Guided Imagery and Music with the Elderly

Typical signs of old age include senility, loss of orientation, and deterioration of bodily functions. But we call the aging process "growing" old, which implies that the growth process continues until death. Is this a contradiction? Inner processes such as spiritual beliefs, emotions, memories, fantasies, and self-concept can provide a foundation for true growth. Without incorporating these aspects, mental and physical functioning becomes perfunctory and attempts to stabilize this functioning or to retard deterioration will do only that. By placing an emphasis on the development of inner processes, however, a nursing home program can spark the self-awareness and self-motivation that will allow for true growth.

One activity that encourages this growth is music therapy.

Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), a music therapy technique developed and pioneered by Helen Bonny, RMT, PhD, is especially well suited to evoking inner processes. It is a technique of listening to music while deeply relaxed. The music serves as a catalyst for inner or unconscious thought processes. These unconscious thoughts are experienced nonverbally during the playing of music as feelings, memories, or imagery (Bonny and Savary, 1973). A music therapist provides guidance in using this experience to work with and integrate internal and external problems, relationships, memories, creative fantasy, and positive aspects of the self (Bonny, 1978a).

This paper presents some sample results of music therapy group sessions conducted over one year in six nursing homes in the Baltimore area. Funded through the Catonsville Community College Division of Continuing Education and Community Services, each group consists of fifteen residents who meet weekly for approximately one hour. Participants attend voluntarily, are usually verbal and are at least partially oriented to reality. All groups are held in a dayroom with a staff person assisting when available; the sites are generally comfortable and well staffed.

The GIM Experience

During the first weeks, music therapy activities such as singing, playing instruments and musical games, moving and improvising are introduced. These activities encourage self-awareness, self-expression, and social interaction. Relationships begin to develop among residents and with the therapist. At the same time, the music sessions provide a common, unifying experience, creating a bond among the group members and encouraging them to become more
trusting and open. At this point in the therapy, they are ready for GIM and the opportunity to share of themselves on a deeper level.

GIM begins with a five-minute relaxation activity. A progressive relaxation technique using the contrast of tension and relaxation (Jacobsen, 1938), or exercises and deep breathing work well. The group is then given an image or thought on which to focus its attention (Anderson and Savary, 1972). A suggestion that members draw to mind an especially pleasant family memory or a favorite vacation spot helps the residents to imagine themselves outside their immediate surroundings. The suggestion to let go of worries and “let the music come inside” also makes way for an internal experience.

At this time, classical music, i.e., both music of the classical period as well as the art music of the Western culture, is played for up to seven minutes. The music should match as closely as possible the mood of the group (Bonny, 1978b). For example, if the group is generally irritated, a piece such as Mendelssohn’s Agitation, Opus 53, Number 3 would appropriately echo that feeling in sound. A group discussion follows the conclusion of the music. Members recall and share the memories, images, or feelings that were evoked by the music. Exploration of their experiences and interaction among group members is encouraged.

Responses to GIM

Several interesting results have been obtained with continued use of the GIM technique.

Typically, the self-esteem of the participants tends to increase. For example, since moving into the nursing home, one resident had been feeling worthless and depressed. He grew stagnant, and had little motivation to participate in activities or to interact with people. During a GIM session, he had a memory of himself as an art student, painting confidently. His paint flowed with the music and he created a detailed landscape. He vividly recalled his feelings of self-respect and confidence, an experience that made him acutely aware of the difference between his youthful enthusiasm and his present languor. Soon after this session, staff members reported that he began painting in art therapy and that his constant self despair disappeared. He has also recently volunteered to help decorate a monthly calendar and bulletin board.

GIM is especially helpful with those residents who constantly ruminate over certain thoughts or memories. In these cases, familiar songs tend to encourage these repetitious reminiscences. The residents may have strong associations with these songs because of their familiarity and therefore tend to perseverate on a few of these surface memories. Unfamiliar music, on the other hand, brings many different thoughts to the surface. Classical music is especially suited, since it can be experienced on many different levels. The qualities inherent in classical music seem to elicit thoughts from deep in the unconscious that are less accessible than those few surface memories. Letting just one new stream of thought into consciousness may serve to break that antiquated, fixated pattern of thinking.

