



Using Music to Facilitate Relaxation

We all know that the benefits of relaxation are numerous: reduced heart rate, reduced muscle tension, decreases in anxiety and stress, lower levels of cortisol in the body, among other benefits. However, the skill of relaxation is one that eludes many. I would like to suggest the implementation of music as a tool to help facilitate relaxation.

Meditation and relaxation are all about being “in the moment.” Being in the moment means focusing on events that are occurring presently, rather than thinking about past or future events. For example, one might choose to focus their attention on their breath. Paying attention to each inhalation and exhalation forces a person to be present and focusing on the current moment. Similarly, music can provide an external stimulus to take a person’s mind off of their thoughts and worries. These two ideas can be combined if a person focuses on breathing in rhythm with a piece of music.

Music can be a very useful tool for helping a person relax but how do you choose the right music for relaxation?

1. **Choose preferred music.** Whether you are picking out music for your own relaxation, or for a patient with whom you are working, keep musical preferences in mind. Music with positive emotional associations and memories can provide an overwhelming sense of well-being for a person. This may be an old song from a patient’s childhood, slow classical music, or new age music, among other options.
2. **Pay attention to tempo.** Be mindful of the tempo of the music that you choose. It should have a slow tempo. If a person is feeling particularly anxious or stressed when beginning to relax, they could choose music with a slightly faster tempo to match their emotional state, but the tempo should slow down throughout the piece. The principal of entrainment tells us that a person’s natural biological rhythms will change to match the dominant stimulus present in their environment. This means that if a person is focusing on music, their heart rate and respiratory rate may change to match, or come close to, the tempo of the music.
3. **Watch out for abrupt changes.** Prior to using the music for relaxation, listen to the music to notice if there are any abrupt or unexpected changes. When a person’s body and mind become more relaxed, an unexpected change in the tempo, timbre or quality of the music may reverse any positive effects that have occurred thus far.
4. **Avoid music with words.** While songs with words may offer that warm feeling of a positive memory, it is best to avoid words during relaxation as they engage our brain in cognition during an intended relaxation session. If you or your patient find the human voice soothing, choose music that uses words from an unfamiliar language. Look into classical vocal (choral or a soloist with instrumental accompaniment) music, or Gregorian chant.



Remember these tips when choosing music for relaxation. Also remember that relaxation is a skill that must be practiced – it may not come easily the first time you try it. Keep these things in mind when working with patients, but also take time in your day to breathe, listen to music and relax. If we take time to care for ourselves, we will provide better care for our patients and their families.