

Soundscape Music Therapy

Music Therapy Services for the Greater Kansas City Area

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Integrating Music into Grief Rituals

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Even though formal music therapy has become an important part of hospice care only in the last couple of decades, music has been an important part of celebrating life for centuries. At the music therapy conference I attended earlier this month, music therapist Dr. Natalie Wlodarczyk from Drury University spoke about the role of ritual in music therapy for people who are grieving. Based on what I learned from her presentation, I wanted to share some thoughts about the role of music in grief and loss.

Why is music helpful in grief rituals?

Music is intimately connected with emotion, and with music, a person can let himself experience feelings or communicate emotions that might not be shared easily in words. Music is also strongly related to memories, which can be important when one is trying to connect with memories of a loved one or honor the memory of the person she has lost. Music has also been a part of various rituals and ceremonies across human history, so it is a natural part of the rituals we construct for ourselves. It helps to give structure to a ritual, especially by giving the experience a place in time, with a beginning and end.

Where/when could music be helpful?

The first (and perhaps most common) grief ritual involving music is the funeral. These services often include songs that had special meaning to the person who has died, and, in some cases, they may have been chosen specially by that person.

After the funeral is over, however, people may need to create different kinds of rituals to honor their relationships with their loved ones as they continue the journey of grief. These rituals may take many different forms, and music can have many different roles in these rituals, depending on who is participating. Just to give you an idea of the range of ways music can be part of a grief ritual, here are a few examples:

- Having a vocal soloist sing during a service for hospice staff honoring patients who have died in previous months
- Group singing of a song composed together during a bereavement group, during the final session
- Drumming to accompany a ritual act, such as setting paper lanterns floating down a river
- A person singing the special song he shared with his loved one during a private mourning ritual
- Listening to a favorite recording to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's death
- Recording a song that was special to you and your loved one and posting your recording to YouTube (Music therapist Michelle Erfurt [wrote about this one.](#))

As you can see, the uses of music are as varied as the rituals people can create for themselves and their own processes of mourning.

Considerations for Planning Music for a Grief Ritual

If you are creating your own grief ritual, you really are allowed to use music in whatever way feels appropriate to you. Deciding exactly how you want to integrate music (or not) can help to make your experience that much more meaningful to you.

If you are participating in or facilitating a group grief ritual, though, you do need to consider carefully what music experiences you choose. Since you cannot assume that everyone will react to a particular song in the same way, you should ask other group members what they think before using a popular or well-known song in a grief ritual. Alternatively, you can use music that is either improvised (as in group drumming) or composed in advance by the group. You will also need to consider whether to use sacred or secular music, depending on the setting and the preferences of the people participating.

Another consideration for any grief ritual is whether the music will be live or recorded. If it is live, consider who will be playing the music – a music therapist or facilitator, or the participants? A soloist or the entire group together? If it recorded, consider the playback device you're using and the particular recording you've chosen.

With so many ways to integrate and adapt music experiences, you should be able to create a grief ritual that will be meaningful to whoever is participating