sounds that I have composed on a 12 string guitar while patients either listen and relax or talk informally. This is very much like the atmosphere you might get in a café or wine bar – informal, soothing background sounds.

GROUP RELAXATION – This is an organised session for any of the patients who wish to attend. The focus is to get the patients really comfortable in their chairs to prepare them for entering into deep relaxation. The session starts with a background CD of pure nature sounds, either the sea, dawn chorus or mountain stream. I then guide the patients through breathing exercises and a body relaxation whilst tapping a single Tibetan bowl. Once the patients begin to enter into a relaxed state I continue by utilising the following instruments as the session develops – an Indian tympani and sarawati, a set of carefully chosen Tibetan bowls, a Chinese wind gong and native American wooden flute and sometimes I finish with a large rainmaker which creates a very fine sound of falling rain. The patients are left for a while to absorb the vibrations before being guided very quietly back into their awakened state. The patients often relax very deeply and take some time to bring their consciousness back into the room and open their eyes.

ONE TO ONE RELAXATION SESSION – This is the same as the group session, but I use less instruments.

ONE TO ONE SOUND HEALING SESSION – This requires the patient to lie on a therapy couch (preferably) or sit in a chair. It is important to get the patient really comfortable and to ground the patient by holding their feet and chanting a deep AUM sound.

This is followed by a manageable breathing routine to help the patient relax, and appropriate affirmations for protection as one would do for spiritual healing. I then project vocal sounds into the patient's energy centres or chakras.

The vocal sounds I use are either the Indian scale of Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Da, Ni, Sa or Bija Mantras. Using pure vocal tone and increasing the pitch as I move up the body, I project these sounds several times. The patient remains in a relaxed state to absorb the vibration before concluding the session. Patients can often feel sensations in their body and the sounds vibrating in certain chakras and feel very relaxed. This type of sound healing requires a lot of focus from the healer and a need to maintain a clear intention for the patient's well being.

SESSIONS FOR IN-PATIENTS – For the sessions with in-patients I use all the above and often include family members around the bedside. The amazing thing about sound/therapy healing is that anyone in the near vicinity can also benefit from and receive the vibration because it fills the whole room. Obviously the type of sound therapy being offered will depend on the patient's need and what they feel they would like.

PATIENTS WITH BRAIN TUMOURS – I have had several experiences where patients have been unable to communicate. They have been restless and this has been distressing for their family. Where this has been the case I have sung the patient's name as a lullaby for them, just as one would sing to a baby or young child. The effect of this has been quite remarkable and in one instance led to me including the family members' names and singing a story about the person's life with the patient responding and creating sentences. This was profoundly healing for the whole family and a very moving experience. I was also able to sing how her children loved her and she loved them.

SOUND DURING MEDICAL PROCEDURES – From time to time, especially when nurses are experiencing difficulty getting a needle into a patient's vein, I have been asked if I can help relax the patient with the help of sound. By using simple breathing techniques and sounding the Tibetan bowls, gong and flute and getting the patient to focus away from the procedure they have been able to relax and the needle has gone in easily, saving the patient from a lot of stress, tension and fear.

SACRED SONGS AND DEVOTIONAL CHANTING – Over the years I have composed simple short verses that I have put to music. The words have been chosen carefully to awaken a deeper meaning of life and to relate to the patient on a very intimate

and deep level. They are inclusive of all religions and can mean whatever the patient wants them to mean.

One to one sessions sometimes include a partner or family members and are always very moving. Often there are lots of tears shed and family members sharing their deep feelings. I feel very privileged whenever this happens.

I have also learnt a selection of Hindu Mantras and often use them with the Hindu families. Each chant relates to a certain deity or being and by repeatedly chanting the name we are creating that vibration in the room. I have often carried out these sessions with up to 12 family members present. There is always a feeling of sacredness and deep reverence, with family members in prayer or openly expressing feeling. Again my intention has to be very focussed and this helps me to contain my own feeling and hold the situation.

My work with sound feels like a journey and I never know where it is leading me. The spontaneity of creating it and being open to whatever presents itself is very appealing to me. I feel that it is helping me discover more about myself and in the way I relate to others. I hope that some of my experiences will be helpful to

you in exploring sound and I urge you to use whatever skills you have to develop this work and explore the incredible world of vibration and sound and at the same time help others.

Alan Watts – Music and Sound Therapist

