March 2023, Issue 24

Dallas YACS-A-LOT
Newsletter

I had to double-check the issue number to ensure it is correct because, somehow and in some way, we have reached two years of this newsletter.

This newsletter started as a way to centralize all of the information for our support group, and to be honest, it wouldn't have started if I hadn't been as bored and restless as an outdoorsman stuck in a cubicle. Now, it's a monthly writing exercise and a semi-essential publication with a committee behind it.

This Dallas YACS-A-Lot has been a map of the group—recording our history and tracking our path forward. It has survived a pandemic (which, to be fair, was almost solely responsible for the aforementioned restlessness), greeted the members of Dallas YACS, mourned the loss of other members, adjusted as the group evolved, and celebrated various milestones. It has been a stalwart for us.

On a personal level, it has observed myself as I went from a cancer patient with a stagnant, non-life-threatening brain tumor to a cancer patient with a glioblastoma. Which, as of the week I'm writing this, I have received good news—the treatment appears to be working on the tumor.

But it has been interesting for lack of a better phrase. It has allowed (and even forced) me to put my emotions on these pages, whether you want to read them or not. I've written about my struggles here, and had to write out eulogies that broke me. At the same time, I've tried to give an insight into what our group does by providing the same tenets as the actual group.
While allowing us to weather the gravity of cancer, I have tried to lay down the foundations of what we do: providing a way to get to know individual members, including Alex's meditations, allowing some time for a joke that lets us laugh (even if the jokes are cheesy), and including some therapeutic exercises when possible.

It's important to acknowledge, accept, and even be proud of the past, but one of the most important aspects of this group is pushing each other forward. So with all of this said, we march into March with some incredible events coming up.

This has been your insight into the mind of Sam Snow. Until next time...

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**Massive Group Win at the Mavericks Game!**

*(Despite the Mavs Actually Losing)*

Even though the Mavericks lost, the Dallas YACS group had a phenomenal time. Taylor Roth handed out the game ball to thunderous applause from our suites, and then we just enjoyed the rest of the time in each other's company.

Thank you so much to Dwight Powell for providing us with the suites and the hats! It was truly a memorable experience. Hopefully, we'll hear more from him soon...
CALL FOR MORE NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE MEMBERS

We need more members to help put this growing and changing publication together. The committee is still in its infancy and finding its feet. We're looking for members that can stick around long-term. Quite simply, the more people we have, the simpler it becomes to put the newsletter together. Ideally, you'd have one section a month and/or come up with some new ideas.

If interested, email us [here](mailto:).
Dallas YACS Retreat Last Call!

The retreat is right around the corner and there's still time to sign up! The deadline is March 6th for all interested. It's taking place at Camp Latham Springs in Aquilla, TX, and it will feature yoga, chair massage, rock climbing, music therapy, bazooka ball, zip-lining, fireside chats (with s'mores of course), and maybe even fly fishing.

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Knowing the Group! Featuring Kristina Agee

Kristina Agee, photographed above, was 23 years old when diagnosed with Hodgkin Lymphoma in 2016. She offered a very personal and cathartic take on her ongoing journey with cancer.
"Like many others, I've had countless treatments, but the cancer has been aggressive and persistent. I would share that I love art, crafty things, guns, and I do resumé consulting. But in this moment I would rather unpack some thoughts about this whole 'cancer journey' because lately I just feel tired.

"I'm tired of people asking for 'updates,' when my honest answer is, 'I don't know, and I don't care.' I don't live according to my own plans like the rest of the outside world—my entire existence feels like it rests upon the decisions of my doctors, and you know what? I've accepted that. It's a wonderful thing to just let go of control. I wish people appreciated that. I don't rejoice over good results, and I don't mope over bad results. I still experience emotions, I'm not numb. But I don't put so much emphasis on my doctors' calls anymore. Whatever will happen will happen, and it's not worth the stress or emotional highs that I used to get.

"I'm tired of constantly having to isolate because of my immune system, feeling strained from loved ones, and not getting an invite because 'we figured you couldn't go.' I hate that I am so hyper-aware of germs, and don't like touching door handles and elevator buttons. I wish none of it bothered me like before I had cancer.

"And to be honest, I'm a little tired of the positivity. Why do I 'just have to be positive' before my results? Is positivity going to cure my cancer? No. Granted, negativity won't cure it either. Why can't I just be realistic?

"When I have multiple signs of lymphoma, it's realistic to consider whether my treatment worked. I'm not panicking, I'm not worried, I'm just assessing the data I have. But people don't want to have that discussion with you, and I think it's because (understandably) they can't handle it. I've spent 7 years getting to know death on a personal level. And even though others could 'spontaneously die tomorrow' (another phrase we love to hear) they don't have to face it, consider its pain, the preparations, what you'll wear... I think that's also why people say 'you're so strong.' They treat me like I was born for this—specially equipped to take on this disease."
"But to say, 'No, I'm just like you. I hate needles and being in the hospital secluded from normal life, I just do all this because I have no other option but to go on hospice and die—' I think it sets in that this could happen to anyone. Not just 'strong people like me.' So it's much safer and easier and comforting to say, 'just be positive.'

