

Hymn Singing With Seniors

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The underlying objective of music therapy with elderly people who are in care depends on revitalizing the positive memories and human relationships that have gone dormant. It also depends on the recognition of self worth and kindness that must permeate all programming .

Times and places may change but some life experiences remain timely. For those who have had a church affiliated childhood, who sang hymns in Sunday School, who observed Remembrance Day, Christmas carols at school and who listened to the music of the church on the radio will have kept the song in their heart and soul. Many are now in care facilities with varying degrees of mental, physical and emotional infirmity or need. My experiences in long term care facilities and my senior status ,(as observed by one elderly resident who said to me “you’re no spring chicken yourself”) provide background for this participatory presentation.

We begin “hymn sings” with music, not the biblical “word” or welcome speech. It may be the song you sing, the dance you dance, or the audiotape that you play that will reignite the memory and trigger a response from a shy, sad or worried resident. Make each individual as comfortable as possible - some may even need a drink of water before we can expect them to sing.. We will act as guide and the resident participant will lead. Some examples follow.

1. Play a tape in the activity room, or the corridor before the first person enters. I cannot explain the appeal of Anne Murray’s “Hi Lili Hi Lo”but it is a winner. Because resident’s processing time varies, I re-record one tune so that it plays continuously.

- 2.If you have a resident who is reluctant to leave the security of their room, play a familiar or favourite tune as you approach. A resident, “ Mrs. Prague” sat at her post by her bed “waiting for her daughter”. Czechoslovakian was her native language and I was able to recall a fractured but recognisable rendition of a folk song that was familiar to her. Her joyful recognition of this tune made it easy for us to link arms and sing down the corridor to the meeting room where she not only participated but energised us with her good humour. Her daughter was delighted and often came to sing with her mother and the group.

Mrs. New Delhi was also uneasy about leaving her room because she was frail and visually impaired. Our initial communication began with a soft, verbal ,”hello, my name is Mary Dean and we are having some music in here”. As I am introducing myself, “Hi Lili” can be heard on my tape player. I sing softly so that Anne Murray can work her magic on this beautiful soft spoken lady with the East Indian accent. She says, “it’s gorgeous, it’s gorgeous”. We hold hands and move to the music-I give her a silk scarf to hold when I leave her with the recording. When she felt comfortable enough to join the group, she liked to sit close to me at the piano- the staff were surprised and pleased that she was responding so positively.

Two Ladies from Jamaica

1. “The Rivers Of Babylon” by Boney M opened the door for one spiritual lady who repeated the meaningful words to herself and then sang or repeated in verse, other hymns.

2. Another lady whom I shall call Mrs. Sparkle was brought out of her solitude by Jamaican folk songs. I played “Me Coffee, Me Coffee” outside of her room and when I stopped at her door, she was interested. This was a lot of fun as the staff from the Islands were pleasantly surprised to hear this familiar music. They were soon singing along. Encouraged by this we did “Brown Girl In The Ring” and from this beginning, this sparkling lady attended some of the hymn singing—she especially liked evangelical hymns.

Mrs. May is an Ont. farm lady who was given the responsibility at age twelve for the care of her younger siblings. When I met her, she was living with the profound symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease and could not participate with others. She had the perseverative need to chant “dusting, dusting, dusting, dusting” to a persistent tapping on her chair tray and this was very annoying to those who wanted to sing or listen. She had music in her past and was referred to me. I began in our first session by tapping and chanting with her and gradually led her to “dusting” to the tune of “Row Row Row Your Boat” and then to my preferred time and tune. Once again, “Hi Lili Hi Lo” was introduced and, with success—she would hum along with us. One day, when Christmas carols were being sung, we heard a clear, true humming of “Silent Night” in sync with other group members. The buzz of the routines ceased. As the staff began to listen, and the other singers took note, a hush came over the room. Nurses, and others listened through tears, with their ears and with their hearts.

Father John, a Roman Catholic priest was a recipient of care due to severe memory loss and was a very willing and able songster. He was the bearer of good cheer, humour, and knowledge. He participated happily when we sang the unfamiliar (to him) protestant hymns, and enthusiastically “do-si-doed” to “When the Saints Go Marching In”. On a day when he was seated next to a facility chaplain, a hymn that we were singing precipitated a comment (from him) as to its origin. The resident chaplain was rather surprised that Father John could converse with the same confidence that he must have brought to his duties as a parish priest. It appeared that the chaplain not only learned about the origin of the hymn, he also gained a greater appreciation of the worth of Father John.

We use music to provide a window of opportunity to rekindle the memories of hope-- knowing that “the song that enters the soul brings comfort and joy forever”.

“Hymn Sing With Seniors” (Mary Dean Braaten) is the hymn book that we used today and is especially designed for use in long term care facilities. With this design, the resident can make requests more easily and can access their choice more independently. Some hints on hymn singing that will assist you in getting positive reactions and meaningful responses from the elderly who have moderate or severe memory loss, and for those who may have physical or sensory differences are available.

