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Songs That Heal: Music Therapy Tools & Techniques for Grief

Guest: Molly Hicks, MMT, MT-BC

Host: Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT

- Heather: [00:24](#) Welcome to episode 13. Today our guest is Molly Hicks, a board certified music therapist and a bereavement counselor at the Penn Wissahickon Hospice which serves Philadelphia and the surrounding area in Pennsylvania. Molly's also a yoga teacher and she weaves in music and yoga and mindfulness when she's working both with hospice patients and with families. Molly, welcome to the Mindfulness and Grief podcast.
- Molly: [00:59](#) Thank you so much, heather. I appreciate being here.
- Heather: [01:03](#) So Molly, can you start us out by letting us know what brought you to the good work that you do and maybe your own journey?
- Molly: [01:12](#) Sure. So actually I learned about music therapy when I was in high school. My mom is a nurse and she shared with me a article in a journal that she got and it was a nursing journal that the article is about music therapy and I really was drawn to it. I started looking into college programs and decided to apply to Temple University where I completed my bachelors and master's degrees. At the time I really thought that I wanted to work with children and specifically people with autism. I had some personal experience with folks I knew who had autism and really felt drawn to that work and it was in probably my third year of my undergrad degree that one of my professors suggested that I might be suited for hospice and I'm just offered to have me try a clinical practicum in hospice care.
- Molly: [02:09](#) And so I thought, okay, I'll give it a shot. I, I didn't really have a strong feeling one way or another. But, I went through with this practicum and I really felt like I clicked with the work. I think that that had to do with some of my spiritual beliefs. It felt like it was a natural fit for kind of the way that I saw the world and the way that I wanted to interact with people in my own life and make meaning. And I also felt like I learned that I had, uh, an energy to work with people who were at that stage of life. My early experience was mostly working with older people in hospice, although now I work with adults, anybody over 18, but at that time I realized I had more of like a marathon energy as opposed to like a sprinter's energy that I think is needed for working with children. And that's kind of how I describe it. Like I, I kind of had that ability to be with somebody and to kind of be a steady presence for them, sometimes over a long period of time. But as we know in hospice sometimes the death comes rather quickly as well. But I just felt like the work was something that was suited for me and I eventually ended up going to do my

internship in hospice as well. And then, now I have about 11 years experience in hospice and bereavement.

Heather: [03:39](#) Music is something that is so universal and just elicits emotion anyway. So can you, for those of us who aren't as familiar with what a music therapist does, can you explain the nuances of it and how it applies to a end of life or to bereavement?

Molly: [04:01](#) Definitely. So music therapists have training in music skills. We have to become able to functionally play piano and guitar, meaning you know, well enough to accompany ourselves and to engage in some basic improvisation and songwriting and we also have to be a functional in voice and singing. So we get training in musical skills and specifically how to use music in a clinical way, meaning how to use music in structured ways to address individuals needs. And that can be over a wide spectrum. So we learn how to address physical needs, like helping with pain management, how to address anxiety, sadness, other emotional needs, how to work with someone's spiritual beliefs. So we address spiritual issues as well. And then how to work with a learning and cognition and help with things like confusion and memory recall, things like that. And then also social interaction.

Molly: [05:11](#) Some patients and clients have needs to work in those areas, so we really work across a whole bio, psycho, social spectrum and we learned psychology and some programs learn anatomy and physiology as well, and a counseling techniques. So there's really a whole range of training that music therapists get. And we do a thousand, I'm actually 1200 total clinical hours for our training. A thousand hours is in an internship in a specific with a specific group of patients or clients. So it's really a very comprehensive program. And then we sit for a board exam. So the training is very much in depth. In terms of the practice itself in hospice care, we visit with patients and families at their homes or wherever they call home, so that could be in a nursing home as well. And what we do is a full assessment of that person's responses to music. So those, those different areas I mentioned, physical, emotional, spiritual, etc. We're looking for responses within those areas as people engage with the music or as they received the music. And then we use those responses to determine if they would benefit from ongoing regular music therapy and in hospice were using their preferred music a lot of times the music that's meaningful to them.

