Music: A Natural Accompaniment to Grief Work

An Interview with Music Therapist Lauren DiMaio, PhD.

At some point after the death of our loved one, it is guaranteed that we will hear a song or some piece of music that takes us directly to our connection with that person. It will happen whether we want it to or not. In a restaurant or an elevator, on the radio, or in church, there will be music, and in one way or another, it will remind us that we are grieving. It may come totally unexpectedly and throw you into an uncontrollable griefburst that feels painfully inappropriate. Or maybe it happens purposefully. That CD that you both loved gets rediscovered, and before you know it, you’re playing or singing a tune that feels so good that it hurts. Radford University professor and Hospice Music Therapist Lauren DiMaio has studied the power of music and its effects on our state of health, and works with music as a healing tool. “Mentally, physically and emotionally, music transforms us,” Lauren has found. “We can try to avoid music until it blindsides us unprepared, or we can consciously make it part of our grief process.”

For many of us, the first time we use music to assist with grief is at the funeral service. We are moved when hearing a sacred song that was close to the deceased’s heart, or lyrics that help us to swallow the first bite of a very different life. “Music helps us to access what’s going on under the surface,” Lauren has observed. “At a funeral we are able to stop dealing with the logistics of the death for a while. Funeral music gives our true feelings permission to come forth and be fully felt.”

Again and again along the grief journey, music that resonates with our feelings, when sung, played or listened to, makes way for needed emotional release. Familiar melodies unlock memories, and well-written lyrics often say just how we feel, more poetically than we could. “Our grief journey has stories that need to be told,” Lauren confirms, “When we listen to our story being told through music, we move another step on the path.”

“I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music.”

- George Eliot, English novelist (1819 - 1880)

Support is Available

Our Grief Counseling Program

We are available by appointment. Sometimes it helps to speak in confidence with a counselor about feelings that arise during these difficult times. We are here to help. Learn more about our grief and support program.

For information or appointments, please call (828) 251-0126.
“What stories need to be told?” you might wonder. The stories about how we feel and why, and who we’ve become now that our life has changed. Lauren suggests these stories are part of us, whether or not they are told out loud. They help define us in a world made uncomfortable by death. Songwriters throughout the ages have shared stories that universally touch the human spirit, yet sound like a personal message to us. Songs we consider our favorites often tell a story about some aspect of our own life.

During grief, many aspects of our life are raw and painful. It’s common to believe we’re better off avoiding them. But magically, on invisible waves of sound, a piece of music can penetrate into pain we swear was carefully locked away. Within a few chords we can go from “doing just fine” to a searing confrontation with heartache.

Of course you might ask: why would we purposely want to do that to ourselves? Grief is tough enough without exposing ourselves to tunes that leave us emotionally wrung out. Perhaps it’s only to say that music is strong medicine. “If a certain piece of music is unbearable, don’t listen to it.” says Dr. DiMaio, “Acknowledge that it’s not helpful at that time. Accept that the piece is only useful in gauging your place on the grief journey at that time.” When confronting the heaviest part of grief, that certain song or hymn, or even a whole genre of music may be impossible to take in. Sad songs of heartbreak or loneliness may, out of respect for our vulnerability, need to be avoided at certain times.

Trust your instincts, but don’t turn your back on music completely. Fortunately, music takes infinite forms. If sad tunes are off limits, go on a search for a more joyful noise. Surround yourself with music that speaks to another part of you: songs of celebration and gratitude, or melodies that uplift the spirit. If the music you once loved brings you down these days, it might be appropriate to explore new types of music, things you’ve never listened to before. Changing our internal vibration is what grief recovery is ultimately about on a molecular level. Exposure to inspiring vibrations, even externally, can help us change internally. Finding new music has become easier than ever. Internet searches and downloads make everything published in the music industry readily available, including lyrics.

Lauren suggests that grievers with access to a computer or tape player make a CD or tape mix that resonates best with how they are feeling at any particular time. “Creating our own ‘tribute album’ to our feelings helps us work through them,” says Lauren. The more ways we have to access our feelings and be with them, the better. All emotions are temporary if we are present with them. Making a musical documentation of feelings will serve as a ‘sound diary.’ Listening to them in the later months, you’ll sense how your feelings have changed along the grief journey.”

Lauren even suggests having two or more different CDs to help us. An upbeat one that rocks you out of a blue funk, out of bed, or off to work, helps you function and smile to the world, and another that mellows you when memories draw close and you want to relax into them. A third one might be dedicated to music your loved one particularly liked.

Going to a live concert is another beautiful way to use music therapeutically. Live music in the company of others can be intense for grievers, but you may be surprised at how invigorating the experience can be. If home alone is the best scenario for you, learning (or remembering how) to play an instrument or sing to yourself has unlimited benefits for the grieving heart. Isn’t this how most great music began? You are your own best resource for discovering what you need to hear. Be patient. Listen. Listening, even to the sound of the birds, flowing water, or the heat pump cycling can ground us into the present moment. Lauren’s favorite meditation is listening to ambient sounds, heard with fresh ears.

Whether we use music to monitor, soothe, or distract ourselves from grief, the act of listening to or making music helps open our senses to the inherent beauty in our lives.

Story by Katherine Caldwell
Tears In Heaven - This autobiographical song, written and recorded by Eric Clapton, expresses his feelings of loss after the death of his son.

Would you know my name
If I saw you in heaven
Would it be the same
If I saw you in heaven
I must be strong, and carry on
‘Cause I know I don’t belong
Here in heaven

Would you hold my hand
If I saw you in heaven
Would you help me stand
If I saw you in heaven
I’ll find my way,
through night and day
Cause I know I just can’t stay
Here in heaven

Time can bring you down
Time can bend your knees
Time can break your heart
Have you begging please
Begging please.....

Beyond the door
There’s peace I’m sure.
And I know there’ll be no more...
Tears in heaven.

Farther Along

Tempted and tried, we’re oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long
While there are others living among us
Never molested, though in the wrong.

Farther along we’ll know all about it,
Farther along we’ll understand why;
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine,
We’ll understand it all by and by.

When death has come and taken our loved ones,
It leaves our home so lonely and drear,
Then do we wonder why others prosper
Living so wicked year after year.

Farther along we’ll know all about it,
Farther along we’ll understand why;
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine,
We’ll understand it all by and by.

~ Southern Gospel by J.R. Baxter & W.B. Stevens, 1937
YOU ARE INVITED

to the CarePartners Hospice Community
Fall Memorial Service

Sunday, November 4, 2018, 3:00 pm
CarePartners Hospice Solace Center – Great Room
21 Belvedere Road, Asheville, 28803

You and your loved ones are invited to our sacred, non-denominational memorial service for those who have died. This service is led by the CarePartners Bereavement, Music Therapy and Chaplaincy Departments. Space is limited, please RSVP by October 26 to 828-251-0126 with name, number attending, if wheelchair space is needed, and call with any questions.

Please remember to check your clocks – daylight savings ends on this date!