



## **Bedside Harp – Therapeutic for the Dying**

**By Donalyn Gross, Ph.D., LCSW, CMP**

Music touches everyone in a very personal way and offers diverse beneficial effects. Just as a person experiences the various rhythms of life, the end of life has its own cadence. As the final stages of dying approach, there is a diminished emphasis on “cure”, and more attention is focused on providing comfort and dignity. Dying encompasses a myriad of physical and emotional states including pain, anxiety, anger, fear and depression. To alleviate these stressors, some providers have enlisted the services of Certified Music Practitioners to create a peaceful environment by playing harp at the bedside.

### **The Harp**

The harp has always been an instrument related to comfort and peace. The resonance from the strings, the range of pitch and tones create a bond between sound and the recipient.

Live harp music offers several healing properties and can benefit:

- the temporarily, chronically, and/or critically ill
- Alzheimer’s patients
- Patients before, during and after surgery
- Premature and healthy babies
- Birthing mothers
- The elderly, comatose, and the dying

Live music can encourage mental imaging, augments pain management, and can facilitate the transition from life to death. This also opens the way for grieving, and can relieve body tension.

### **Playing for the Dying**

As an LCSW and Thanatologist in a local nursing home, I was always looking for something new in the field of death and dying. When attending an end of life seminar, I learned of the Music for Healing and Transition course that is given all around the country. It teaches you to use your voice or an instrument to play for the elderly, the critically ill, chronically ill and the dying. I had previously purchased a small lap harp, took a few lessons, and with the help of the course, became a Certified Music Practitioner. We learned that when playing music for the dying, you don’t want to play recognizable music, because you don’t want to bring that person “back”. You don’t want to interfere with the process of letting go by playing music that they might recognize. So, we improvise, playing along with their breathing patterns. People have often asked

me to “play that pretty melody again”, but I can’t because I don’t remember what I just played!

Certified Music Practitioners differ from Music Therapists, in that therapists actively involve or instruct the patient in the process of creating sound. Practitioners play directly for the actively dying to relieve stress and promote a gentle passing.

A fund for the terminally ill has provided grant money to create a position for me to play therapeutic bedside harp for the dying. Presently, I work with two nursing homes and a local hospital. The fund works through the Spiritual Care Departments. I am on call, 24/7, with a beeper. When a patient is actively dying, the nursing staff notifies the chaplains who will first speak with the family members to see if they would like the harp played for their family member. If they agree, the chaplain will beep me. They’ll give me the information, and I will be on my way. The response from the families is 99% in favor of music. Many want to be there when I play. This is not a performance; I play 1-1 for the patient.

The first time I played for a patient, her two grandsons were there. They wanted to stay and listen. Fifteen minutes later, all three were snoring. For a moment I felt insulted, but then realized the music had the correct effect– they were relaxed and comfortable enough to let go and fall asleep. The woman died soon after.

A patient who had a day stay procedure said, “You’ll never know how helpful and wonderful your music was for me. After you left I was so much more relaxed. I had been shaking uncontrollably during the test even though I had Valium and Benadryl. I had brought a CD player and meditation music with me, but the interesting thing was after I had listened for awhile, I turned it off and I could hear your harp music in my head, not the music I was listening to. Thank you so much”.

One December day I played for a dying woman, her family crowded around and on the bed. Suddenly there was a flash of light and a crash of thunder. She died that moment. One of her daughters turned to me with a smile and tears in her eyes and said, “She died to your music.”

Family members, nursing staff and other residents/patient derive benefits from live music. Music can soften stressful situations and allow them to express grief and achieve closure. I’ve been told by many nurses that they feel more at ease, making it easier to go about their jobs, when they know someone is there providing comforting music for their patients. **“Half an hour of music produces the same effect as 10 mgs. of Valium”, Raymond Bahr, MD, Head of Coronary Care Unit, St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore, MD.** Many time patients will stand by the doorway, or come in their wheelchairs to listen. The music brings such a calming atmosphere to the floor.

In nursing homes and hospitals when someone is actively dying, the radio is playing jazz, rock and roll, talk shows, or the television is on. Staff sometimes feel that there has to be some kind of music/talk in the room when there's no one there. Unless a person specifically requests that there be a certain type of music while they're dying, (and I once

sat with a man who wanted to die to rock and roll, and we listened to WDRC Oldies for 9 hours as he died), I **strongly** recommend Yanni, Enya, nature sounds (water, birdsong, wind, chimes), or New Age music be played. (no specific melodies, non-melodic and peaceful).

Bedside music is appropriate and beneficial in hospitals, hospice programs, nursing homes, clinics, and private homes. Referrals and requests for the services of a music practitioner can be made by administrators, medical staff, social workers, clergy or families.

"At Jewish Geriatric Services and the Julian J. Leavitt Family Jewish Nursing Home, we have strived to make these days and hours as positive for the individual and their families as possible. Last year, with support from the Albert E. and Lillian M. Marceau Fund, we enhanced our program dramatically when we introduced Donalyn Gross and her Therapeutic Harp into our program for actively dying residents. Dr. Gross is a unique individual who is a Thanatologist, and a talented musician. She also radiates a spiritual presence. Her program at JGS has been embraced by staff, residents and their families. Families are naturally offered the service and can accept or refuse. But when she appears at their bedside, harp in hand, all have found her music at this most critical moment in one's life remarkably comforting and even uplifting.

I speak for all the staff at JGS in saying that we value her lovely enhancement to our program and are appreciative of her efforts and commitment."

**Alan. S. Rosenfeld, Ph.D., President and CEO, Jewish Geriatric Services, Longmeadow, MA**

"Music can be a crucially important aspect of therapy. Whenever I get a book on neurology or psychology, the first thing I look up in the index is music, and if it's not there, I close the book".

**Oliver Sacks, MD, Columbia University Medical Center, New York, NY**

"Music has been recognized through research as a safe, inexpensive and effective non-pharmaceutical way to relieve anxiety".

**Brian Seeney, MD, National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, MD**

**About the Author**

Donalyn Gross' 30 year career as a Thanatologist includes working with hospitals, hospice, correctional systems, and long term care facilities. An Adjunct Professor, she teaches college courses in Death and Dying, and offers training workshops for healthcare professionals. The author of several books, therapeutic music CD's, and a video, she is the creator of the Good Endings® Program ([www.goodendings.net](http://www.goodendings.net)). A professional musician, she is a graduate of the Music for Healing and Transition program ([www.mhtp.org](http://www.mhtp.org)). Presently, she is the Director of the Vigil Team at Heritage Hall West Nursing Home in Agawam, MA, and Therapeutic Bedside Harpist for the Jewish Geriatric Services in Longmeadow, MA, and Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, MA.