

Name

# Music: Helping to Heal Those that Grieve

## by Tony Falzano

There's an old saying that time will heal all wounds. For those suffering the loss of a loved one, pet or even a relationship like a divorce, time will eventually ease the grief. This will also allow life to be bearable and even enjoyable again. Time is a major component in the healing process. But what does a person do with the pain and emptiness in the weeks and months immediately after losing someone? How does an individual cope with today?
Therapists, clergy and medical professionals believe one of the best things you can do while going through the healing process is to have contact with loving, supportive people who will keep you active and provide company. When my family and I lost my mother several years ago, followed by my father and most recently my wife's step-father, people were very generous with their time and concern to comfort us. At the time of each loss, family and friends would call to "check in" and see if we were all right or if we needed anything. Some stopped over to visit and brought their dinners and their hugs. They reminded us that we were not alone and provided companionship at times of challenge and change.

My family and I were lucky; we had each other and a stable of supportive friends and family. However, sometimes the bereaved may not have many friends. Family members may live far away. And there are times when the grieving individual either wants to, or has to, be alone. This is a perfect time for music to be a companion. Similar to a friend who visits, music provides company the moment it is heard. It will stay with you for as long as you wish. While it plays, you can do what you want. You can talk to it, cry with it and even shout at it if it makes you feel better. I'm not suggesting music take the place of human interaction, but it can be a beneficial alternative. In many ways it can do everything a companion can do except bring you a glass of water.

Though sometimes overlooked, music can be a powerful ingredient to everyday good health. It can do more than entertain and help sell products and services. Research has concluded that certain music can slow down the brain waves allowing for numerous benefits to occur. Medical studies have shown that music can reduce anxiety and muscle tension. It boosts the immune system and will regulate the individual's heartbeat and pulse as well as the nervous, digestive and respiratory systems. Music is also known to reduce stress and ease depression. These are symptoms that can accompany grief. Getting these issues in order can alleviate further physical harm.

People living alone often use the television and radio to keep them company. But in these life changing situations where wounds need to heal, television might be too "busy". Pictures and sounds come at you at a rapid-fire rate. Radio is more subtle, but commercials interrupt the music often with someone shouting to draw your attention to their product or business. Furthermore, you don't always hear the music that does the most good.

Music specifically designed to relieve tension and bring stability to the mind and body is the most beneficial. Soft, soothing music is conducive for an atmosphere that will foster healing. I am one of those composers who create music to make people feel calm, centered and relaxed. My approach is to compose instrumental "story music" where the compositions and the instruments of the orchestra bring to life the melodious and often spiritual narratives that provide clues to the meaning of the song's title. It is a different approach to composing music that gives an uplifting result to the listener. My music, along with that of other committed and talented artists, is designed to help restore good health.

Music can be of benefit when we face the responsibility of going through the belongings of a loved one who has passed on. This can be a very difficult time as you decide what you should do with the remaining possessions and special objects that were the passion and soul of that person.

I remember procrastinating for months about going through the last of my parent's belongings. Then one day, on the spur of the moment when my own family was not at home, I decided it was time. I put on calm, soothing music to play in the background. I went through boxes of old photographs, letters and other memorabilia. I held in my hands objects that were not only my mother's and father's but what symbolized earlier periods of my own life. I was reminded that my parents along with my youth would not return. As many of you have experienced, and would agree, these were not moments I shelved in my library under "happy memories." But on that day when I was physically alone, I wasn't all alone; I connected with the music. It filled the silence that would have been present if it were not filling the room with beautiful sounds. The music was like a friend who was working quietly on the other side of the room helping me with the difficult task at hand.

