

How Complementary Therapies Can Lend Support

By Valerie Hartman RN, CHPN, CTRN

The fight or flight response is the culprit. Body tension and blood circulation change in the presence of stress hormone release. Stress hormone release occurs in the presence of fearful thoughts and sensory perceptions that alert you to risk, danger, threat. Grief, after a fresh loss, can illicit fear and anxiety, also triggering stress hormone release. This can produce uncomfortable physical symptoms.

In hospice, the effects are clear to see: not only does disease create symptoms, stress does too. Difficulty breathing, nausea, muscle tension, and rising anxiety, coupled with the desire to flee, may be caused from stress alone. Sometimes it is impossible to separate a symptom that is disease-related from the stress-related component of it, as with someone who has advancing lung cancer. Fear of breathlessness caused by the disease creates anxiety that makes breathing worse. With decline, the closer someone feels to his/her last breath, the more his/her fear may grow. The more compromised the body is, the

longer the stress hormone release is sustained—relentless and seemingly unending.

Like a Breath of Fresh Air

It is the hospice interdisciplinary team that deals with case after case, month after month, and the stress that accompanies such demanding caseloads. Complementary therapy can not only help patients and families, but can also be a breath of fresh air for the hospice team member who works with skill to support individuals through the stages and the changes of the dying process.

Complementary therapy is the use of alternative therapy, alongside conventional healthcare practices. In hospice, volunteer and complementary therapy program coordinators recognize the value of having access to massage therapy, reflexology, acupressure, energy-based therapies (e.g., Reiki,

Healing Touch, Therapeutic Touch), pet therapy and aromatherapy. Music and art therapy programs stand alone and provide specialized psychotherapeutic services. Horticulture therapy programs are gaining recognition for nature's healing potential, and guided imagery, meditation practices, competencies in hand or foot massage, and live voice are being woven into interdisciplinary team visits.

With a complementary therapy program comes specialized education on the value of sensory forms of therapy and their beneficial effects on stress. In the area of bereavement services, education is growing around the use of complementary therapy as a way to communicate or express emotions that words do not adequately convey. The senses are a powerful trigger of thoughts and emotions. Complementary therapy can be used to help evoke or suppress feeling levels and, therefore, touch, aroma, music, and visual arts can help 'pace' the feeling levels in grief when used appropriately.

When Self-Care Happens Naturally

For the hospice team that has access to volunteer or hired complementary therapists, caring for staff often "just happens." Education about the therapies makes a team more aware of the mind-body connection, as well as the holistic options that provide a healthy break in physical tension that is caused by worry. The therapeutic supplies (relaxation blend massage crèmes, essential oils, foot lotion, music selections, art supplies) provide a strong level of interest for stressed staff and, oftentimes, staff members become interested in purchasing the products and changing their healthcare practices at home in order to use them.

It is also common for the hospice program that has a relaxation room set up with a massage table or a reflexology chair, or an art or music therapy room, to make sessions available to staff in times of need. In fact, a growing number of hospice programs have formal session times available to staff for therapeutic bodywork therapy. Reflexology and Healing Touch are commonly used to support staff. It is in these quiet sessions that a space of care is held for the team member who may not want to express herself through words; the silent effect of the session alone is enough to assuage the grief or tension.

Employees report feeling "really cared for" by the hospice program or the healthcare organization when they have access to complementary therapies. Reported target stressors that can indicate when such support is needed include high-stress case management; a difficult on-call period, and working after a personal loss or personal health crisis.

Creating Opportunities for Self-Care

There are creative ways to encourage staff to use complementary therapies. One way is through education. Try making resources and music available to staff or create a quiet space and promote its use for reflection and rest when needed.

Your program does not have to wait until it's already offering complementary therapies to patients and families before justifying staff care. In fact, sometimes it is easier and more

continued on next page

Helpful Links to Learn More

Massage Therapy

American Massage Therapy Association:

www.amtamassage.org

To find a therapist in your area, visit:

[http://www.amtamassage.org/
findamassage/locator.aspx](http://www.amtamassage.org/findamassage/locator.aspx)

Reflexology

American Reflexology Certification Board:

www.arcb.net

Acupressure/Healing Touch

Healing Touch International:

(www.healingtouchinternational.org)

Healing Touch Program:

www.healingtouchprogram.com

American Organization for Bodywork

Therapies of Asia:

www.aobta.org

Aromatherapy

National Association for Holistic

Aromatherapy:

www.naha.org

Music Therapy

American Music Therapy Association:

www.musictherapy.org

Art Therapy

American Art Therapy Association:

www.arttherapy.org

Horticulture Therapy

American Horticulture Therapy

Association:


www.ahta.org

Also—see the article on page 9.

effective to offer the therapies to staff first—the best learning experience is often a personal one. For example, when staff can understand the value of massage or music or aromatherapy personally, it then becomes a natural extension to provide that therapy for patients.

Hospice programs can also invite students of Healing Touch level 4, and/or those seeking certification in reflexology, guided imagery or aromatherapy to perform their final case studies with hospice staff. This is an affordable way to support

staff, while also providing a meaningful opportunity for these therapy students.

See the sidebar on page 17 for the list of therapies that may benefit staff as well as patients and families, along with Web site links to learn more. For additional suggestions or to pose questions to members of the NCHPP Allied Therapy Section, join the Section—it's free to NHPCO members and a great way to network and share ideas: visit www.nhpc.org/nchpp. 

Valerie Hartman has 22 years of holistic hospice nursing experience and, for the past 11 years, has included the integration of massage and bodywork therapy into her practice. Since 2002, she has coordinated the complementary therapies program at Holy Redeemer Hospice (Philadelphia, PA) and also serves NCHPP's Allied Therapy Section leader.

Simple Ways to Improve Mood and Morale



- The right music can instantly enhance the environment. Live music is best as this can be modified to meet the needs of listeners “in the moment.” Playing live music in a hallway or near a central stairwell makes it more accessible to everyone—patients and families as well as staff.
- Teach staff how to take longer breaths throughout the day—*really pausing* and taking those moments to refresh and restore.
- Make lavender lotion with pure essential oil (therapeutic grade) available to staff. The essential oil has a calming effect on the nervous system, and the intensity of the natural aroma can promote a sense of well-being.
- Offer a memory-sharing exercise for inpatient or residential staff, such as the following Memory Share-Zen Board:

Supplies/Setup:

Take two large pieces of black construction paper and tape them, side-by-side, onto a wall. Make available a large watercolor brush and cup of water.

The Exercise:

Ask staff to read the names of patients who have died and reserve a few moments of silence for individual reflection;

Ask each staff member to write a word or two about a patient or an aspect of hospice work on the construction paper, using the watercolor brush dipped into the water;

As the writing fades quickly within this ritual space, the seconds seem suspended in time as a reminder of the ephemeral nature of life and our work.

Submitted By: Laura Thomae, MT-BC, NCHPP Allied Therapy Section Steering Committee member and the creative arts and complementary therapy program director for Keystone Hospice (Wynmoor, PA).