
Harp Therapy in Aged Care

Harp Therapy is therapeutic music played on the harp. It is a healing modality that lies at the intersection of Music Therapy, Sound Therapy and Pastoral Care. It is about touching the heart and soul of a person through music.

It is particularly beneficial in aged care and palliative care settings, and provides a calm and comforting atmosphere for patients, their families, and the medical staff who attend them.

Facilities can sometimes be noisy and stressful. For patients who are needing a moment of peace, I will mostly play unfamiliar music that is improvised on the spot, according to what needs I can assess they have. I will make use of the different musical modes, tempo and rhythm as I create a 'cradle of sound' especially tailored for that individual at that time.

Whilst **non-familiar music** is good for promoting rest, and addressing grief, the use of **familiar music** is also vitally important in aged care and dementia care . It is very beneficial for these residents/patients to be able to relate to the music they hear, as this provides 'grounding' for them; a place to go where they can relive good memories, and find peace, relaxation, comfort and joy. For dementia patients in particular, it allows them a moment when they can gain clarity, away from the confusion of the present time.

Harp Therapy is not about performing, but about meeting the needs of the patient. It is about finding just the right music for the moment, whatever that moment is. It is about recognising there is more to healing than medicine alone, acknowledging we are creatures of soul and spirit, and we all have a need to be nurtured as such. When we blend modern medicine with the ancient art of healing music, **we are able to treat the mind & body as one integrated whole**, to achieve the best possible outcome for each patient.

I'd like to share a few 'stories from the bedside' (names have been changed to protect identities):

Mary is crying . She is in deep distress. Her dementia-ridden mind has her stuck in the past and mourning the loss of a beloved friend. Her pain is real. I sit down next to her, gently stroking her arm with one hand, whilst creating a soothing rocking rhythm on my harp with the other. I echo the notes I hear in her voice, and softly hum as I play. No particular melody, just a soothing rhythm. Soon her sobbing dies down to a gentle whimper. As she begins to calm, I transition into playing 'Amazing Grace'. Mary is a devout Christian, so I know this is a safe tune to play for her. Immediately her face brightens and she begins to sing along. She has a beautiful voice, and sings with passion, for three whole verses! I stop playing, and plan to play another hymn for her, however, she turns to me and calmly says, 'Thank you. That was lovely, but I have to go now. I need to make some phone calls.'

Marjorie is bed-ridden. She has advanced dementia, and constantly talks to herself, whilst lying with her eyes closed. She does not respond to any verbal communication. She is totally unreachable... Until I play 'Danny Boy'. Then her talking immediately turns to singing! Her eyes remain closed, and she doesn't move, but she sings! She can hear the music, and it is familiar to her. She knows all the words perfectly. She responds this way every time I play for her. The staff are amazed, because they have never been able to get any other response from her.

Con is dying. He is in palliative care, surrounded by his family. His disease has left him without speech or movement, but his eyes are wide open. When I enter the room his eyes lock onto mine, and I sense deep sorrow, grief and fear. Gently I begin to play...unfamiliar music, created just for him in this moment. He watches me, transfixed. I change my playing to echo his sadness, to empathise and say 'I feel your pain.' Suddenly, and with every ounce of strength left in his body, he lets out several heart-wrenching sobs, from the very depths of his soul. After allowing these emotions to be released, I bring the music back to a place of calm and rest. In that moment, his face entirely changes, from one of contorted pain, to one of peace and gratitude. It was as if the music gave him permission to grieve; to let out all the unspoken and pent up thoughts, fears and emotions. The music also gave him permission to finally let go, and soon afterwards, he passed peacefully away.

“Music begins where language ends; it expresses thoughts and emotions, to which speech can give no utterance; it clothes words with a power which language cannot impart.”
(Author unclear.)

Jenni Sawell