Heather: [06:37](#) So you're tracking in terms of responses, you're kind of tracking maybe, you know, physical reaction or something visual that where you can see it's resonating with them, and I imagine sometimes it might be a positive reaction and sometimes it might be - I don't want to use the word negative - because I don't think of difficult emotions as negative - they can be really big messengers and an opportunity to explore what's happening. And so when you see that emotion arise and just thinking about the people who are listening, who might go home and pop on a song and have something come up, what's the next step when that emotion shows up?

Molly: [07:22](#) So if the person is able to interact and to talk about what they may have been experiencing, we might go into a conversation about what that was like for them. And that music often opens the door to people sharing about their life, about their memories, about things that may have been really challenging in their lives, and for hospice patients, maybe things that they want to talk more about in order to come to some kind of resolution if that's possible before they die. For people who may be grieving those songs like that emotion they come up in response to a memory that they have of the person who died, and so definitely to talk more about that, what might be the next step for the music therapist and then maybe to see if there's another song that can help with that continued processing or maybe it's time to go in a different direction in order to, to change the mood. So music can have a lot of different options for shifting moods one way or the other. So it may be time to do something a little more neutral musically after that difficult emotion has been processed.

Heather: [08:36](#) And music is a way to tell a story when you can't find your own words.

- Molly: [08:40](#) Yes, absolutely.
- Heather: [08:41](#) We know that, you know, sharing your story of loss or as you're nearing end of life sharing your, your legacy, sharing your feelings. If you can't find the words yourself, music can be a great way to express them to others.
- Molly: [08:57](#) With one of my clients, I've actually done songwriting that ties into what you just mentioned or, or legacy projects where perhaps the patient wants to dedicate a song or a series of songs to different people in their lives to actually leave a lasting legacy through, through a cd or through some notes that might be written, you know, to go along with the music.
- Heather: [09:20](#) That's beautiful. And you mentioned that in hospice work you usually use the person's music, the music they're familiar with and at the same time you, you are using your own musical skills. So you're showing up maybe with a guitar - I'm guessing you don't show up with a piano. If one is available, it's there, maybe a keyboard or something. And, and you're actually singing it along with them. And that would give you the flexibility to have intonation and you know, eliciting the emotions, but as a person who has a gift of music, which you do because I have listened to some of your music, tell me about your own writing, your own musical creation and how that supports you in your work and your clients. A little spoiler alert.: we're going to get to, to hear a song, and I'll let you set that up.
- Molly: [10:25](#) Absolutely. So in my own personal life, separate from work, I really enjoy writing music as a way to engage in self care and also to kind of keep my creativity going and keep that aspect of my own life fluid and nourishing to me. It can be hard for music therapists because sometimes we feel like we're giving all of our music away to other people and I find that I need to give music to myself and write songs just for the sake of my own creativity, whatever the subject matter of those songs may be. And I've done more of that, a lot more songwriting in the last, I would say seven or eight years, after kind of a period of not doing it as much and focusing a lot on my work. I really missed out on that. So it's something that I am getting back into in terms of the music that I write for my work and with, and now my bereavement counseling work, I've been writing a series of songs that have to do with some common experiences across the work I do with bereaved folks. So kind of taking themes of different grief reactions, different experiences and engaging with others in their lives. Difficult and helpful experiences, both. And the idea that we can simultaneously validate what people are going through in the pain of grief while also showing that there are ways that they can care for themselves and be proactive about asking for help and bring a certain amount of light into their own lives through this process.
- Molly: [12:16](#) So the song I'm going to share with everybody listening is a song that's called a call in the light. And the idea of that song is that the imagery rather is about darkness and light, which is very common in a lot of music and a lot of songs and the ideas that they can, the person who is grieving can call in a source of light from themselves and also from the memories that they share with their loved one and the bonds that they still have with that loved one. And so that's kind of the message of the song and I hope you enjoy it.
- Heather: [12:55](#) Alright, so here is called in the light by our guest, molly hicks.
- Speaker 5: [13:22](#) {Call In The Light}
- Heather: [16:56](#) Wow, Molly, that was absolutely moving and I'm so grateful that you are sharing that with us today. And for those of you who are listening, the lyrics are available on the show notes Page <http://mindfulnessingrief.com>. Just click on the podcast button and you'll see Molly's podcast there. So Molly, let's transition into how listeners can use music at home, or I guess on the go too, to work through this experience that we share called loss.

