



music as therapy
international



Be inspired

Exploring the role of music in dementia care

This booklet was created by Music as Therapy International to inspire caregivers to think about how they can introduce music into the care they provide.

Music is not just an enjoyable pastime. Research has shown it can significantly improve and support the mood, alertness and engagement of people with dementia; it can reduce the use of medication, as well as helping to manage and reduce agitation, isolation, depression and distress, overall supporting a better quality of life.

As well as this, music accesses different parts of the brain to language, so music can be used to communicate or engage with someone who has been diagnosed with dementia, even if they no longer speak or respond to other people's words.

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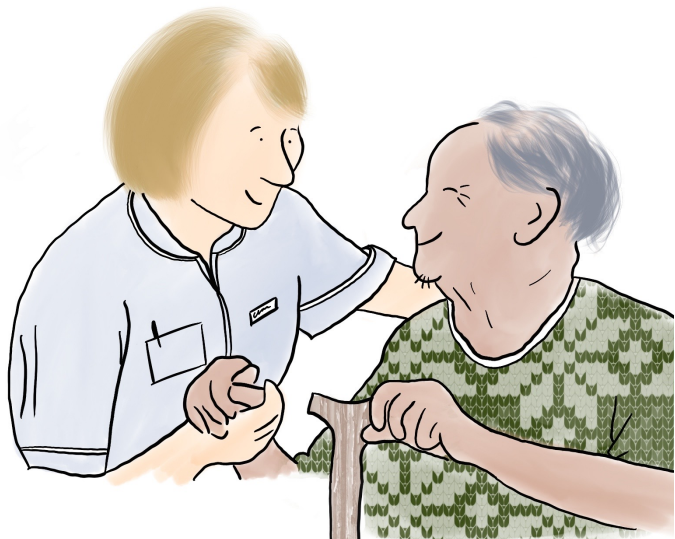
Why use music?

The benefits of using music with someone living with dementia

- Reducing depression, stress, anxiety and blood pressure levels
- Decreasing agitated and aggressive behaviours
- Reducing the use of medication
- Eliciting positive changes in mood and emotional states
- Contributing to, maintaining or rehabilitating functional cognitive and sensory abilities
- Aiding recall
- Improve speech and language skills
- Enhancing socio-emotional experiences
- Increasing motivation and stimulate interest in activities
- Providing meaningful time spent together in a positive, creative way
- Improve quality of life

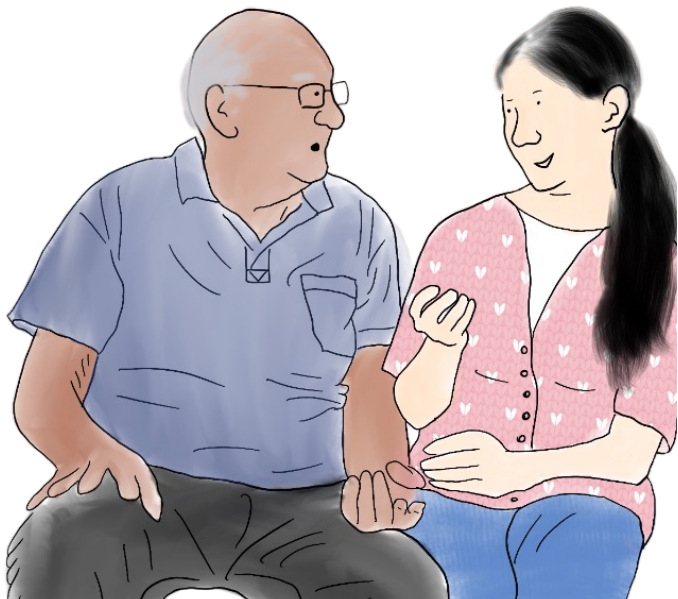
Why listen to music with someone living with dementia?

- To get to know someone
- To start a conversation
- To occupy in an enjoyable way
- To share in an activity
- To provide support and emotional containment
- To settle
- To divert and change the mood



Questions to ask

- What music does or did the person like?
- Did they learn a musical instrument or sing in a choir?
- Did they like dancing?
- What did they enjoy and what music might be associated with this?
- What music did their parents like?
- Were religious celebrations significant in their life?
- What music did their children listen to or play?



