

The Effects of Bedside Singing at the End of Life

On the Dying Patient:

- offers comfort, relaxation, a quieting of the breath
- unfolding of a clenched posture
- release of fear/letting go of tension
- creates a feeling of support especially if the patient is feeling alone
- connection and community
- beauty in the midst of pain
- enlivening of memories
- provides pleasure, joy and delight
- offers confidence and courage for the journey that lies ahead

On the Family:

- creates a place of rest in the midst of caregiving and concern
- release of emotions, the ability to openly and fully grieve
- connection with their loved one; hand holding, stroking during the singing, sitting close
- connection with each other
- allowing the music to express emotions in a way that seemed impossible
- accessing shared memory
- feeling of support/community
- feelings of being witnessed in a difficult process

On the Professional Caregivers:

- Respite in the midst of stress and duties
- a reminder of the humanity of the patient
- refreshment of their spirits
- ennobling and recommitment to their own vocations

On the Singers:

- Acceptance of the reality of death, including their own
- offering a new perspective on dying; the possibility of creating beauty and courage in the midst of dying
- a deep sense of gratitude and a humbling sense of being privileged to be present in a sacred place and at a sacred time; the boundary between life and death
- renewed energy and appreciation for living
- a bonding and deep connection shared with each other and all of those present, including the dying patient
- a sense of grace and of being a "channel" for something much greater, the experience of being "in the spirit."
- healing of personal loss and grief from experience of death of loved ones
- practice of being fully present and ability to respond to the unexpected with grace

On the Culture:

- changing the way we regard aging and dying
- helping caregivers and families find beauty and support in the midst of dying
- Increasing respect and dignity offered to those dying
- modeling creative ways for families to be more present or involved with the death of loved ones
- changing the way we view death from a detached distant place, bringing us all closer to the experience of death as the part of life that is the end of life
- deepening the understanding of impermanence, thereby increasing joy and gratitude for living each day.

What is actually happening during this singing? What is being communicated? The music itself communicates emotions and wordless images, it connects with the experience and memory of those who hear it and may bring to mind specific moments from the past.

We will often choose songs in other languages, chants or liturgical pieces that create a trancelike meditative state and do not call the dying person into the present. These sounds allow the patient to rest and remain subconsciously wherever they may be in the moment. These sounds are free of concepts or attachments and tend to communicate pure emotion or feeling state; calmness, peace and serenity.

We choose songs according to what is needed in each situation. Is the person in the bed actively dying? Who are they? What have they loved/practiced/experienced in their life? What might serve them now, in this transitional journey out of this world? Do they follow a religion and if so, what songs will offer comfort and honor their spiritual practice.

Our repertoire includes songs from many cultures and traditions. We have songs that address the journey of death and songs that honor the joy of living. We have songs that bring joy and spirit and songs that calm and comfort.

Bedside singing calls for the singer to be present, to be intuitive and deeply respectful of another's process, and to be a quiet witness of death. We are not performing. We do not expect an audience. We see this singing as a service; for the person dying before us, for the families saying good-bye to a loved one, for the caregivers working quietly and constantly in the background, for ourselves and the expansion and evolution of our own spirits and for the culture as a way to begin to shift the lens we view death through. As the lens grows wider, the perspective changes and we begin to view the end of life as a celebration of what has been lived and loved. We accept our own dying as part of our living and make peace with our greatest fear.

Singing for the dying often creates a timeless moment which has no other purpose than

to be present for that person. We are, in a way, celebrating, honoring and anointing the person while they are still alive rather than waiting for the funeral.

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