Relaxation music and music with imagery are often used to alleviate anxiety, stress and unpleasant thoughts. Music of this type has use in the home, in health care settings, or for brief respite in the workplace. Each available MP3 file was crafted by music therapists using their collective 37 years of experience after reviewing research articles related to “relaxing” and “sedative” music. The following summary supports their original compositions which feature common musical elements as they relate to music for relaxation purposes: melody, harmonic progression, instrumentation, key signature, tempo, and time signature.

Melodic lines can be manipulated by the composer to elicit emotional responses (Thompson & Robitaille, 1992). The documentation supports using musical intervals (pitch to pitch) in the higher range and melodies constructed of consecutive consonant (without dissonance) intervals (Costa, Bitti, & Bonfiglioli, 2000; Costa, Fine, & Bitti, 2004; Maher, 1980). These intervals are considered grounded, cheerful and potent. Gaston (1951) set forth a fundamental principle by stating that music is considered sedative if it creates a dream like mood and has “more legato melodic motives.” These factors and information obtained concerning key signature and harmonic progression were used to inform the creation of each piece. In further defining the musical characteristics of sedative music, Hooper (2010) found that repetition of musical ideas in the melody line was the most consistent quality shared by the pieces used in his study. Repetition also helps create a sense of familiarity, even in music unknown to the listener.

The timbre or particular sound of an instrument or instruments colors a listener’s perception of the emotional impact of any piece of music. Small groups of instruments have been determined to have a sedative effect on the listener (Hooper, 2010). To this end, when composing the original pieces, the therapists chose to write for the synthesizer only, the harp only, or the harp and cello. These instruments were specifically chosen because of their easy ability to create both gentle and smooth sounds, qualities determined to be beneficial in composing music for relaxation (Kraut, 2007). Harp music was a specific category used in the Good et al (2000) study of music chosen for pain relief across multiple cultures.

Key is most often referred to in the literature as either major or minor, following the rules for building scales. Bruner (1990) found that music in a major key with consonant harmonies was considered soothing and Wolfe et al. (2002) found supportive evidence with achievable improved relaxation. Harmonic progressions which are considered relaxing have an absence of unexpected chord resolutions, modulations or dissonant harmonies (Hooper, J. et al, 2010).

Tempo, or “the overall speed or pace of the piece” (Levitin, 2002) strongly affects the listener’s perception of any given musical composition. When composing music specifically for relaxation purposes, it has been found that slower tempos produce a more relaxed feel or environment (Rigg, 1940). Hevner (1936, 1937) in categorizing human emotional reactions to music found that a slow
tempo was the most consistent musical characteristic in eliciting a response of dreamy/sentimental or serene/gentle. These two emotional states would be the most conducive to producing a relaxed state in the listener. Even in music from cultures around the world, a high degree of correlation was found between a slow tempo and an emotional response of peace (Balkwill, Thompson, 1999).

The time signature or meter of a musical composition reflects the way in which musical tones are grouped with one another across time. The listener hears this as a result of rhythm and loudness cues (Levitin, 2002). Two common time signatures in music are 4/4 and 3/4. This was important to consider when composing the original pieces. In order to produce a relaxed state, the listener must feel comfortable with what he or she is hearing. A sense of familiarity often helps create this feeling of comfort (Clayton, Sager, Will, 2004). For this reason, three of the original pieces are in 4/4 timing (a four beat pattern) and two of them are felt in a three beat pattern in the time signatures of 3/4 and 6/4.

The Relaxation Response (Benson, 2000/1975) was used in an effort to duplicate a well-documented strategy for relaxation (Jacobs, 2001). The script outlines the nine step process developed by Benson. This includes using a word or phrase to help focus attention, progressively relaxing muscle groups and taking deep breathes. Most importantly it allows a non-judgmental approach to slowing down thoughts. Ten minutes of music are included providing the listener the opportunity to practice the technique.

A script was specifically developed for children to promote relaxation. The literature supports the use of music, guided imagery and relaxation techniques to help reduce pain, nausea, fear and improve outcomes (Good, et al, 2001; Siedliecki & Good, 2006; Gonzales, et al, 2010) The original imagery script was based on: Relaxation Lessons, Standard Closes, Relaxation Shortcuts, and Deep Relaxation Exercises found in The Mind Fitness Program For Esteem & Excellence (Goode & Watson, 1992).

References


