Music

Music and sound play an important part throughout our lives whether through listening, taking part or moving to it. We can respond to music from a very early age, before words and language are developed, and this continues even when verbal abilities are lost and/or we are at the end of our lives.

Music involves melody, harmony and rhythm using instruments or the voice. It can be ‘passive’ i.e. listening to recorded or live music or ‘active’ in which people take a direct part through playing an instrument or singing.

Music can trigger emotions, feelings and memories in people particularly when there is a personal connection to their past experiences.
Music and dementia

Music is increasingly being used to communicate and engage with people with dementia.

As dementia progresses, music can be used to enhance communication and wellbeing. Music stimulates different parts of the brain and can help the person to express feelings and connect with past memories, for example, playing music that is significant, such as favourite songs, a piece of music from a wedding, or a lullaby the person used to sing to their children.

Music can be used in a range of structured or unstructured ways, either individually or in a group, such as:

- Listening to a live performance
- Playing instruments or singing
- Listening to music played through headphones
- Listening to favourite pieces of recorded music

Music therapy involves a trained music therapist working either with a group or an individual, using music to support and help people express themselves and communicate with others. Music therapists are qualified and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Music therapy has been shown to reduce anxiety for some people with dementia, as well as leading to improvements in their cognitive function i.e. their thinking, feeling, perception, mood and behaviour.

Music therapy can provide a powerful and pleasurable way to communicate and connect with someone, especially when other forms of communication are lost.
What are the benefits?

- Music helps people with dementia express feelings and ideas
- It can encourage physical exercise, dance or movement
- It can encourage social interaction with others, reduce social isolation and promote activity in groups
- Music can prompt reminiscence
- Singing or playing a favourite piece of music can lessen distress and may be particularly helpful whilst giving personal care
- It can help the person with dementia ‘tell their story’ and give voice to their personal history
Tips for using music

• **Choose music that the person likes:**
  Most people will react more positively to music they have listened to frequently as well as music from their teenage years. Ask the person what music they like or if they can’t tell you, ask family or friends. If there is no information available, investigate popular music from the person’s cultural background and era and try it out.

• **Watch to see how the person reacts:**
  If someone seems uncomfortable or distressed in response to the music, try something different. It may be that they just don’t like that particular type of music or song. If they respond positively then use the music to engage with them. Does the person tap their fingers or hum along? Try joining in!

• **Use music to interact with the person:**
  Listening to music and or singing can trigger memories, feelings and emotions that aren’t expressed at any other time. Holding someone’s hand, tapping to the rhythm, moving or dancing may provide an additional way of connecting with the person. Using pictures or photos alongside music can also provide a way to reminisce and share memories for families.
Things to be aware of

• Start with gentle quiet music and involve the person wherever possible
• Simply having loud music in the background could be over stimulating and sometimes distressing
• Music can awaken negative emotions and memories as well as positive ones. Watch out for how the person reacts – if there are signs of distress, turn the music off. However, expressing sadness may be a normal reaction to a memory or an association to the music. Just sitting with the person during this time and offering comfort may be the best response.
Useful resources and organisations

• British Association of Music Therapists:
  www.bamt.org

• Live Music now:
  www.livemusicnow.org.uk/wellbeing_older_people

• Playlist for Life:
  www.playlistforlife.org.uk

• Singing for the Brain:
  www.alzheimers.org.uk/info/20172/activities_and_services/1092/singing_for_the_brain

• Music Mirrors:
  www.musicmirrors.co.uk
The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit www.dementiauk.org/donate or call 0300 365 5500.

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If you’re caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm

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