There are other ways to extract the healing benefits of music that will keep you company and your mind active when you are alone. One way is to place a quiet and relaxing piece of music at a volume that is not too loud and get comfortable in your favorite chair. Slide to the side the things weighing on your mind. Start by deep breathing. Slowly breathe air in through your nostrils and hold for a count of 5.  Shape your mouth as if you were drinking from a straw and slowly exhale. With each exhale, think of the tension leaving your body. Repeat this several times and I can guarantee you will feel more relaxed. When you're ready, start listening to the music; I mean, really listen to the music.Soak yourself in the musical emotions being played. Listen to the melody as it rises and falls. Sing or hum along with the song. Identify the instrument(s) that are playing. Better still, picture yourself playing one of those instruments. It could be a bell, flute or whatever you choose. This will stimulate your mind as you focus on when you join in or drop off from playing with the other instruments. Also, imagine you're part of the group performing this piece in front of others. Music can help you escape. And if you center your attention on the music, you'll temporarily get away from the things troubling your mind.

Use your imagination as you listen to the music. Let your mind wander to other places. Envision sitting on a shore looking at the ocean or walking a path through a forest. See, hear and feel the beauty in these quiet locations.

Some people recall meaningful moments with their loved one in the presence of music. They watch a movie in their minds. One person used music as the catalyst for his movie. When the music sounded sad, he saw the sad times with the individual who passed on. When the music was brighter, this person viewed the happier times. He followed the emotional elements and dynamics of the music to help him work through the pain and grief.

Music can also inspire you to overcome an obstacle or accomplish a goal. Identify a song that you find inspirational. When the music reaches the motivating part in that piece, recite your goal out loud. You can repeat it several times. As you do, hear the words you are saying and believe they will come true. For those going through the healing process after a loss, you may want to recite the words that hospice nurse Deborah Sigrist encourages her patients to repeat; "It's normal for me to be abnormal for a while, but I won't be like this forever." This statement allows you to accept yourself now while you look forward to the future. Re-enforcing your intention with music can be the first step to find the courage you need to succeed.

Emotions will rise when you listen to music. What usually follows is crying, even sobbing. This is okay and it should be welcomed. It's therapeutic to cry. It's one of the best things we can do. We release hormones, stress and toxins when we release tears. That is why many of us feel better after "a good cry." We let go of pain which helps us return to a calm state. Music augments these moments. There is something about it that heightens the emotion in what we are experiencing.

You may even fall asleep listening to music. This is a testimony of how soft and soothing music can be so powerful. It alters your mood and brings you to a level of relaxation and peace.

If you are grieving a loss or know someone who is, I hope you will remember the power of music. It is truly a wonderful friend that can help you feel and heal, better. Music is non-judgmental and never asks too much of you. Music states the obvious where words are difficult to speak. You don't have to entertain it, and its feelings aren't hurt when you tune it out or shut it off. Music is available anytime to act as a reliable companion. And this friend is only your CD collection away.

What should you keep in mind when picking out appropriate music to help you heal? Each individual is different, so the "right" music will ultimately be your choice. Some find CDs containing one instrument to be therapeutic. Solo harp or piano music is very popular. Some people enjoy hearing two instruments played together, such as piano and flute. Others prefer music played by a full orchestra

Here are a few suggestions to guide you:

Many people choose instrumental music. It is simpler to listen to in these situations. Non-lyrical pieces leave more to the individual's imagination. You may find it easier listening to just music rather than listening to songs where there is singing.

* Music that is slower and between 60-80 beats per minute is the best choice when using it to calm and heal. The average person's heart rate is between 70-90 beats per minute. Music billed as ambient, spiritual or celestial will usually be at "heart-level" or below. The slower, more relaxed the music, the more effective it will be to help you heal.
* Consider purchasing music that you are unfamiliar with. It will not connect you to the time spent with your loved one. This music will be like getting to know a new friend. Years from now, you'll remember it as the CD that helped you through this difficult time.
* Music using a minimal amount of rhythm and percussion can be beneficial. You want something that is "beat less" and feels smooth, which will be soothing. Read the notes on the CD to see if its contents interest you.