

Music and Social Work: The Connection

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Social work and music have always been intertwined for me. Lately, I have been hearing more and more about social workers who use music and the other arts in their work. It seems like a natural fit.

I have been a flutist since about the age of 11 and have always been aware of the therapeutic qualities of music. In high school, I became a volunteer for many different causes. When I went away to college, I found a major that combined these two interests—music therapy—before returning to school to get my master’s in social work.

I have always seen the two as being related, at least for me, since I have had an interest and training in both. So, when I saw an ad for the Music for Healing and Transition Program (MHTP) a couple of years ago, I took notice. MHTP is a national nonprofit organization that trains and certifies people to provide live therapeutic music at the bedside, culminating in certification as a Certified Music Practitioner (CMP).

As a social work publisher who previously worked in mental health and medical settings, I had been thinking about getting back into part-time direct practice. MHTP was the answer for me. The training program consists of five weekend modules, 10 book reports, and a 45-hour internship, plus an exam and recording of therapeutic music repertoire. It took me 15 months to complete the program and become a CMP.

I interned (and continue to do this work) in two settings—a nursing home and a hospital. Let me tell you a few stories about what I do.

One resident at the nursing home, an 87-year-old man, told me he liked to go to the opera. I played classical music for him for about 25 minutes. He smiled and thanked me. He died a week or so later. My session with him was most likely the last time in his life that he heard live music.

I played for another resident who told me, “I’m not glad I’m in a nursing home, but I’m glad I am here to hear this.”

In the hospital, I often play my flute on the pediatrics floor. One day, I was playing my flute for a 12-year-old male patient. This young man told me that he liked all kinds of music, and his mom chimed in, “He likes classical music.” Although he didn’t look very excited, I trusted “mother’s intuition” and gave it a try. As I played, he smiled, and when I finished, his face was beaming. He shouted, “That was awesome!” For a period of time, the music took his mind off of his illness.

Through my training in MHTP, I learned to play appropriate, non-obtrusive music at the bedside, based on the individual patient’s needs. As I play for each patient, I continue to evaluate from moment to moment how the person is responding to the music. By providing live music, I can adjust what and how I play to each person’s needs.

In social work, we often use words to reach people, but sometimes words aren’t needed, and the pure sound of music may take us far beyond what words can express.