

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.

alzheimer's association®

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Take My Hand, I'm A Stranger in Paradise: Music & Dementia

By Marcy Maler, MA, Art Therapy

Research suggests that listening to or singing songs can provide emotional and behavioral benefits for people with dementia. Musical memories are often preserved because the key brain areas linked to music are relatively undamaged by the disease. Music can relieve stress, reduce anxiety, depression, and agitation for a dementia patient and can also benefit the caregiver by reducing his own anxiety and distress, lightening the mood and providing a way to connect with a loved one who has dementia—particularly for those who have difficulty communicating.

A recent study shows that dementia patients can recall memories and emotions and have enhanced mental performance after singing classic hits and show tunes from movies and musicals. For example, your loved one may have difficulty finding the right words to use in daily conversation, yet may be able to sing an entire song without a problem.

Music can evoke emotion in even the most advanced stages of dementia. Musical aptitude and appreciation are two of the last remaining abilities in dementia patients and because these two abilities remain long after other abilities have declined, music is an excellent way to reach beyond the disease to the person. By pairing music with daily routines, patients can develop a rhythm that helps them to recall the memory of that activity while improving cognitive ability over time.

Singing is engaging; it activates the left side of the brain and exercises greater mind power.



Music in Early Stage Alzheimer's

Many people enjoy playing music or singing during the early stages of Alzheimer's. Encourage your loved one to continue to be involved in music; it may be an area in which she can feel success and accomplishment, and be encouraged by its beauty. Compile recordings of her favorite music, perhaps ones that date back to her younger and middle years. Adults with strong spiritual beliefs will often appreciate songs of faith that are strongly embedded in memory.

Music in Middle Stage Alzheimer's

Some people in the mid stages of the disease can continue to play an instrument they knew well. Others, however, may become frustrated when forgetting a chord or being unable to read the music and abandon the activity altogether. During this stage, behaviors can sometimes be challenging. The use of music can be an effective tactic for distraction to redirect the behavior. For example, sing a song with your loved one as you help him complete a task. You may notice his improved ability to learn the songs and lyrics, increased social interaction, and a release of tension.

Music in Late Stage Alzheimer's

In the later stages of Alzheimer's, music is often used as a way to connect with a loved one and evoke an emotional response. Play the recordings you made of his favorite songs. The familiarity of the music may be calming when he is in pain, anxious, or restless. At a time when he can no longer speak, he may be able to mouth the words of the familiar lyrics or relax in the midst of a

Tips & Tools

How to begin the search for music that connects to a person's heart:

- ◆ Ask "What are your favorite songs?" or "What music would you love to listen to?" Thanks to music streaming services, most songs are available at the click of a mouse.
- ◆ Create playlists for different moods or life stages. Music can calm, energize, help us grieve, and more. Be mindful about what music you select for an occasion.
- ◆ If verbal communication is limited, use trial and error. When a song elicits a favorable response from the individual, add it to the playlist.
- ◆ Select songs from your loved one's youth (between 18–25 years old). Depending on what years were most transformative for them, move forward and backward within the timeframe or decade you're exploring.
- ◆ Find songs in your loved one's native language and recordings by the original artist.
- ◆ Find live recordings of a concert you know they went to and was important to them.

familiar melody. The music can be transformative.

If you would like to incorporate music in your caregiving strategies, consider these tips:

1. **Think about your loved one's preferences.** What kind of music does she enjoy?
2. **What music evokes memories of happy times in his or her life?**
3. **Involve family and friends** by asking them to suggest songs or make playlists.
4. **Set the mood.** To calm your loved one during mealtime or a morning hygiene routine, play music or sing a soothing song. When you would like to elevate her mood, use more upbeat or faster paced music.
5. **Avoid overstimulation.** When playing music, eliminate competing noises. Turn off the TV. Close the door. Adjust the volume so your loved one can comfortably hear it. Opt for musical stations that aren't interrupted by advertisements that can cause confusion.
6. **Encourage movement.** Help your loved one to clap along or tap his feet to the beat. If possible, sway or dance with your loved one.
7. **Sing along.** Singing along together can boost the mood and enhance your relationship. Some studies suggest that musical memory functions differently from other types of memory, and singing can help stimulate unique memories.
8. **Pay attention** to your loved one's response. If your loved one seems to enjoy particular songs, play them often. If your loved one reacts negatively to a particular song or type of music, choose something else.

Keep in mind that music does not necessarily affect your loved one's cognitive function or quality of life. Additional research is necessary to better



understand the precise effects of music and Alzheimer's disease. However, these lasting memories of music are likely an important factor in understanding why it can be beneficial to those with cognitive impairment. Many of us enjoy and benefit from listening to music, and this often does not change after someone develops Alzheimer's.

What Musicals or Movies are Most Effective?

There is no magical playlist for people with dementia. We all feel the beautiful effects of music, but perhaps they are most profoundly felt by people who are living with dementia. Music will reconnect her to joyful experiences from her past. The best music for your loved one will be music that helps you connect with him.

Think of the classics your loved one grew up with, music that was played and replayed, such as

- *The Sound of Music*
- *When You Wish Upon a Star* (from *Pinocchio*)
- *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (from *The Wizard of Oz*)

How can music help a person with dementia? While indeed, music can shift the mood, diffuse stress, and stimulate positive interactions, it is not just about placing the headphones of an iPod on your loved one's head, and leaving him alone to listen to it. If the use of music is intended to improve your loved one's life, his memory retrieval, and his ability to communicate and engage, it should be an interactive experience. Create a magic moment that can be shared. Use these periods of heightened sensibilities and abilities to share the moment and converse. You may find out more about your loved one, understand his or her needs, and cultivate your relationship.

Once music has opened that door to improved engagement, you must step into it!