GIM also permits new experiences without leaving the dayroom. Since it is improbable that most residents will travel outside the nursing home, they may welcome a seven-minute trip to a different state or country. In one instance, an imaginary GIM trip to Hawaii was coordinated with the nursing home’s “Hawaiian luau.” The activities director reported that when she asked who had been to Hawaii, several of the music therapy group members smiled at each
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other, and one exclaimed, "We have — the music took us there!"

An example of a particularly successful application of GIM was with a quadriplegic resident. During her fourth GIM session, this resident was able to imagine herself dancing gracefully to Chopin as she had not done in thirty years. She reported a "deep sense of joy" after this session.

The discussion that follows GIM is extremely important. The mere verbalizing of the GIM experience deepens its meaning and increases its impact on the patient. It also sparks reactions such as support or anger from other group members. During the discussion after one GIM activity, a resident burst into tears as she related her experience of the memory of her deceased husband. The group members came to her support by encouraging her tears, revealing similar hardships, and sharing how they dealt with them. This support helped her to understand that she was not alone in her sadness and that she need not suppress it.

This type of group support can help to increase self-awareness and self-acceptance, an internal change that fosters interpersonal relationships at the nursing home. During the discussion in which the group member talked about his memory as an art student, a woman in the group repeatedly commented, "Oh, isn't he wonderful?" By the next session they had begun a relationship — one that is still continuing several months later. This has been important for both residents, since neither has had a deep relationship for over twenty years.

Generally, the sharing and interactions among the group encourage and reinforce each member's internal experiences, whether memory or fantasy, pleasant or unpleasant. These group discussions are a privilege and a learning experience for the therapist. They also provide an opportunity to develop sensitivity to the needs of the residents, their means of expressing these needs, and the appropriate way to respond to each individual.

Finally, in addition to the psychotherapeutic effects of GIM, it exposes residents to classical music, which was enjoyed without exception. A trip to an orchestra concert with a preconcert relaxation — instead of the usual pre-concert cocktail — is a good adjunctive activity.

Special Problems

The relaxation exercise or the calming of the music may often put certain group members to sleep, specifically those who are heavily medicated. In this case, it may help to suggest that the relaxation exercise will be energizing, as well as relaxing; a strong suggestion to feel the energy communicated in the music may also prove stimulating. When a member does fall asleep, it should be noted in the group discussion, where peers and therapist will usually express their understanding and acceptance.

Another problem is that other residents hesitate to fantasize and find it difficult to "let the music inside." They report that they "just listen to the music" or that they "don't think or feel anything." They probably respond to the music stimulus on some level that they are not verbalizing, and discussion about emotions can often encourage these patients to verbalize their experience. Questions about the mood of the music, the patient's mood before the group, or other members' emotions can be a catalyst in this sharing.

Conclusion

An elderly resident was taken to see a cardiologist who recommended that he give up smoking cigars due to his heart
condition. He was very reluctant to do this as he said it was the one thing he enjoyed in life since his wife had died. Staff members stopped giving him cigars and encouraged his abstinence. He began complaining that he was depressed, and that life was miserable without his cigars. He died two weeks later of a heart attack. This is not to imply that his abstinence from smoking caused his death, but rather to illustrate the futility of prolonging life without considering its meaning to the individual. Developing sensitivity to the inner needs of the residents during GIM activities can prevent a situation such as this, in which priorities were confused due to staff insensitivity to inner needs.

Each person’s individuality, no matter how distasteful or unacceptable to the professional, should be taken into account in therapy. If aspects of the psyche are silenced, the result can be an unsatisfactory life. On the other hand, if we recognize and work with these integral parts of the personality, then we are encouraging a meaningful life for each individual. GIM allows the residents to experience music and themselves on the levels relevant to them, thereby providing a tool to realize their potential as individuals who are not merely aging, but who are growing old.

References


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