

Support in a Song

The Benefits of Music Therapy in Cancer Care

by Hannah Shefsky, MA, MT-BC



As a music therapist working in a large cancer center, I'm often asked, "What exactly is music therapy?"

Music therapy is the clinical use of music-based tools and techniques to enhance quality of life and promote wellness and healing. In cancer care, music therapy is a supportive therapy that is part of a complementary medicine program. It has been shown to help reduce fear and anxiety, promote relaxation, improve mood, support pain management, decrease feelings of isolation, and provide space for emotional release and self-expression.

One common misconception is that music therapy is only for people with previous experience in music. In actuality, engaging in music therapy requires no prior music experience whatsoever. Music therapists are board-certified

professionals who can incorporate music into treatment in ways that best support you and your unique set of needs and experiences, regardless of your musical ability.

Music therapy can take on many forms:

🎵 **Receptive music therapy** Some may find it most helpful to sit back and listen as a music therapist sings or plays gentle live music tailored to their specific preferences and needs. This can be a powerful way of letting your body and mind relax. It can help to ease stress and shift your focus away from pain and anxiety. Live music can even motivate you to explore movements along to the beat. We all know the benefits of a good morning stretch!

🎵 **Active music making** Many music therapy sessions involve hands-on music making. This can include learning an instrument, singing or playing along to favorite songs, or exploring the fun of improvisation. It's probably no surprise that active music making can help you express yourself, improve your mood, boost your energy, and enjoy a creative outlet. Again, you don't need to be a "music person" to reap the benefits of music making. All you need is a willingness to explore and try something new.

🎵 **Songwriting** Another common activity in music therapy is writing songs

or creating original recordings. Songwriting can be a powerful form of expression and a way to process and communicate challenging feelings about your illness. Recording projects also have the added benefit of being easily shared with friends and family who may be far away as you go through cancer.

🎵 **Music-supported meditation** You may also be interested to explore music-supported meditation. With the support of live or recorded music, a music therapist can lead you through a guided meditation or mindfulness practice. This can help you feel present, connected, and centered within yourself. It can also promote deep relaxation and assist in decreasing fear and anxiety.

🎵 **Group music therapy** While many of these techniques take place in one-on-one settings, group music therapy also has many wonderful benefits. Group sessions might include shared music making, song lyric discussions, songwriting activities, or music-based movement. These experiences can open up meaningful conversations, help you express yourself in a positive and safe space, and, of course, offer a way to have fun and build connections with other survivors and their families.

In my work as a music therapist, I am lucky to witness the relief, healing, and joy that music can bring to cancer survivors. Whether I am working with a young woman to write an original song



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using selections from her journal, playing gentle music to create a relaxing environment during an infusion, or learning guitar with a man looking for support as he recovers from a successful bone marrow transplant, the power of music remains constant. It is a source of support that should not be overlooked.

Hannah Shefsky is a board-certified music therapist at The Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center in Boston, MA.

To learn more about music therapy and to find a music therapist near you, visit the American Music Therapy Association website at musictherapy.org or the Certification Board for Music Therapists website at cbmt.org.

Music therapy can help you ...

- 🎵 Find relaxation and ease stress
- 🎵 Boost energy and improve your mood
- 🎵 Take your mind off pain and discomfort
- 🎵 Process and express emotions
- 🎵 Connect with other survivors