"And in order to prevent anyone I haven't met from thinking I'm an awful, negative Grinch of a person at this point, I'm not :) I appreciate how much I have grown up as a result of the cancer diagnosis, and much of it was indirect. It's not just about managing disability and doctor appointments, it's about the abuse I received from friends and family during my sickness, and learning how to stand up for myself.

"Going to therapy and seeing improvement in my emotional intelligence, learning what kind of people I want in my life, improving my communication skills, being less reactive, and gaining confidence in my decisions. And if it's okay to add, I have learned to value the importance of biblical literacy in my relationship with God, because of the spiritual abuse I experienced when I was deathly sick.

"Not all things are good, (clearly) but scripture promises that he works ALL things for good for those who call on him, and I've seen it play out in my life. So despite tremendous hardships and trials, I do see the good that has been made from it, and for that, I'm so grateful!

"I have such a heart of gratitude now without trying. I don't just thank God for my food, but for the stomach to eat it (not everyone can eat/digest food), for the physical capability to cook it (some people are disabled and can't cook), for the money to pay for the groceries, and for the energy/strength to cook (which I many times haven't had). There is truly so much to be grateful for, it's actually insane when you think about it.

"If you've made it all the way through, thanks so much for reading!"

Thanks for sharing, Kristina! It's always so interesting to see how we view ourselves while facing cancer.
We need more submissions!

If you’d like to be featured in a future newsletter—and let’s face the facts, if you’re reading this, we want to feature you—then send us an email through THIS LINK, bolded so you won’t miss it.

As we receive your responses, they're added to our supply and we pull one per month for the newsletter.

Meet UTSW's Music Therapist

For those who haven't met her yet, our music therapist Christina Shocklee will be at the retreat this month. She'll be leading us all in musical exercises that will assist in our own personal therapy. Besides, what’s a campfire without campfire music? With that, I'll let her tell you all about what she does because I find music to be essential to the soul.

Hello everyone! My name is Christina Shocklee and I am the board-certified music therapist (MT-BC) here at the Simmons Cancer Center. I work full-time at the Dallas/Harry Hines location providing in-person music therapy services to patients and their loved ones. I’ve been at UT Southwestern since March 2022. I received my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Music Therapy from Texas Woman’s University in Denton, TX and have been board-certified since March 2020. I'll be joining y’all on the YACS retreat at the end of March, and Sam Snow reached out to me to answer some questions about music therapy and how it works in the context of navigating your cancer journey.

What is the purpose of music therapy?

The broadest, simplest answer is that music therapy helps people achieve a variety of goals that support health, well-being, and/or development through music and the therapeutic relationship.
Depending on the people an MT-BC works with - premature newborns and their parents, elderly adults with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, children with autism or intellectual/developmental disabilities, etc.—those goals can look very different.

Here at the Cancer Center, the goals I help people work towards are often centered around emotional and psychological support including, but not limited to, reducing anxiety, normalizing the medical environment, providing opportunities for choice and control, creating space for safe emotional expression, and developing music coping skills and resources that can be used on their own time.

There are physiological goals as well, such as reducing heart rate and decreasing pain perception. I get to know each patient individually and complete an assessment, choose appropriate goals with them, and bring in music experiences to help them work towards those goals.

**How do you see it affecting your patients?**

Increasing amounts of research provide evidence that supporting every facet of health has a greater impact on a person’s quality of life than just focusing on the physical body. This includes recognizing every patient’s humanity and identity before and beyond cancer. The most common feedback I get from the patients I work with is that music therapy helps them re-contextualize their experience coming to the Cancer Center and receiving treatment, helps them feel seen as a person and not a diagnosis, and provides comfort and respite from the stress of navigating their treatment.

I see people working to reconnect with the music that they leaned on in the past, picking up instruments that they stopped playing, revisiting old memories and making new ones.

**What sort of exercises do you have for patients?**

So music therapy exercises, or “interventions” as we call them, fall into four main categories: receptive, recreative, composition, and
improvisation.

Receptive involves the patient passively taking in music with the music therapist (i.e. guided meditation and music, active music listening, music and art, lyric analysis).

Recreation is when the patient and music therapist recreate pre-written music (adaptive lessons, singing patient-preferred songs, heartbeat recordings overlaid with important songs, therapeutic choirs).

Composition is when the patient and music therapist plan out and create original music or lyrics (lyric rewrites using familiar songs, wholly original pieces, short or long-term projects).

Improvisation is when the patient and music therapist create music on the spot (vocal or instrumental, one-on-one or group, themed or free). When I meet a patient for the first time, I ask questions about a lot of things, including their music background, tastes, and how they use music in their lives. That gives me an idea on where to start, what music is appropriate to bring in, and what interventions they’ll be comfortable exploring. As time goes on and rapport is built, I may introduce other interventions if I think that person will be receptive to it, and more importantly, take meaning from it.

