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## AVOW'S MUSIC THERAPY PROGRAM GREATLY IMPROVES PATIENTS' MENTAL AND PHYSICAL QUALITY OF LIFE.

BY TESS RAINES

Alan Jones first became acquainted with Avow Hospice nine-and-a-half years ago when his mom was admitted as a patient. Their attentive care and use of a violinist in the home made the transition more comfortable not only for his 77-year-old mother, but for Jones, too. He was so impressed with the care that he entrusted Avow again with the care of his father, Richard, this past year.

Jones' father, 86, had cancer and dementia and was generally unresponsive. Avow offered to bring in a music therapist, Laura Seipert, which Alan Jones gratefully agreed to.

"She had a guitar and she sang and sat next to my dad's bed and played," says Jones, 54. "He actually lifted his hands and reached out to her. I could tell it affected him. It was peaceful for everyone."

Music therapy has been used nationally by health care providers because of its success as a tool in aiding patients' mental and physical wellbeing. Although technically a complementary therapy, it is individualized to address the specific needs of the patient.

"There's a lot of evidence that leads us to believe that hearing is one of the last senses to fail. So even if they can't open their eyes and look around the room and blink at you, or even if they can't reach out and give you a hug ... we still believe that they can hear you," explains Natalie Gonzalez, Avow's manager of supportive care and a board-certified music therapist. "Because of the way that they're physiologically responding, and how their breathing can change to music, even at the end of life ... little things like that indicate to us that, yes, music at the end of life is a positive stimulus for people."

Avow's music therapy team receives referrals by staff members who sense a need in a patient they're working with. Jillian Iurlano, one of Avow's three board-certified music therapists, explains that a staff member might recognize a patient experiencing anxiety or distress. "When we have those needs out in the field, they've let us know so that we can go in to help. I always try to just





meet people where they are," she says.

Not all patients receive music therapy, simply because the number of patients is significantly higher than Avow's music therapy team can attend to. Because of this, Avow will triage their patients, so those with pain or anxiety, in need of emotional and spiritual support or experiencing end-of-life care are generally assisted first.

A music therapist arrives at a session with an instrument in tow—usually a guitar or keyboard—based on the genre or sound they think will be most beneficial. They're often clued in on what to play for the patient based on the referral or a recommendation from the family. The therapist might try songwriting or improvisational music, where she'll prompt the patient or their family to contribute names and special memories to substitute into the lyrics.

Many times, the songs or melodies played are old favorites of the patients' and hold a special meaning. A wedding song or a first date song, for example, can spark positive memories. Patients making these associations, even if they're not showing a physical response, are still engaging with the music.

"Sometimes people can really engage, and they'll sing along and they'll dance," says Iurlano. "I have one person who is such a sweetheart and she's physically declining. ... But every single time there's music, she will always engage, sometimes even making progress in the music where she might start out tapping her toe, and then by the end of it, she's kicking her legs, really enjoying herself. We find that music is such a part of the human experience and that people can connect with it all throughout their life from the very beginning."

Gonzalez adds, "The structure of music itself that goes into playing a song or hearing a song, even in terms of how your brain processes music,

is one of the only stimuli that touches both hemispheres simultaneously."

Because of this powerful association occurring in the brain, it's crucial that the music played is appropriate. Gonzalez notes that it's easy for someone observing music therapy to dismiss it as a group of people having fun; although she agrees that it is, isolating music therapy to such a cursory concept is misleading.

"There is so much more going on in terms of meeting clinical needs and helping (patients) progress," she says.

She describes a scenario where music is played for a stroke victim. If the patient is learning to walk again, the therapist wouldn't play a song with a swaying rhythm, like a waltz. Instead, a therapist might use a marching tempo, which is structured enough that the patient can match their gait to the beat.

Just as the appropriate music is important for rehab patients, it's equally vital for those near the end of life.

"If you played a CD of 1950s music for a patient who was dying—who loves 1950s music—and you walked out of the room, there might be a song that comes on that was like a high, upbeat dancing song," Gonzalez says. "As this person is laboring to breathe, that song could actually cause anxiety and agitation in them because their body is trying to entrain to the rhythm."

She uses this example to illustrate the importance of having a board-certified music therapist playing live music, as opposed to simply playing a CD.

"What if you put on a song for this nonverbal person with dementia, and all of a sudden it reminds them of music they listened to when their mother died?" says Gonzalez. "You need somebody there who knows how to look at physical symptoms of agitation or physical change in the body."

Music therapists must go through extensive schooling and an apprenticeship before becoming board-certified. They're required to complete a four-year music therapy program at an accredited institution. In the program, students are asked to become proficient in a primary and secondary instrument, which Iurlano likens to a typical major and minor. A six-month internship follows, where the graduate must choose the population they'd like to serve, such as hospice patients, inmates or school-age students with an individualized education plan. After the internship, they are eligible for a board exam that, once passed, will recognize them as a board-certified music therapist (MT-BC).



Although music therapy has become a mainstream complementary therapy across the country, it's not reimbursable by Medicare or Medicaid. But if there's any testament to its power, it would be that Avow's music therapy program is funded by donations and earnings from investments. Those who have seen the benefits of music therapy in their family members in hospice often return to Avow to give back in the form of a monetary donation or an instrument.

Robb Winiecki, the local franchise owner and CFO for Assisting Hands Home Care, attended a music therapy session led by Avow's music therapists for a large group at Golden Gate Senior Center in 2018. "It was high energy, lots of smiles, lots of laughing, and it was really great," Winiecki recalls. Seeing the group reminiscing and dancing to familiar melodies from their youth inspired him to fund a monthly music therapy session for the center for an entire year. Assisting Hands has continued to underwrite the expense for the last three years so Avow can continue to provide monthly sessions. Noting that seniors are a population often underserved, Winiecki adds, "I felt it was a great opportunity to just give back to the community."

The center's director, Tatiana Fortune, says the program draws 25 to 30 people per session and gives seniors a chance to reminisce with each other. "The program is so helpful," she says. "A lot of people wouldn't go to a counselor or a regular ther-

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apist because of the stigma around dealing with depression that a lot of our members are experiencing. ... (Music therapy) takes them back in time where they feel like they can reconnect with their former life, how they lived at one point."

Music therapy is powerful not only for renewing the patients' spirits, but also for uplifting the families and even the staff. "I have so much respect for ... what people are going through," says Lurlano, "It's humbling to be there for people's vulnerable moments. It's a blessing for me to be able to go out and to help people in such an intimate and special way."

