



## TAP INTO MUSIC TO REMINISCE AND ENGAGE: **MUSIC** as Therapy for **OLDER ADULTS**

BY CHRISTY FEUERSTHALER, CDP

For people with Alzheimer’s or dementia, music therapy is a powerful tool because a person’s rhythmic response is tied to the motor center of the brain that requires little or no cognition or mental processing. Human response to music, particularly drumming or singing, is essentially primitive. People with Alzheimer’s or dementia who engage in music therapy often respond positively, even in the late stages of disease.

Having taught and played music most of my life, it’s been a joy bringing music’s therapeutic benefits to seniors and caregivers.

I’ve heard nothing but appreciation from participants in our local Lyrics & Laughter community program, an offshoot of a program from the United Kingdom called Singing for the Brain. Lyrics & Laughter is a 45- to 60-minute weekly music program

for people with dementia and their caregivers that goes beyond passive listening by incorporating singing, instruments, and action. We gather in a circle, and that cue helps focus our participants. We then begin a session of warm-ups; hello songs; rounds; rhythms; and thematic tunes on familiar topics, like the Old West, patriotism, and Irish folk tunes. Caregivers enjoy sharing in the songs too.

An iPod listening program is another great idea for seniors whose families can help develop playlists of favorite songs. The personalized collection helps those in need of sensory stimulation, and earphone splitters can allow a senior and family member to experience music together. I’ve seen people hold hands, dance, smile, and sing or simply get a sparkle in their eyes when the music starts.

Songs from a person’s young adult years, from about age 18 to 25, are the most likely to elicit dancing, toe tapping, happy facial expressions, and other forms of engagement. People with late-stage dementia especially respond to folk songs when sung in the language in which they were learned. Don’t worry if you don’t have time to create a full playlist; each time you visit, you can pull up a special song to share together. I was once sitting with an otherwise nonverbal resident who began speaking to me once she heard her songs, even

complimenting me on my blouse. Music can help elicit speech in people with advanced dementia, even if only for a short time.

Facilitated drum circles brighten moods, encourage social interaction, and allow the release of pent-up emotions. People with Alzheimer’s or dementia who typically sit with their heads down may perk up and move their eyes around when group drumming starts. Drum circles are a very good fit for those who can tolerate the loud drumming because it taps into their rhythmic instinct. It’s also an affordable participatory program because drums can be handmade with simple wooden frames and duct tape, and sticks can be used for mallets.

Everyone deserves music in their lives, and for those with Alzheimer’s or dementia, it can be a portal to past feelings of happiness and contentment, building connections with people

in their current social circle. It might even help them express with words and smiles, which puts a song in anyone’s heart.

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*Photographs provided by Valley VNA Senior Care.*



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