**Do you have any favorite exercises, and if so, what are they?**

Personally, I have always found improvisation really fascinating—I wrote my thesis on the historical development and use of improvisational models of music therapy in mental health settings. I think there is something deeply freeing about letting go and allowing your body and mind to create in the moment.

I have seen beautiful moments of freedom, expression, and release without a single word being spoken. I have experienced that freedom myself! Honestly, though, my favorite experiences are when my patients become comfortable with me and with the process and throw themselves wholeheartedly into whatever intervention we’re doing.
What should we expect on the retreat?

I’m definitely going to bring some options! I’m still ironing out details with Alex, but likely there will be some drumming, some humming, some deep breathing, maybe some mantra work. We’ll see where the day takes us and what feels right!

I know that the idea of making music, especially around other people, can feel intimidating or stressful. Please know that music therapy does not require a lick of musical talent to get benefits from it. It will be a judgment-free zone and I invite you to participate at your comfort level.

My job is to meet you where you are and bring in experiences that are approachable for everyone regardless of skill. I’m here to support you, and your peers in this group are here to support you too!

Anything you'd like to say that isn't already mentioned?

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this and I really look forward to meeting more of y’all at the retreat. If you’re reading this and we’re currently working together or have worked together in the past - hi!!

If the information here resonates with you and you’re interested in receiving music therapy services, please reach out to a member of your care team for a referral—your Nurse Navigator is a great place to start.

I’m providing a few links so if you’d like you can learn more about the field, such as what board-certification means and the history of music therapy in the US:

FAQ's | American Music Therapy Association (AMTA)

What you need to be a music therapist | American Music Therapy Association (AMTA)
Borrowed Comedic Branch

We're borrowing from The Last of Us this month because it was too good to pass up.

"Why did the scarecrow get an award?"

Find out what it is at the end of the newsletter...

Alex's Meditation Moment

In the two years we’ve been publishing this newsletter, we’ve offered different types of mindfulness activities as tools to reflect on our intentions, beliefs, and values and to inform our decisions, choices, and interactions. The exercises offered can be organized into three categories: breathwork, visualization, and sound. Each of these has its own benefits and can be employed with specific awareness in mind. Breathwork brings about physical benefits, stillness, balance, and a sense of calm. Visualization focuses on the psychological benefits, healing from the past and preparing for the future. Sound, the category for this edition of the newsletter, generates psychic benefits and creates deep connection to ourselves and the universe. While we set up our mindfulness practice in a space of silence, that does not mean the absence of sound—just the absence of unwanted inner and outer noise.

Sound meditations can strengthen our concentration and listening
skills by offering a useful, safe anchor. The practice evokes a dual control model in which we aim to turn off the stories we tell ourselves, negative thoughts, interpretations, judgments, and projects and turn on or into the inner silence that is available to us through awareness. Music is an important pathway to inner silence. By focusing on meaningful phrases sung, hearing the repetition of lyrics, and feeling the sympathetic vibrations, we actually begin to participate most in the performance through our silence. Fascinatingly, silence is embedded in music—music notations for the duration of a note are matched by an equal notation for the duration of silence between the notes. Not only does this inner silence positively impact us on an individual level; the ability to silence our inner voice creates the conditions for truly hearing the voices of others, increasing connection in our relationships.

Let’s explore by putting this into practice.

First, choose meditation music that can help you relax. I’ve provided a few links and want you to find music that you enjoy but not necessarily that you are familiar with. Look for music that has a slower tempo (and preferably without lyrics) which can be distracting and can engage your conscious mind—the part of your mind that we hope to slow down.

https://www.calm.com/app/music

https://open.spotify.com/album/67ozVdV9kfSsWizbxWEIlcc

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWLkJpmBBU

Get into a comfortable position and relax. Whatever position you feel is comfortable is the position you should try. Once you’ve found your position, close your eyes if that’s a supportive option for you, relax your muscles, and breathe through your diaphragm. Let your shoulders, your belly, and even the muscles in your face relax. Breathe in deeply through your nose, gently expanding your belly rather than your chest, then exhale through your mouth.

Stay focused on the music. If you find yourself thinking about other
things (or even thinking thoughts about the music), gently redirect your attention to the present moment, the sound of the music, and the feelings in your body that the music evokes. Try to really feel the vibrations of the notes music.

Continue this practice for the duration of a song if possible. As thoughts come into your head, gently let them go and redirect your attention to the sound of the music, the present moment, and the physical sensations you feel. The goal of this practice is to quiet your inner voice, breathe freely, and simply be.

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**Prompt of the Month**

Imagine you're an hourglass, filled with thousands, if not millions, of grains of sand. What does each grain look like? What happens when it stops? Or when it's turned over to restart?

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If you’d like your response featured in next month’s newsletter, simply include it in an email to the group's email, dallyacsalot@gmail.com.

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"Because he was outstanding in his field."
Feedback?

If you have anything you'd like us to know that isn't covered in the newsletter, tell us [here](#).

That's it! You've reached the end of our newsletter. Until next time...