Molly: [17:32](#) well. I think there's a lot of practical ways that people can use music and ways that they can utilize it for self care. And the first thing that I would suggest, and I think you and I both know, we try to apply this to our own lives, but share with others that it's really important to be gentle with yourself and to show yourself compassion. And that includes when you're kind of looking for music to help you through your experience of grief and loss. So you may find that that music that you loved for many years that you might associate with the person who died may not be the right music for you, especially in the early weeks and months of grief. So if there's music that you don't feel like you can listen to and kind of tolerate emotionally, don't listen to it, you know, it's okay for you to look for other music, maybe to listen to music that doesn't have any words so that it's not as evocative that way.

Molly: [18:40](#) And then conversely, if you really enjoy and find happiness and listening to the music that you use to share with the person who died, that's okay too. I worked with someone who recently said, I found myself listening to the song that my wife and I loved and I was smiling and I kind of started singing a little bit and then I felt guilty. So that guilt as we know is going to arise naturally sometimes, but I encourage you to show yourself compassion. Whatever your reaction is to the music that you have enjoyed in the past.

Heather: [19:14](#) That's really helpful because I've talked to so many clients who say I can't listen to the radio anymore because I don't know what's going to show up or that will force themselves to listen to a song and it's causing more suffering. And so this is where the mindfulness comes in, is tracking, is this helping me, is helping reduce my suffering? Which is different from avoiding emotion. You can still feel the sadness, the loss, the yearning without harming yourself, or is it amping it up and just, you know, am I beating myself up through this? So thank you for sharing that.

Molly: [19:57](#) Sure. And that actually leads into something else I wanted to share, which is that there actually has been studies that have shown that that silence is better than kind of listening to music randomly. So a way that we can apply that, that knowledge is, is to think about listening to the radio, which we could, we could consider to be random listening, right? Because we don't know what song is going to come on next. So if you're in that mind state where you're worried about what you're going to hear next on the radio or on like a, if you're listening on the internet like a random playlist, it can actually be much better to either be quiet or to construct your own playlist, whether you use a streaming or you have a program on your computer where you can create playlists, you can try that as a way to have more control over what you're listening to in general. And so that's one thing that I might recommend for people, so that you can be empowered to create your own playlist that you know are going to be songs that you know are predictable. You know which one is going to come next. and you can kind of gauge what type of music and the order of the music that you want.

Heather: [21:20](#) It puts you back in control as you said. And grief is such an uncontrollable feeling, it rises up whenever, whenever it chooses. And that gives you something that you can actually do help support your mood. And I also think too, you know, we always talk about nutrition and how, what you put into your body fuels how you feel the same is obviously true with music and when you are listening to a random station, there could be messages that are getting into you that aren't necessarily helpful. And I feel that's true whether you're grieving or not. I have a friend who struggled with depression and I remember she said I never listened to the radio. I only listen to my playlist because, you know, I don't need that. I don't need the negative messages. I just need neutral because this isn't about being pollyanna, being happy, you know, just because you "should" control is a great place to be. So in terms of, as recommendations for someone who maybe wants to take control of their own playlist and part of that might be adding in new music, new styles of music. What are some of the things you find helpful there?

Molly: [22:51](#) So I think that technology can help support us in that in several ways. One way would be to, if you have, again, some kind of streaming service or maybe use one of the many internet radio services you can put in, you know the name of an artist that you know that you enjoy and you're going to get

different suggestions of perhaps artists that are similar or musical genres that are similar, but that may help you find some new new material in a style of music that maybe you already know and enjoy and then you can create a playlist from those new artists. So that would be one suggestion suggestion that I would give to people.

Heather: [23:32](#) Yeah, that's a long way from going into the record store. One of my first jobs was working in a record and tape store, and people would come in and we'd actually had a big book, big fish book, and you could look up by artist. There was no internet and you would find new music by talking to people who had similar taste. Of course you were getting what record label was pushing. But now there's so much more freedom with the internet radio and being able to look for those similar artists.

