

Music and Dementia

Music may help caregivers connect with their loved ones in wonderful ways – especially for those who are experiencing communication difficulty. Evidence is increasing that music which is enjoyable to the listener can provide emotional and behavioral benefits for people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, even into the later stages. Music-related activities may improve mood and stimulate associated memories, cognition, and conversational ability. It has also been shown to reduce anxiety, agitation, and depressive symptoms. These benefits are rooted in the brain and body's widespread built-in responses to music.

The Brain Has Many Responses to Music

We are “hard-wired” to react to music—it provides a natural bridge for communication. Long term musical memories are often preserved in Alzheimer's disease because they are stored in parts of the brain that are among the last to be affected by the disease. This is why many people can remember lyrics to old favorites or how to play an instrument even when they seem unable to communicate verbally.

Studies reveal that music may:

- ◆ Naturally hold one's attention and “light up” many parts of the brain including emotions and memory in the limbic system, cognition and language in the frontal and temporal lobes.
- ◆ Stimulate the neurotransmitter dopamine which regulates feelings of pleasure.
- ◆ Encourage movement to the beat and stimulate the social bonding hormone oxytocin.
- ◆ Reduce stress hormones.
- ◆ Boost the immune system.
- ◆ Increase neuroplasticity (building new neural pathways) even in dementia.



Tips for Harnessing the Power of Music

Here are some ways to use music every day to shift moods or revive happy memories—at home, outdoors, or in the car. **The key to success is to use music that is enjoyable to the person with dementia.**

- ◆ Start with listening to familiar favorites and then explore to find new favorites.
- ◆ Use YouTube to find sing-alongs, concerts and dancing.

Safety and Health Considerations

- ◆ If you're a visitor, hum along while wearing a mask, but do not sing together (high COVID-19 risk).
- ◆ At mealtime use only instrumental music to reduce the risk of choking due to eating and singing.
- ◆ Hydrate after singing.
- ◆ If balance is a concern, movement and dance can be enjoyed while seated.
- ◆ Don't use earbuds or headphones outside when near cars or bikes.

Alzheimer's New Jersey[®]

Music for Mood Shifts and Background for Other Activities

- ◆ **Since the brain is stimulated by music, the time right after a music activity may be the best time to connect with your loved one.**
- ◆ Create playlists (a list of songs that can be played on a tablet, phone, or other media player) to shift a mood or to distract and redirect.
- ◆ Playlists as background music can include music for movement and exercise, laughter and fun, painting/crafts, folding laundry, bathing, mealtime, car trips, etc.
- ◆ Begin by choosing music that matches the person's current emotional state (agitated or sad).
- ◆ Slowly modify the music type to correspond with the desired mood (calm, upbeat or happy).
- ◆ Plan a visit or phone call after music has warmed up the brain.
- ◆ As a caregiver, you can also make playlists to reduce your stress, relax, and help shift a mood.

Make it Interactive

- ◆ Use Zoom to invite family and friends for safe sing-alongs.
- ◆ Use old favorite music as a memory trigger to reminisce and share stories.
- ◆ Move to music (swing arms, march around or in-place, wave a scarf).
- ◆ Add clapping, tapping, egg shakers, maracas or other similar shaker instruments.

In Early and Moderate Stages of Alzheimer's

- ◆ Develop playlists together.
- ◆ Be more interactive with singing, movement/dancing, playing percussion together (shaker eggs, clapping, etc.).
- ◆ The person with dementia may be able to use a smart speaker or iPod to play favorites.

In Later Stages of Alzheimer's

- ◆ Louder, more upbeat music may be distressing.
- ◆ Try soothing music– humming/soft singing.
- ◆ Explore singing groups in your area that visit nursing homes, or if appropriate, you may find a hospice or a religious-based choir.

Explore Old and New Music

Old music from early memories may have added meaning. New favorites can also bring joy.

- ◆ Popular music from earlier decades in the person's life
- ◆ Songs from school, clubs and camp
- ◆ Family favorites – a good opportunity to involve other family members in the search
- ◆ Religious music, patriotic songs and hymns
- ◆ Old TV show theme songs and ad jingles
- ◆ Broadway musicals, operas and cultural favorites
- ◆ Radio, smart speakers, and music apps

Use these tips and techniques to harness the power of music - enrich your days, communicate better with your loved one and “boogie” every chance you get.

Music To-Go

Put a printed copy of the playlists in a “Go Bag” to help healthcare staff reduce stress for the person with dementia during an emergency room, hospital, rehab, respite stay, or ambulance ride.

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