While working a shift earlier this year, I observed a fellow nurse play music for her confused and agitated patient through an iPod. The patient had been this way the entire day despite receiving multiple pain and anxiety medications to help calm him down. However, within five minutes of playing the music, the patient finally began to relax and remained calm until he went to sleep. This event really amazed me and sparked my interest in the use of music as an intervention in health care, in particular for treating anxiety and depression.

Music for Anxiety & Depression

The universal language of music has been used for many centuries for healing. Even the ancient Greeks and Egyptians recognized the therapeutic value of music; for example, the Greeks used music to treat a wide variety of physical and mental illnesses (Meymandi, 2009). Many adults in the United States are likely to develop anxiety and depression (CDC, 2011). Using music for these symptoms can not only eliminate unnecessary medications and their associated cost, but also improve patient satisfaction scores.

Anxiety and depression can impair the desire and ability of patients to understand their diseases and follow recommendations for healing. Low adherence to treatment may decrease patient expectations of self-efficacy, which in turn may interfere with patient independence and self-care (Bautista, Vera-Cala, Colombo, & Smith, 2012). Proper management is extremely important in preventing the worsening of symptoms, avoiding the development of additional illnesses and death, and reducing the associated costs of healthcare (Rahimipour, Shahgholian, & Yazdani, 2015).

Due to the side effects associated with medications designed for these illnesses, non-medicinal treatment is now more in demand (Rahimipour et al., 2015; Smeeding, Bradshaw, Kumpfer, Trevithick, & Stoddard, 2010). Alternative, complementary, and integrative methods that involve music have been shown to reduce or control anxiety (Nilsson, 2011). However, as the world and healthcare continues to evolve, the use of medicinal substances continues to outnumber these healing approaches.

Music Nursing Interventions

A Music Nursing Intervention (MNI) has been defined as an intervention that improves healing through pre-recorded music that reduces distress and stimulates and maintains relaxation (Nilsson, 2011). An example of a MNI may include creating and providing personalized song playlists for patients through iPods or similar digital audio systems (Music & Memory, 2017). Another example of a MNI may include implementing Continuous Ambient Relaxation Environment systems (C.A.R.E.®) in which music is chosen for its appropriateness to the healthcare setting and is broadcasted to alleviate distracting noises and promote relaxation for patients, families, visitors, and staff (Healing Healthcare Systems, 2017). The use of music has been shown to be an effective nursing intervention for relieving many physiological and psychological diseases and symptoms including pain, anxiety, and depression; it is inexpensive, does not require extra manpower, and has minimum side effects compared to more common treatments such as medication (Lee et al., 2012; Nilsson, 2011). Music can support both patients and their providers as well as reinforce relationships between them (Wolf & Wolf, 2011). Because studies have shown that nurses spend more time with patients than any other healthcare professional, and the quality of nursing care has such a large impact on patient outcomes, the use of music as a nursing intervention should be advocated to help improve patient outcomes (DeLucia, Ott, & Palmieri, 2009; Nilsson, 2011).

It has been suggested that music is most relaxing when it has a slow tempo, a maximum level of 60 decibels, and
duration of 20 minutes to one hour (Nilsson, 2011). The concept of a MNI is not well-known or used in nursing practice. Gaining a better understanding of MNI through research may help to enhance its use in present-day health care to improve healing processes and patient outcomes.

Music Therapy
The use of music listening for patient care by nurses must not be confused with music therapy. Music therapists are professionally trained and credentialed in using music for healing through individualized therapeutic relationships and goal setting (Nilsson, 2011; Wolf, & Wolf, 2011). Music therapy often involves the creation of music (i.e. performing/playing, composing, and improvising) in addition to the experience of listening to music. Being familiar with the benefits and outcomes of music therapy could help nurses and other healthcare professionals advocate for and increase requests for music therapy in healthcare settings. Likewise, offering music therapy experiences to healthcare staff can also help equip nurses and doctors with the skills and tools to use music independently with their patients (Wolf & Wolf, 2011).

Music for Healthcare Staff
National nursing turnover rates across many specialties range from 12.8 to 19.1 percent, and preventing burnout in the healthcare profession has become an increasing concern (Kovner, Brewer, Fatehi, & Jun, 2014; NSI Nursing Solutions, 2017). It is not uncommon for nurses to change jobs or leave the profession altogether due to “unhumanistic and chaotic work environments and professional and personal burnout” (AHNA & ANA, 2013, p. 46). Decreased healthcare quality has been linked to anxiety, stress, and fatigue in healthcare professionals. Studies have shown that music-based interventions can be effective, with nurses reporting that these interventions have helped to increase their relaxation, concentration, and productivity during intensive work shifts (Wolf & Wolf, 2011).

Music projects designed for professional development and positive change in the workplace can motivate and empower staff. Music interventions improve staff experience by increasing the comfort of patients and making them easier to care for (Wolf & Wolf, 2011).

Those diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression can live healthy, happy lives when they adhere to treatment recommendations. Having a general knowledge of the effects and importance of integrating music into Western medical healthcare practices is important for nurses and other healthcare providers because it makes it possible to better explain this knowledge to patients. It also helps to understand the most effective ways to provide music to patients so that the best outcomes are achieved. Encouraging and requesting recorded music and/or musical performances for patients may help decrease stress, improve mood, and lessen anxiety for patients, their families, and healthcare providers.

Although the positive effects of complementary and integrative health approaches involving music have been demonstrated in many research studies, there is not much literature that explains the specific mechanisms involved with how music directly impacts biologic responses. Therefore, further research is needed to help better understand the cause and effect relationship between music and its impact on the whole person – body, mind, emotion, and spirit.

REFERENCES

Judith Akachukwu, RN, MSN has a passion for holistic care and music. During her work across the country as a travel nurse in acute care, she has studied the effects of music therapy in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Judith recently graduated with a Master of Science in Nursing Leadership degree from California State University, Fullerton. She aspires to become a better nurse leader and advocate for holistic and integrative health care.