

The Power of Musical Memories for People with Dementia

No matter our age, for most of us music plays a significant role in our lives. Just hearing a song we associate with a particular time, person or event can bring back a flood of powerful memories. We all often find ourselves singing along to long-forgotten lyrics. The good news is that this is also true for people with dementia.

While nursing homes have long recognized the value of music for entertaining residents, a major shift in the use of music has occurred over the last few years which means that even more people can enjoy and connect with music, whether they are at home or in a nursing home. This is something that Dan Cohen, a Long Island social worker, learned first-hand a decade ago when he set out to create personalized iPod playlists for residents of a local nursing facility. When this proved successful, bringing pleasure and reducing distress, changing behavior, improving mood and social interaction, he set out to formalize the program. From these humble beginnings, the non-profit MUSIC & MEMORYsm, Inc. now serves over 3,000 nursing homes and other care organizations in the U.S., Canada, and a half-dozen other countries as far flung as Australia and South Africa. Their work was profiled in a 2012 documentary *Alive Inside: A Story of Music and Memory*, which included a short video clip of Henry, a 94-year old with Alzheimer's Disease who was uncommunicative but literally came to life on hearing a favorite gospel song on his headphones. The clip

went viral on YouTube, accumulating over 14 million views (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FWn4JB2YLU).

Henry was a patient at Cobble Hill Health Center in Brooklyn, NY, which has worked with Music & Memory over the last eight years, bringing customized music playlists to residents on personal iPods. According to Louise Dueno, Director of Therapeutic Recreation, "We see incredible changes in patients who were barely responsive, and I feel this is one of our greatest successes." Cobble Hill was one of the first organizations to be certified by MUSIC & MEMORYsm, and they have now incorporated the program into annual mandatory in-service training offered to all staff members.

In addition to the spreading success of this program in nursing homes, word is getting out to people still living at home: donations to the Alzheimer Society in Toronto, Canada have made it possible for anyone living in Toronto with a diagnosis of dementia (whether living at home or in a care facility) to have an iPod and a personalized playlist.

Many studies have shown that music can activate regions of the brain affecting both movement and emotions. As Dr. Ravindra Amin, Chief of Psychiatry at New York City Health + Hospitals/Coler and Carter, explains it: "Part of the brain that helps us comprehend the emotional aspect of music is located deeper in the brain and therefore less likely



to be affected in the early course of Alzheimer's disease. This explains why emotionally important music improves quality of life for those suffering from Alzheimer's disease and helps them meaningfully connect with those around them." Thus, even when persons with dementia have lost the ability to communicate verbally, they can still respond to familiar music, often in dramatic fashion.

The Process

Setting up a customized iPod program is relatively simple. It can be done on an individual basis by caregivers and/or family at home, or implemented in a nursing home or other care setting. Needed are a laptop computer, iPods, and lightweight, adjustable, over-the-ear headphones (people are often more comfortable with headphones than with earbuds). In the nursing home, setting up an iTunes account on a computer provides the master library for all music selected (as long as the music purchased from iTunes is on iPods used within the home, one song can be placed on many different iPods). Music & Memory offers a certification program to



www.musicandmemory.org

The Music & Memory website shares stories and videos about the impact of personalized music on nursing home residents and staff (as well as people receiving care at home), and details the benefits and process for becoming a Certified Music & Memory facility. A complete listing of all organizations currently Certified is also available (there are now more than 3,000 homes across the United States and Canada, and worldwide).



Palliative Care for People with Dementia: Why Comfort Matters in Long-Term Care

This Publication is available for download here:

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nursing homes and other organizations, providing staff education and training, ongoing coaching and problem-solving, and a wide variety of musical selections; information is available on their website (www.musicandmemory.org).

It is very important to emphasize that what makes this work so well for so many people is that the music is personal to each person, specific songs and specific artists. While people may grow up in the same era, that does not necessarily mean they like the same kinds of music or the same artists.

An iPod shuffle can hold about 300 songs; the goal should be to start with at least 100 selections and 10 to 15 artists. If the person is still able to understand and communicate, you can interview him or her to hone in on genres, time periods and artists; if not, family and friends may prove helpful in providing suggestions. One point to keep in mind is that a certain amount of variety is recommended as the person's preferences may be affected by the time of day or how they feel. The playlist should also be evaluated periodically and altered if necessary. The Genius feature in iTunes can be helpful in identifying similar music.

The Benefits

As noted, personalized music can help people with dementia reconnect with the world, increasing socializing and physical activity as well as improving mood, and decreasing use of antipsychotic medications. As Music & Memory states, the use of music can be a powerful tool for culture change, affecting both residents and staff in positive, energizing ways by creating a more peaceful, engaging social environment.

Further, the new CMS Dementia Survey process is very much concerned with the individualized needs of residents, and this intervention is a perfect example of truly personalized care.

The Results

A survey of nursing home professionals working in homes that have been certified by MUSIC & MEMORYSM found that 100 percent believed that personalized music brought greater pleasure to residents all or most of the time and that they would recommend the program to other facilities. Three-fourths of staff agreed that personalized music enabled better care all or most of the time, while nearly 100 percent said it might help reduce the use of anti-psychotics; it was also found substantially effective for residents with depression, anxiety or verbal and/or physical aggressiveness.

As someone's dementia progresses, the role of music can be instrumental in helping maintain individuality and identity when other connections may be fading or gone. According to Dr. Amin, "Having had the privilege of practicing psychiatry in the long-term care setting, it is deeply awe inspiring and life reaffirming to see what personalized music, as practiced in Music & Memory, does to the persons with Alzheimer's disease and other types of cognitive disorders by improving an overall sense of wellbeing and reducing a spectrum of anguished behaviors."

Dan Cohen perhaps sums it up best: "When listening to our most favorite music, regardless of whether we have dementia or not, we're engaged – our mood improves. When we're in a better mood, we're more likely to be more active and socialize with others. There is no downside. When people 'light up,' they are more likely to respond even better to all other activities available to them. Enjoying time with others to the best of our ability is making the best of life."

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