

Best Music for Dementia Patients

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Activity directors at assisted living communities and occupational therapists have long known the benefits of using music for dementia therapy – it can help to engage, manage stress, soothe and uplift the moods of those suffering from Alzheimer’s and memory impairment. In his 2007 book “Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain,” the famed neurologist and author Oliver Sacks wrote, “People with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias can respond to music when nothing else reaches them. Alzheimer’s can totally destroy the ability to remember family members or events from one’s own life—but musical memory somehow survives the ravages of disease, and even in people with advanced dementia, music can often reawaken personal memories and associations that are otherwise lost.”



The Benefits of Music

Music and Memory is a nonprofit group that’s promoting music therapy. They’ve undertaken the “iPod Project” in an effort to get music to seniors with dementia who live in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. In fact, they’re accepting donations of used MP3 players. They will then load these MP3 players full of popular old-time music and bring them to residents with Alzheimer’s and dementia at senior communities. A clip from their recent documentary about the project shows how successful it can be. They play music for a man with advanced dementia who is usually non-communicative and low-functioning. He is clearly moved by the music, so much so that he becomes highly animated and speaks almost eloquently about how the music makes him feel.

Senior communities are also using music as part of their activities and therapy programs. Debra Christnacht, Activity Director at People's Retirement Community in Tacoma, says that music is a key element of the activities program at her community. She not only provides listening opportunities by playing recordings and arranging live performances, but also encourages residents to participate and make music themselves: "For years we have heard about the benefits of music so I did not waste any time building our activity department around music." Christnacht says she incorporated music into many activities at the community, including the fitness program: "Singing folk tunes and patriotic songs while we workout helps with their breathing and makes the exercise class go quickly and more enjoyable for the residents."

Those of us who have loved ones with Alzheimer's or dementia can start music therapy projects of our own. Create a playlist on your computer or iPad using a music streaming service like Spotify and Pandora or consider buying your loved one a simple MP3 player like an iPod Shuffle. Look for clues in their facial gestures and body language to gauge the effect the song is having on their mood. Music can be stimulating or soothing. It can conjure a range of emotions from elation and joy to melancholy, irritation and relief. Music can turn a bad mood around, trigger lost memories, connect people to each other and ground them to the present moment.

Tips for Finding the Best Music

1. Mood Enhancing Music: Personally Meaningful Songs and Familiar Old Favorites

Listening to old favorites can enhance mood and make potentially troublesome daily living activities such as bathing or dressing go more smoothly for all involved. Kim Warchol, a licensed occupational therapist says that the music should be something familiar to your loved one, "Music can be used in so many ways and for so many purposes in Dementia Therapy. Get creative and get personal. Find the specific songs that were special to your relative and awaken their interest and attention." Play songs that have some importance to your loved one. This could range from a favorite hymn to "All Shook Up" by Elvis Presley. For ideas about what songs to include, rely on your own recollection of your loved one's tastes in

addition to asking your loved one about his or her favorite songs. Older family members may also be able to recall tunes that were special to your loved one in their youth.

2. Stimulating Music: Pop Songs From Their Salad Days

Stimulating big band, swing and salsa music often inspires dance and movement in dementia sufferers, giving them much needed physical exercise. Ann Napoletan, a writer for the [Caregivers.com blog](#) whose mother suffered from Alzheimer's disease says, "My mom enjoyed just about any music," adding that her mother's housemates "loved the oldies station – Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin. There's lots of singing along." Look at the top pop songs from the years when your loved one was a young adult. If your loved one was born in 1930, look at the music charts for the late 1940's and the 1950's. [Wikipedia](#) maintains a list of top American pop songs from 1940 onward.

3. Soothing Music for Agitation Management

Soft classical music, lullabies or non-rhythmic instrumental background music can reduce agitation and anxiety during periods of sundowning. Music therapists also suggest redirecting agitated patients to participate in a rhythmic activity such as singing, tapping or shaking percussion instruments, drumming or clapping.

4. Connecting and Comforting Music: Sing-Along Classics

To create a sense of comfort and safety as well as engagement, look for classic American folk songs with easy to remember lyrics that most of us learned as children, think "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain" and "I've Been Working on the Railroad." Certified musical therapist, Rachel Rambach, wrote [12 Songs Every Music Therapist Should Know](#). Some of the songs she's found most successful in her work include "Over the Rainbow" and "You Are My Sunshine," even "American Pie" by Don McLean. She adds that "Amazing Grace" has been a favorite song of elderly patients she's worked with.

Sample Song Playlist: Music for Dementia

Dementia patients vary in their response to music depending on which stage of the disease they're experiencing, but it can also change from day to day. What music should you play for your loved one? Bottom line – whatever works.

- "You Are My Sunshine"
- "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain"
- "This Land is Your Land"
- "Amazing Grace"
- "Over the Rainbow" – Judy Garland
- "Pennies from Heaven" – Bing Crosby
- "Moonlight Serenade" – Glen Miller
- "A-Tisket A-Tasket" – Ella Fitzgerald
- "Moon Glow" – Benny Goodman
- "Nature Boy" – Nat King Cole
- "Memories are Made of This" – Dean Martin
- "Wheel of Fortune" – Kay Starr
- "Five Minutes More" – Frank Sinatra
- "Look for the Silver Lining" – Chet Baker
- The Goldberg Variations – J.S. Bach

Are you a caregiver or long-term care professional? How have you used music for dementia patients? We welcome your comments below.

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