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## Book Review

# **Music Therapy: Death and Grief**

## Chava Sekeles

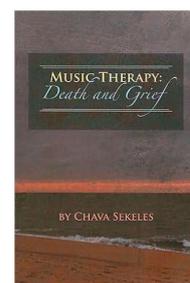
Reviewed by Tamsin Dives

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*Music Therapy: Death and Grief*

Chava Sekeles

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**Tamsin Dives** trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, gaining the AGSM in 1982. For twenty-two years she pursued a diverse career as an opera and concert singer. In 2005 she returned to the Guildhall to retrain as a music therapist. Since qualifying she has worked with adults with severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour and brain injury. She served on the British Society for Music Therapy committee and she was a ‘buddy’ for the Terence Higgins Trust. She has also been, for many years, a proactive member of her local community using Music and the Arts as a collaborative tool to bring different groups together. She now works as a music therapist at St Christopher’s Hospice in South East London.

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Dr Chava Sekeles’ book *Music Therapy: Death and Grief* is a frank and open hearted book. She draws from a wealth of over forty years’ experience as a music therapist working in Israel and abroad.

This book offers a rich mix of chapters covering a broad range of work. Her seven case studies show how she uses music therapy to address the complex and very different ways her clients are affected by death and the consequences of grief. Together with these is a chapter in which she explores Israeli music and its role in managing collective and personal grief. Chapter 5 looks at how ‘art music’ can be used therapeutically and in the final chapter Sekeles looks at how she manages her own grieving processes.

The author lies very much at the heart of her writing. She has a readable, approachable style. She looks at the individual, the individual within the

family unit, and the social and cultural context. She acknowledges the values and attitudes of society, and how these affect the way that people grieve.

Grief is complex, by its very nature, and everyone responds to loss differently. The case studies illustrate that Sekeles works in a variety of ways. She has developed her own tool in managing her work, the “Developmental – Integrative Model” (p. 2) and this is central to her therapeutic approach. Alongside this she embraces other artistic processes, encouraging clients to draw and write, when and where appropriate. Narrative emerges as an important aspect of the grieving process.

At times Sekeles relies on intuition, and at times she is self-questioning. She has the confidence to include in this book work which is incomplete: cases where family members or the client have decided to discontinue. Therapy is a journey, and it

is the case for all practitioners that work sometimes does not end as we would wish. I find it refreshing to see this included.

War, as well as the terror and violence that war brings to a nation, are the shadow central to much of her work. It is a daily reality. In Chapter 1 the case study of Miri is presented: a young girl who witnessed the death of her mother and brother in a suicide bomb attack. There is a real sense that Sekeles' work provides a space for Miri to grow and develop as she processes these devastating losses. The songs of Israel play a vital role in connecting Miri to her dead mother and helping her to mourn. During this work Miri is also sensitively supported by loving family and community.

There are other cases involving children where family dynamics impact in a way which is not so helpful. Avi (Chapter 7), a severely handicapped child struggles to feel brave on his long daily bus ride to a special school. Bobby (Chapter 6) is not allowed to process the death of a favourite grandfather and this is a direct consequence of his parent's wishes. It is only when he begins therapy with Sekeles that he is given the space to explore his feelings. Unfortunately this work is abruptly brought to an end by the parents.

Listening and an open outlook are the foundations to Sekeles' approach. Grieving and loss do not just affect the individual. It can extend to close family members and carers, and Sekeles often works with them too, inviting parents into their child's session, or working with the child of a dying parent. This is the case in Chapter 3 where an account of work with a father who has terminal cancer is presented.

Chapter 2 explores the 'particular-ness' of 'song' in modern Israel. Israel post world war is a country made up of many immigrants from across the world. 'Song' helps develop society; it is a valuable tool in bringing disparate groups together. It plays a vital role in the faiths and rituals of different cultures and also helps to revive the Modern Hebrew language. In war torn countries it is a cultural reference point, a way of surviving, a place of affirmation, a way to celebrate what it is to be human.

Chapter 5, *The Relationship between Art Music, Death and Grief*, seems to me slightly out of place in this book. This is a huge subject matter – where to start? Perhaps this is a separate book in its own right. However it is good to be reminded that not all clients can easily access their emotional responses and receptive listening can be a useful starting point which might then lead to creative music making. Sekeles regularly introduces pre-composed music into her sessions. This is the case in Chapter 4. Sekeles shares her work with a bereaved mother

and widow. Again the reader is required to reflect on the psychological implications of random terrorism. The mother's son had been killed by friendly fire and not long after, her husband died after a short illness. The mother has 'locked in' emotionally. Music therapy offers her a place to 'unpack' her grief. She is able to revisit her relationship with her deceased husband and to invite her surviving son to therapy where they work through some painful and difficult issues together.

In Chapter 8 Jonas is presented: a young man with borderline personality disorder who has struggled to come to terms with the death of his mother. Musical processes illustrate a strict and overbearing mother. Whilst the work in this course of therapy was never completed, Jonas left with a greater insight.

Chapter 9 looks at some very interesting work in a Psychiatric Unit. Here the work focuses on an individual; however, much of the work takes place within a group. Songs are shared and play a valuable role in celebrating the individuality of group members. Their work develops into group composition and they work on a 'Musicals' format to express their psychological states. In this scenario public performance plays an important role in giving patients a sense of belonging and 'being heard'.

Chapter 10 is a personal examination of the emotional impact of working in this territory for the therapist. This aspect of music therapy work is not often written about. Music therapy can end in a variety of ways and we will always have an emotional response, sometimes straightforward, sometimes complex. We have a responsibility as therapists to look after ourselves (Tasker & Hartley 2014).

It is often the case that books about music therapy are a collection of contributions from different authors. It is good to immerse oneself in the practice of one writer. There is a great amount of detail about the musical processes during sessions in which she integrates theory and practice. Each case study is unique. Using a variety of methods Sekeles offers a relationship which requires a creative response and draws out the essential humanity of those with whom she is working. Attitudes and values of society provide direction for how illness and health are understood, and the impact of death and grief upon wellbeing. Sekeles embraces the community, the family life of the individual she is working with, how they define their purpose and place in the world, both how and where they fit in.

I would recommend this book to anyone who is working in the field of death, dying and bereavement.

## References

Tasker, M., & Hartley, N. (2014). Looking After Yourself. In N. Hartley (Ed.), *End of Life Care: A Guide for Therapists, Artists and Arts Therapists* (pp. 203-226). London: Jessica Kingsley.

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