



Music: A Key to Connecting with Those Suffering with Dementia

Joe had carefully curated two playlists for his father Dave: one was calming classical music and the other featured big band and jazz. Since his Dad had always loved music and had been an accomplished trumpet player, Joe thought the music might spark his attention—even through his advancing dementia. After putting on the earphones, there was a noticeable change in Dave's demeanor. He clearly recognized the music even if he wasn't able to tell Joe.

Music During the Holidays

The holidays are approaching and this usually means that we will soon be spending time with family and friends. Sadly, this year, due to COVID-19 many of us will not be celebrating with all of our loved ones. As we continue to make sacrifices to ensure everyone's safety, it is especially difficult to be apart from seniors who are struggling with dementia. One way to connect, provide comfort, and ease anxiety may be found through music.

Music and Memory

Throughout our lives, we are exposed to music in various ways. Whether it is through formal training as a musician or dancer, listening to the radio, or going to concerts, the art form is engrained in our lives. Music takes on deeply personal meaning and has the power to evoke emotional responses and memories, which can lead to interconnection with caregivers, loved ones, and others with dementia.

When people have brain impairments or decline cognitively, there are some activities, such as taking pleasure in music, pedaling a bicycle, and dancing that are usually preserved. This is because the actions were learned and embedded at a young age. This type of memory is called Procedural Memory (PM). It is different from Explicit Memory, which is memory for events, knowledge, and logic. This form of memory gradually diminishes as dementia worsens, but PM typically remains intact for a longer period of time.

The Benefits of Music for Those with Dementia

Even when dementia is advanced and judgment, speech, and language are impaired, individuals can still have a meaningful response to music. In addition to this, it has been demonstrated that music can have a positive impact on mood, behavior, and in some instances, even cognitive function.

There is mounting evidence from researchers that music has many benefits. One study in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* found that singing can have a positive effect on individuals with dementia. Research shows that improvements in behavior, mood, and function can last for hours, or even days, after the music has stopped. Interestingly, it is not necessary for music to be familiar for it to be beneficial.

Agitation is a common trait of dementia and it can cause extreme distress for both the senior and their caregivers. It is important to remember that agitation experienced by the senior is a direct result of the illness. It should be understood as part of a biological response and is in effect connected to a loss of identity. In some cases, music may provide a key to reaffirming a sense of self.

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There are additional benefits of playing music. It has been shown to increase heart rate and hormone levels in cognitively impaired patients. Music can also elicit a pleasurable response, such as smiling or movement, thus creating new ways to connect with others.

Enjoying the Perfect Playlist

There are a few things to keep in mind when sharing music with your loved one who has dementia:

- Select songs and styles your loved one used to listen to
- Encourage them to move and dance if it is safe for them to do so
- Sing along to foster their engagement
- Monitor their response

Music provides benefits to everyone no matter their state of health. There is no drawback to turning on some tunes and finding out if this is a way to connect. For a more detailed discussion of music's potential benefits on cognitive function see Ronald Devere, MD. "Music and Dementia: an Overview." *Practical Neurology*. June 2017: <https://practicalneurology.com/articles/2017-june/music-and-dementia-an-overview>.

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