Other things to think about

- When was the individual born?
- What musical era have they lived through?
- What music might have been listened to by their parents and children?
- What is the individual's cultural and religious background?
- What languages do they speak?
- Where did they live and grow up?
- Where did they go on holiday or what different countries and places are important to the individual?

Psychologists have proven that we create more memories between the ages of 10 and 30 than at any other time in our lives.

Try music from this period in the person living with dementia's life:

Birth year +10 = start Birth year +30 = end

Practical Tips

Be Prepared

- Have a suitable device ready, with the right music source open
- Think about any distracting background noise
- Focus on the sound, not the screen

Monitor the responses of the person living with dementia

- Listen to what is said, but also look for non-verbal communication
- Allow time for the individual to focus and process information
- Follow the lead of the individual: Are they enjoying simply listening? Do they want to talk? Should you stop or change the music?
- Keep an eye out for music that triggers unpleasant or unwanted feelings or memories. **AVOID THIS MUSIC.**
- Tears are not always bad. They are a sign of deep emotion, but if they indicate distress: **STOP**

Practical tips (continued)

Keeping music listening interactive

- Consider asking the individual about the music
- Consider commenting on your own experience of the music or the lyrics
- Be ready to talk over the music, or pause the music
- Listen without judgement



Connecting without words



WAIT Take time to watch what the person living with dementia is doing. Silence is OK!

WATCH & LISTEN for what the person living with dementia does, notice the speed of their breathing, listen for any vocal sounds and focus on their body movements.

RESPOND in a way that you feel is appropriate – stay aware of the person living with dementia's non-verbal communication (e.g. body language/facial gestures/changes in breathing/changes in mood) and try to respond to it.

Ways to respond

- **Mirroring** Take time to make sure how you respond reflects the mood or emotional expression of your client. This is effectively done by adjusting the speed, volume or intensity of anything you do.
- **Matching** Copy the person's physical movements. Watch to see if they notice and if this is interesting, enjoyable or distressing for them. Stop if they become distressed.
 - What happens if you stop copying the person's movements? Do they notice? If you start again, do they notice?
 - Sing your own words to match the client's behaviour (e.g. "Derek is listening." or "Irene's hands are rubbing."
- **Extending** Can you build on this point of contact by introducing something new, such as a different movement (e.g. moving from stroking the arm of your chair to tapping it, or start to hum or sing)? Watch the individual closely. You're looking for any sign of awareness, enjoyment or potential for interaction.
- **Inviting** Try singing a song at the speed of the person's own breathing or physical movements. If they are able, can you leave space for them to join in?

Considerations

- Think about the distractions in the environment (ticking clocks, background noise, babbling radio).
- Think about how much spoken language or instruction you use.
- Allow space and time to process information.
- Each person's experience of music is different – there's no "one- size-fits-all"
- Check the volume - Loud volumes can startle people, cause physical discomfort or distress.
- Constant noise will be overstimulating.
- Follow the lead of the individual: Are they enjoying simply listening? Do they want to talk? Try to think of listening to music as a shared activity.

Considerations

- Match the mood of the person living with dementia and use music to acknowledge their emotional state.
- Making music is usually fun, but it is also a space to address more difficult feelings (anxiety, grief, anger), and it is important to allow all feelings to be present. There is no need to cheer everyone up, or even to encourage everyone too strongly to participate. Allow people the time and space to decide for themselves what to offer.
- If someone becomes agitated or distressed listening to a particular piece of music, stop and avoid this piece of music in the future.
- Don't assume that one negative or disinterested response is a permanent rejection. Try using music at different times of the day and trust your instincts. Remember, you can always try another day.

Music Helps

The content in this resource is taken from Music Helps, an online training course currently in development and due for launch in February 2024.

Music Helps is an online training course created specifically to help caregivers working with people living with dementia.

The interactive four-hour course comprises five chapters offering guidance, videos, exercises, and resources to give caregivers an understanding of the role music can play in the care they provide, whether at home or in a residential setting.

Sign up for Music Helps

To register your interest and be one of the first to gain access to the Music Helps online course when it is launched, scan the below QR code or visit www.musicasterapy.org/keynotes/register-your-interest.



Get in touch

If you have any questions about Music Helps, the resources within this booklet, or when you are using music in your care practice, please contact:

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For more information visit www.musicasterapy.org