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Researchers at Sylvester, Frost School Receive \$2.6M Federal Grant to Study Mindfulness and Music Therapy

Researchers with Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, part of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, and the University's Frost School of Music are using a \$2.6 million federal grant to study how mindfulness and music therapy can alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression, reduce treatment-related symptoms, and improve quality of life for cancer patients and survivors.



Frank J. Penedo, Ph.D., associate director of Cancer Survivorship and Translational Behavioral Sciences and director of Cancer Survivorship and Supportive Care at Sylvester

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The principal researchers on the project, which is supported by a five-year grant from the National Cancer Institute and other agencies, are Frank J. Penedo, Ph.D., associate director of Cancer Survivorship and Translational Behavioral Sciences and director of Cancer Survivorship and Supportive Care at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Teresa L. Lesiuk, Ph. D., MT-BC, director and associate professor of music therapy at the Frost School.

It is generally accepted that listening to preferred types of music can often change one's mood, eliciting joy or sadness, recalling old memories, or energizing or calming the listener. But Drs. Penedo and Lesiuk are working to identify specific therapeutic techniques in which music can favorably impact symptoms and quality of life in cancer patients and survivors. A critical tool is mindfulness-based music therapy (MBMT) applied by trained music therapists. MBMT, which can be taught in person or online, refers to paying attention to the present moment, avoiding distractions, and focusing on what is happening now.

"This involves focusing the mind and not letting it wander," said Dr. Lesiuk, who is an accomplished pianist and board-certified music therapist.

Teresa L. Lesiuk, Ph. D., MT-BC, director and associate professor of music therapy at the Frost School

A cancer diagnosis is stressful, she said, and exercising mindfulness can help minimize overthinking and ruminations which can cause distress. Teaching participants to focus on music, by either listening or playing an instrument, can help.



Teresa L. Lesiuk, Ph. D., MT-BC, director and

associate professor of
music therapy at the
Frost School

“Previous research on music therapy has led up to our study,” Dr. Lesiuk said. “Researchers looked at the link between music and stress in the workplace, how music caused mood changes in air traffic controllers and improved cognition,” she said. Some research on music therapy has been done in the past on cancer patients, but the University of Miami researchers pointed out that more specific investigation is needed.

For the current project, the research team will be looking at several factors relating to cancer patients and survivors. One is how listening to favorite types of music or playing an instrument (even for beginners) can “settle down” the effects of chemo brain: memory lapses, inability to concentrate, motor skill problems, and other issues associated with chemotherapy. They will also examine how music and attitudes of mindfulness can reduce distress and symptoms associated with cancer treatments, such as fatigue.

Participants in the program, equipped with computer tablets, will meet in person and/or online, work with therapists, and report their progress.

“The overall project will begin with focus groups to refine the intervention content, then we will obtain feedback and move on to the full pilot study with randomized patients,” said Dr. Penedo, who is also a professor in the Department of Medicine and in the College of Arts and Sciences’ Department of Psychology.

“A cancer diagnosis and treatment can be very distressing for some patients, and music can be an effective tool to reduce the emotional and physiological impact of stress,” Dr. Penedo said. “Music therapy and stress reduction techniques have the potential to enhance the immune system and reduce the symptom

burden that can be common as a result of treatment—pain, fatigue, and cognitive impairment.

“The NIH [National Institutes of Health] is interested in music therapy, which has a record of showing improvements in patients,” he said. “We are trying to identify specific music therapy techniques and link them to specific outcomes.”

The five-year grant, which began in October of this year, is funded by the National Cancer Institute, with support from the National Center for Complementary and Integrated Health, the National Institute for Mental Health, and the National Institute on Aging, all federal agencies.

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