Molly: [24:11](#) Yeah. Another thing I might recommend is that if you have certain songs like that you know you love the melody or you love the cords that accompany the song, but you maybe don't want to hear the words. You can look online, especially on Youtube. You could look for different instrumental versions of songs that you like and you can type the name of the song in and then just type instrumental after it and you may come up with some tracks that have the music to the song but not the lyrics, and that may give you a little more control as well.

Heather: [24:45](#) That's a great suggestion. I actually spend a lot of my day listening to the piano guys who do instrumentals of popular music. I find words to be distracting, especially if I'm writing, but the music helps elicit the emotion. For people one of the most common things that we hear, and you mentioned it earlier, is that sense of anxiety. That is such a common experience, and when we have had a great loss or when we're anticipating our own end of life or the life of someone we care about, at the risk of pigeonholing it, is there a type of music that can help with that or is it just going to depend on you?

Molly: [25:35](#) Yeah, so music therapists in general feel very strongly about each individual person's relationship with music. Not, everybody has a strong relationship with music, but we tend to shy away from recommending certain types or genres of music as a general rule. For instance, listen to classical music and that will decrease your anxiety. That's not something you're really going to hear a music therapist say too often. So my first answer would be that it really does depend on what your personal preferences are. Probably general wisdom would say that, for instance, listening to heavy metal is probably not going to relax people, but there may be some people for whom that is a relaxing style of music. But within that, kind of aside from that first answer, which is the one I'll give most often, I would recommend to people, if you are looking for a different style of music to help with relaxation, you might want to try listening to ambient music that's pretty slow. Maybe it has, different kinds of electronic instruments that are, you know, some people might actually call it like yoga music or meditation music that you might hear in that kind of a setting. I like Liquid Mind. You can search for that online. They have a playlists that are pretty long and so for instance, you can just press one playlist and use it to help you relax or go to sleep. So that might be a resource for people. But in general it's great to use the music that you find relaxing.

Heather: [27:21](#) It's very similar to yoga. I was recently looking at a thread on Facebook where someone said, "what kind of yoga will help me with grief?" and everyone is typing in with their opinion, and as a yoga therapist I'm like, eehh! I know for me what helps, but I know for each individual person, you know, kind of thinking of the heavy metal analogy to yoga, someone's like "avoid power yoga," and well someone who a lot of energy that might work for them or not. You don't know. And so it's probably very similar to that. Try different things. The nice thing about music is you can hit the stop button and start with something else.

Molly: [28:12](#) Yeah. And with music too, and to kind of bring in the mindfulness piece also, you can try a song that you know, maybe it's a song that you like. You're not sure if it's going to be relaxing or not, try just pairing that song with, with deep breathing. You know, while you're listening to the song, commit to breathing a little more deeply than usual for the duration of the song and see how that is.