Some Hints For Hymn Singing

1. Prepare for the first person to arrive by having a favourite tape playing while you guide and greet the residents. Make sure that the resident is as comfortable as possible - you may even want to offer a drink of water as some medication causes dry mouth. One lady who was teaching me a Ukrainian folk song, was very firm about this as she folded her arms and emphatically declared “no food, no drink, no sing!”
2. Arrange the chairs, wheel chairs, etc. in a semicircle around the piano and close enough together so that you (and they) can join hands in greeting. You will also hold the hands of each individual at the close as you sing an uplifting hymn or song that offers hope, and promise and that we will meet again. You may sing “Farewell, Farewell” or “Come Along With Us” to the tune of “Bringing In The Sheaves”-.
3. If your group is very large, I recommend that the most capable and responsive singers be placed close to you. When you are ready to interact directly with an individual needing more assistance, you can move to the second row and the more able singers will carry the hymn while you sing to and with the one needing the most assistance. The able singers will be pleased to see (and hear) the involvement of their house mates.
4. Give the participant the choice of singing from the printed page—do not assume that they can’t read it or see it, sometimes a magnifying glass helps. You may be surprised at the number of people who can read without corrective lenses. Choice is an integral part of dignity and may be overlooked in the lives of those who depend on others for their care.
5. Be inclusive but not intrusive. In a group you may need to engage an individual on a one to one tone basis to get a response. Try to resist the urge to sing more loudly or to involve all participants at the same time—help them o appreciate the moment each in her own way. It is essential that recognition be given to every member of the group.
6. Respect the feelings and sensibilities of each person in the group. Some hymn selections will have very special meaning to an individual and may evoke sadness or very thoughtful reflection. Take time to acknowledge the memory (and its significance), and give the person the opportunity to recognise and resolve this emotion. You can assist by being supportive and by guiding (gradually) to a transitional hymn that is less evocative. Move to a hymn that is bright while resisting the temptation to “swing” into “The Saints” or to “That Old Time Religion”. too quickly. Try “Jesus Loves Me” or “O Holy O Holy Lord” then to something that is joyful.
7. Families and friends: Their involvement is very important. They can tell us about wedding hymns, church and spiritually significant happenings in the individual’s life before “care”. Obtain an audiotape or hymn book that will be a comfort to the resident and that will also facilitate a connection to you. Enjoy yourself—if you have a favourite hymn, sing it!

Resources

Hymn Books

Folk Hymnal for the Now Generation, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Singspiration.

Hymn Sing With Seniors, Canada , Mary Dean Braaten, Toronto. email braaten@idirect.com

Hymn Sing With Seniors, U.S.A., Mary Dean Braaten, Toronto. email braaten@idirect.com

The Hymnary Of The United Church Of Canada, Toronto: United Church Publishing House.,1930

Sing Your Way Home, Strathroy Seniors Hymn Book.

It is advisable that you use the music that you are most comfortable. There are a variety of hymn books available, from basic and easy to play to the more complex arrangements for congregational singing and choral groups.

Song Books

All American Song Book, New York: Robbins Music Corporation,1942

Songs to Sing Again And Sing Again, Shelley Gordon, Toronto: Shelley Gordon, 1994
Address: 25 Besize Drive, Toronto, Ontario, M4S1L3.

This book is an excellent resource for guides who have little experience in leading group singing.

Community Churches, Synagogues, Temples, Mosques, Families, Senior's Centres:

Contact the office or choir director in the local religious communities for information and resources that will help you to provide meaningful music to the people that you serve.

Contact the facility social workers and ask them to include (on intake and admissions) musical preferences or a favourite audiotape when they come into care.

Compact Discs

Andrea Bocelli: Viaggio Italiano: Ave Maria
Panis Angelicas

Chants Sacres: Roberto Alagna: Ave Maria
Pie Jesu

Celtic Awakening: Solitudes : Instrumental Selections.

December: George Winston: Thanksgiving
Variations On A Kanon-Pachelbel
Peace

Frank Patterson: Songs of Inspiration:
Whispering Hope
Battle Hymn Of The Republic
Bless this House

Gospels and Spirituals: The Gold Collection:
Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen
When The saints Go Marching In
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
Jacob's Ladder
Daniel Saw The Stone

The Lord's Prayer
Every Time I Feel The Spirit

The Jesse Norman Collection: Amazing Grace
Do Lawd, Oh Do, Lawd
He's Got The Whole World

The Mennonite Piano Concerto: Waterlily Records:
Good Times(Suite For Orchestra)
Piano Concerto #1 Imgard Berg

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: Rock of Ages - all selections

Tennessee Ernie Ford: All time greatest hits - all selections