

Examining Lived Experiences of Singing in a Bereavement Support Music Therapy Group

Co-investigators:

Dr. Laurel Young¹ & Adrienne Pringle²

Associate Professor of Music Therapy, Concordia University¹

Music Therapist, Carpenter Hospice²

Learner Objectives

- To learn about the use of singing/voicework in bereavement contexts.
- To understand practical & theoretical rationale underlying this research.
- To learn about the research project and potential implications.

Background Information

- What the co-investigators bring to this project...

Adrienne Pringle
Laurel Young



Music Therapy at Carpenter Hospice

- **Carpenter Hospice:** Burlington, Ontario. Residential-based care & community-based programs. Family centered model.
- **2006:** Music therapy services initiated (Canadian Music Therapy Trust Fund). **Currently,** 12 hours/week of MT service funded by hospice + MT interns.
- The music therapist (MTA) works within Wellness & Bereavement Supportive Care group programs (residential).

“Singing Well”

- **2013:** “Singing Well” clinical pilot project launched.
- **18 sessions** held prior to launch of our study in **2015.**
- **Program evaluation:** Protocol for our study guided by participants’ feedback.
- If the group was working well, why was a study needed?

Significance & Need: Practical

- Set benchmark for provincial & national hospice services. A program informed by “research in context” lends **credibility** to the work.
- Create *evidence informed* guidelines for an innovative *effective* program which can address needs &/ gaps in service.
- Provide participants (who often feel disempowered by grief/loss) with a forum through which their voices could be heard.

Significance & Need: Theoretical (1)

Why singing? In the general population...

- Positive impact on affect/mood, breathing, immune responses
- Increased motivation, confidence, perceived feelings of social support/belonging
- Decreased anxiety, isolation
- Motivates personal growth, feelings of vitality, sense of safety/community belonging

Significance & Need: Theoretical (2)

Why singing & bereavement?

- Use of voice: creates pathway to access & release feelings; helps synthesize physical, sensory, emotional responses
- Use of metaphor & symbolism in song material (safety through symbolic distance; songs as “containers”)
- Can express feelings without needing to share/talk about them
- Singing together = support

Significance & Need: Theoretical (3)

Why singing & bereavement?

- Less focus on cognitive processing, more focus on experiencing feelings.
- Music/singing can facilitate grieving processes in culturally specific ways.

Summary:

Singing serves multiple biopsychosocial, spiritual, & practical functions; potentially a valuable & unique coping strategy for bereaved persons. More research needed to formulate best practice guidelines.

Purpose of Study

To better understand how singing/voicework was experienced by adults who participated in a bereavement support group that took place in a community-based hospice setting.



Participants & Design

- **Convenience sample:** 7 Caucasian females; 51 to 80 years old.
- **Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry**
- The uniqueness of each person's experience is of key importance.
- Analysis of individual cases.
- Themes identified among participants' experiences.

Data Collection

- Six singing groups occurred over three months.
- Clinically informed session protocol.
 - Verbal check in
 - Breathing/Relaxation/Vocal Warm ups
 - Chanting/Vocal Improvisation
 - Sharing individual's song compositions/meaningful songs/recordings
 - Group singing/selection of songs
 - Closing song
- Participants could submit written feedback after each session.
- Semi-structured individual qualitative interviews within 24 hours of final session.
- Researchers made analytic memos throughout data collection & analysis processes.

Data Analysis

- Interviews transcribed. 6/7 participants reviewed.
- Qualitative analysis procedures.
- **Seven narrative summaries.** Represent explicit/implicit aspects of each individual's experience of singing/voicework in this context.
- **Overarching categories/themes.** Represent group's lived experience of singing/voicework in this bereavement support music therapy group context.

Selected Results

“Alison’s” Experience

*Musical re-awakening
Opportunity to make choices*

*Felt connections with
lyrics/specific songs*

*Frustrated when
singing time not
maximized*

*Desire to support
others through
singing*

*Desire for new
learning/experiences*

*Facilitated
needed release/
escape*



“I felt everyone’s voices...carrying me”

Selected Results

“Sally’s” Experience

Compassion for self & others

*Nurtured by creative
shared singing experiences*

Private moments

Connection



*Motivated by singing &
its benefits*

*Relaxation facilitated
ability to grieve/
express herself*

“I’m All Alone and You Don’t Know”

Group Categories/Themes

Category 1: Group singing experiences/the *Singing Well* context:

- Helped foster various feelings of connection.
- Evoked a wide range of feelings; often experienced physically.
- Helped participants express inner feelings in ways that were different & sometimes better than talking.
- Gave participants permission to enjoy themselves & freedom to explore their voices.
- Motivated participants to attend; felt accepting and non-judgemental.
- Evoked feelings of compassion among participants.
- Worked well because of the personal/professional qualities of the music therapist.

Group Categories/Themes

Category 2: Vocal warm ups, breathing and relaxation exercises:

- Mixed feedback.

Category 3: Songs (precomposed/original):

- Reflected/validated experiences of grief & loss.
- Evoked memories; release of emotions.
- Meaningful song(s) chosen by one was meaningful experience for all.
- Act of choosing songs important.
- Song writing: a forum through which to express grief/other emotions; overwhelming for some

Group Categories/Themes

Category 4: Improvised vocal experiences (chanting, toning, humming, creating melodies, harmonies):

- Felt liberating; experienced physical sensations of floating or flying.
- Sense of togetherness and independence at the same time.

Category 5: Overall experiences of *Singing Well*:

- Sense of commitment to group.
- Motivated participants' to make changes, explore new/revive previous interests in their daily lives.
- Helped participants to move forward in their lives.
- Difficult to express in words.

Selected Implications

- Individuals' grieving processes emerged organically.
- Aligned with Dual Process Model of Grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and six 'R' processes of mourning (Rando, 1993).
- Singing “**as**” therapy. A viable alternative/adjunct to other forms of bereavement support.
- Need for singing & health groups outside of the hospice context.
- Implications for “health musicking” in everyday life (e.g., MacDonald, Kreutz & Mitchell, 2012).
- Limitations of sample indicate need for additional research.
- Examine role of relationship with the music therapist and role of previous music [therapy] experience.

The Last Word & Closing Song

*In this group, we are soothing our hurt,
opening ourselves up to new experiences and to the
affection of others.*

*We are singing ourselves well
("Yolanda")*

Reference for Publication

Laurel Young PhD, MTA & Adrienne Pringle MMT, RP, MTA (2018). Lived experiences of singing in a community hospice bereavement support music therapy group, *Bereavement Care*, 37:2, 55-66, DOI: 10.1080/02682621.2018.1493646

Thank you!

Listening Audience and RQSPAL for this opportunity.

&

Research Participants

Carpenter Hospice/Concordia University

Graduate Research Assistants: Mary Parkinson & Miya Adout

Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing Project:

An MCRI funded by SSHRC.

Dr. Laurel Young, MTA

Psychothérapeute (N^o de permis 61453-15)

laurel.young@concordia.ca

Adrienne Pringle, MMT; MTA

Registered Psychotherapist (Ontario)

musictherapy@thecarpenterhospice.com