

The Medicinal Power of Music in *Memory Care*

Edgewood Education - Memory Care

Living with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia is never easy – it's life changing for the individual affected as well as his or her family and friends. It's been described as one of the scariest feelings of loss that a person and their caregivers can experience.

As the disease progresses, residents lose their short term memory, as well as the ability to cognitively and physically care for themselves. However, for the most part, their long term memories of the life they lived and loved are still there.

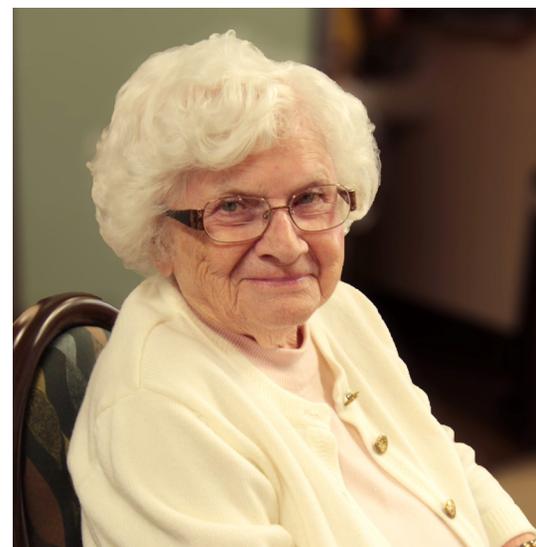
Through music therapy, senior care professionals can tap into those deep memories not yet lost to Alzheimer's or dementia. Familiar music can trigger memories and emotions, allowing them a chance to feel engaged and to converse, socialize and stay present - even if only for a few moments, an hour or sometimes even a day.

For residents with Alzheimer's disease, the key to comfort may be musical. While drug companies continue to test for treatments that slow this disease's progression, other researchers are looking beyond the lab for help.

One recent study out of George Mason University followed 45 adults struggling with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Researchers encouraged frequent singing of popular, familiar songs. Over a four-month period, as the group enjoyed its music, the study confirmed a sharp cognitive boost in each of the participants.

"Twenty-one drugs to treat Alzheimer's have failed in the last nine years. I believe they will eventually find the right drug. In the meantime, these non-pharmaceutical approaches are helpful," Jane Flinn, a behavioral neuroscientist and co-author of the study, told AARP.

For decades, music therapists have been coaxing Alzheimer's patients out of their shells with tunes that remind them of their earlier days. For many, music has been grounding, giving them an experience that is familiar and helps them feel safe, calm and comforted. By regularly exposing their patients to song, music therapists find the adults in their care are more engaged, socialize with greater ease and generally



experience better moods. In extreme cases, therapists have reported music enlivening their patients, even inspiring long nonverbal adults to begin speaking again.

“Music has reduced the need for antipsychotic drugs for treatment of Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia.”

Why Music Matters

One reason researchers believe songs have been key to treatment is that musical aptitude is one of a resident’s longest-lasting abilities. In a statement to The Independent, the United Kingdom’s Alzheimer’s Society said it encourages singing sessions for those battling the disease. “Even when many memories are hard to retrieve, music can sometimes still be recalled, if only for a short while,” said a spokesperson for the organization. “The sessions help people with dementia communicate, improving their mood and leaving them feeling good about themselves.”

A second theory for why music matters? Songs stir emotions, moving even late-stage Alzheimer’s residents to feel something. Neurologist and bestselling author Oliver Sacks wrote in “Musicophilia” that, “Music evokes emotion, and emotion can bring with it memory. It brings back the feeling of life when nothing else can.” Sacks recommends caregivers play and sing familiar tunes while going about routines with those in their care. Tying a song to an activity may help residents remember their routines and slowly boost cognition.

Cognitive response aside, singing sessions can simply help improve a resident’s mood. The results of music therapy are so outstanding that the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America even states that, “When used appropriately, music can shift mood, manage stress-induced agitation, stimulate positive interactions, facilitate cognitive function and coordinate motor movements.”

Currently, Alzheimer’s disease affects more than 5 million adults in the United States - and what’s worse, there’s no cure. This disease chips away at the quality of life for both resident and caregiver. But music and song now offer great hope for disease management. Researchers, physicians and medical organizations around the world are embracing the healing power of music. If you have a loved one struggling with Alzheimer’s or dementia, talk to his or her health care provider about music therapy to reduce stress, offer comfort and improve mental acuity.

“This has allowed us to use fewer medications for anxiety as the music calms them. For some residents, we put the headphones on and when they hear the music they will jump up and start dancing or swaying with a smile on their face. It is truly heartwarming!”

- Shana Klinge, Executive Director
Edgewood Vista in Missoula, MT

Consider joining an Alzheimer’s Support Group. Contact your local Edgewood community for more information.