- Heather: [28:37](#) Yeah, so bringing some, some mindful breath and presence that brings in awareness of body too, which means you're in the room right there listening to the music, which is an interesting thing because music does elicit memories and it and it does sometimes take us to the future. I know for me it often takes me to the past, but I imagine it could very easily take. Take one in either direction, that breath, bringing yourself to the present. You're hearing it now. Noticing your emotional and physical response in the present even as you may be remembering something from the past, and that's what mindfulness is. It's not about saying, oh, don't ever remember what happened, and we know in grief and grief work remembering is a part of it. Carrying your loved one's memories with you and the imprint they've left upon you is a big part of grief work.
- Molly: [29:42](#) Absolutely.
- Heather: [29:44](#) So Molly, in your work with groups, because some people who are listening to this might be group facilitators, they might be bereaved parents who are bringing together other bereaved parents. What type of practice would work in a group? I have some ideas in my head of what people could do, but if you were facilitating a group, how would you bring in music and then discuss in a way that keeps it mindful and present?
- Molly: [30:21](#) Yes, that's a great question. Thanks for bringing that up. In my own work, one of the ways I use music in my bereavement support groups is to have a song that we open with every session. So I do a series of eight weeks, a closed group where we know we have a set number of people who are registered and they go through the once a week for eight week groups, and we do an opening song, a ritual that's meant to connect the group members to each other. So that initial song is not necessarily about loss. It's about how can I connect with someone that I may feel like I may not have anything in common with, but kind of how does that connection build and form over time. And then we do a ritual that's to honor the people who have died. So that could be one, one thing that a facilitator could utilize. I play the song live, but if someone is a facilitator who is not musically inclined or who's not a music therapist, you could find a song recording that the participants listened to or maybe even learn to sing along with over time. So that's one way as a ritual.
- Heather: [31:35](#) That's a really beautiful way to start a group. It's a way to say, hey, we're all going to do this now. Where it gives you a little bit of space. Yeah. And something to kind of maybe break the ice a little bit because in a bereavement group, especially that first meeting, there's a lot of fear for many people going in. It's scary to walk into a bereavement group the first time for many people. And it also is an acknowledgement that this is actually happening, right? I can imagine that music provides a little softer landing.
- Molly: [32:10](#) Yes. Another way that I use music in my groups is to do a lyric discussion of a song. So I might play a song, again people could do this with recordings as well. Play, a song that has to do with, with grief, you know, it could be something similar to the song that we heard earlier in this episode, and then hand out copies of the lyrics and ask the participants to identify a few lines of lyrics that they feel like they relate to. Or if they don't feel like they relate to, parts of the lyrics, that could be material for discussion as well. And so utilizing that to kind of spark a group discussion about common experiences in grief and their own unique experiences.
- Heather: [33:00](#) And I imagine you could also take it outside of the group if you are a journaler, if you're writing through your grief, listening to music, and then just writing your emotions down on paper could be very helpful.
- Molly: [33:15](#) Absolutely.
- Heather: [33:17](#) So Molly, for people who want to know more about you, where do we find you, what projects do you have in the works?

- Molly: [33:30](#) Well, right now the best way to reach out to me is through email. I do hope to have a website at some point, but we'll have my email address available for folks and I also do have a facebook page which I'll have available too. That's a public page where sometimes I post music and things like that. One of the upcoming projects that I'm really looking forward to is to make some professional recordings of my original songs, specifically the ones that I've written that have to do with grief and loss and that has kind of come out of my music therapy practice. Songs that I've written that have themes that have emerged throughout my work, and I'm hoping to do that within the next year. So if you would like to stay in touch with me regarding that, you can certainly email me. I come from a musical family and my sister, Robin Hicks is also a wonderful musician and a singer, and she happens to be a hospice and palliative care physician as well, so we're really hoping to record an album together so that we can share that music with our patients and their families, and also have the experience of working together musically and kind of sharing our passion with ourselves, but also with the world.
- Heather: [34:52](#) Wonderful. Well, for those of you listening, check out the show notes page. We'll Have ways to contact molly and link to her Facebook page and I really look forward to hearing that album when it's produced. I had no idea you had a sister that did similar work, and I love hearing sibling voices in music. Some of our good friends have a band, a folk music band and they're all, it's all relatives, they are cousins. It's actually about five members and just there's something in that that's really beautiful. And your voice is like an angel, letting us hear your song today was such a gift and I'm really grateful for that. Molly.
- Molly: [35:40](#) Well, thank you so much for allowing me to share about my work and my passion with others.
- Heather: [35:46](#) Thank you. As we come to a close, do you have any final words you'd like to share with our guests
- Molly: [35:53](#) Just to, you know, give encouragement to people to be open, to be open to new music and open to ways of listening to music that you've loved for years, perhaps through a new lens. We all know that grief gifts us many things, many things that we probably don't want, or weren't looking for, but it can provide a different perspective on life and so just be open to the ways that that works through your musical life as well.
- Heather: [36:24](#) Thank you Molly. Namaste
- Molly: [36:27](#) Thank you Heather.
- Heather: [36:33](#) Thank you for joining us for the Mindfulness & Grief podcast. If you found the information helpful, please help others find us by rating, reviewing or subscribing to this podcast, wherever you download your favorite shows for additional grief support, including free guided meditations, visit us on the web mindfulnessandgrief.com, and consider adding the Mindfulness & Grief book to your self care tool kit. Special thanks to our sound engineer, Todd Campbell of Hub City Recording and to the Atomic Mosquitoes for our theme music. I'm Heather Stang and I hope these teachings will be of great benefit to all who received them. Until next time, namaste.