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Conduct music activities to significantly benefit your elders with dementia

Activities involving music are research –proven to show substantial benefit to your elders with Alzheimer's. In fact, in some cases, the results with music can sometimes be greater than those obtained with drugs.

These benefits include significant improvements in problem behaviors, depression, socialization and cognition.

Music as therapy works!

Barbara Jacobs, MS, a leading music therapist, and who produces sing-along DVDs for use with Alzheimer's elders, says this:

"Throughout my twelve-year career as a therapeutic musician in nursing homes, I have witnessed the beneficial power of music for those with Alzheimer's disease.

"People in my classes who are virtually speechless and confused begin to sing, hum and sometimes dance once they are stimulated by music.

"The benefits of music and singing, such as mood improvement and calmer behavior, often persist for hours after the music has stopped."

"Joining your loved one in a musical activity can bring you both a sense of joy and well-being.

Benefits those with Alzheimer's

Jacobs points out that much evidence-based research confirms the significant benefits of music to elders with Alzheimer's.

She says, for example, that research shows that singing on a daily basis will raise the brain chemicals melatonin, epinephrine and norepinephrine in our blood levels, thus positively affecting our mental state.

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In one study, she reports that Dr. Ardash Kumar of the University of Miami's School of Medicine, found that music provided lasting benefits to elderly men with Alzheimer's disease who participated in a music therapy program through singing familiar songs 30 to 40 minutes a day, five days a week for a month.

Music's behavioral benefits continued for these men for weeks after their participation in this music program had ended.

Rewarding experience

Jacobs describes one rewarding incident she had with an Alzheimer's elder:

"I had a thrilling interaction with Lou, a resident with moderate Alzheimer's including aphasia (loss of speech).

"I was playing a Judy Garland album, intending to reminisce with the residents before I played their favorite "oldies" on the piano for our sing-along. I randomly went into the audience and chose Lou to dance with me while Judy Garland was singing "Somewhere, Over the Rainbow."

"He joined me willingly, and before long held me in an appropriate dance position; stared into my eyes and clearly said the last few words of the song, "Why, Oh Why, Can't I?"

"I was thrilled, but somewhat baffled when I saw staff running to get their cameras, because I knew nothing about him.

"The staff later told me that this was the first time they had seen Lou speak and show any semblance of his former self.

"Apparently, he had been a great dancer and music lover in his pre-Alzheimer's disease life."

Two-part sessions

Jacobs says her "formula for success" is a two-art music session.

"In the first part I play CDs of favorite recording artists such as Judy Garland and Nat King Cole.

"The second part consists of an old fashioned sing-along in which I accompany the residents on the piano.

"Everyone is given large-print lyrics of each song so they can fully participate – and they do!"

She adds: "I have always known that music can open hearts.

"Through my teaching experience, reinforced by recent research, I have seen how it can also open minds."

You can check out Jacobs' music videos for Alzheimer's elders at her website:

www.FrontRowSeatVideos.com

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Reduces agitation and depression

Many other studies have shown similar beneficial results.

In one study, a 2-week program of individual and small group music activities significantly reduced agitation and depression in nursing home elders with advanced dementia.

In this study, a team of researchers, led by Dr. Mary Mittelman, developed the program specifically for residents with moderate to severe dementia and symptoms of agitation, wandering and/or depression.

The study involved 84 of these residents, who participated in daily music activities delivered by a total of 36 CNAs, led by two music therapists.

After two weeks, the residents' agitation and depression had dropped by about one-third, as measured with the Cohen-Mansfield Agitation Inventory and the Dementia Mood Picture Test, respectively.

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More than entertainment

Elders with advanced dementia lose the ability to speak, but many can still sing, recognize familiar tunes, and move in time with music.

This has led researchers to speculate that music is much more for these elders than mere entertainment.

It is a medium through which they can continue to communicate with others, participate in activities, and maintain relationships.

And when elders with dementia can do this, they are less likely to become agitated or depressed, which, in turn, reduces caregiver burden and makes resident-family interactions more pleasant.

Visiting is "no longer a chore"

Mittelman said: "Family caregivers say they now look forward to visits since their loved ones are often more talkative and sociable following music therapy."

She recalled one resident's son, in particular, who said that participation in the music program has made his mother happier, more communicative, and keen to share memories of her past.

This relative said "visiting his mom is no longer a chore, but a pleasure."

Sessions and activities

Music therapist Kendra Ray, the director of the research project, told *Current Activities* about the program's structure.

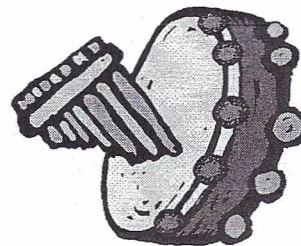
"The sessions lasted from 15 to 45 minutes, depending on the type of intervention and the elders' tolerance and attention span," she said.

"The interventions consisted of one-to-one and small group activities.

"We used ocean drums, table drums, rain sticks, maracas, tambourines, hand bells, glockenspiels, a piano, guitars, and flutes."

The activities included:

- sing-a-longs,
- moving to the rhythm of the music,
- music listening,
- instrument playing,
- and music-based range of motion exercises. (These are recommended in old age to improve joint and muscle function, and prevent or alleviate pain and stiffness due to arthritis. The MJHS program may thus have an additional potential benefit for participant elders.)



With daily activities

Not only that, an innovative feature of the program is that music is also used outside the sessions, along with routine daily activities.

For example, some CNAs sang, or played soft music, during bathing or wound care, to facilitate relaxation.

Others sang to the resident to motivate them to get out of bed in the morning, while transferring them with wheelchairs, or when walking together to the dining room.

(Music, cont'd next page)

Tips for success

"Use music that is the resident's preference," Ray said. "A therapeutic choice would be to select music that was popular during the participants' 20s and 30s, taking in account their culture.

"For example, we had residents from a variety of countries, including Jamaica, Russia, Poland, and the US.

"It's best to ensure you can accommodate the musical preferences of your participants with regard to their country of origin."

If possible, the use of qualified music therapists to develop the activities for sessions is recommended. For the study, the researchers used two nationally board certified music therapists: a pianist and a trombonist/guitarist.

Group sessions shouldn't involve more than four to six residents. Both individual and group sessions should be scheduled for the time of the day in which agitation or depressed mood usually occur.

Many proven benefits

The journal *Aging and Mental Health* reports that, in a randomized controlled study (the 'gold standard' for assessing the effectiveness of any intervention), music activities, delivered 30 minutes per day, three times weekly for four weeks, reduce apathy and delusions.

In another study, published in the journal *Current Aging Science*, 50 percent of a group of dementia elders who participated in music activities, twice a week for 15 weeks, had improved heart function.

None of another group of elders, who didn't attend the program, showed such improvement.

Korean researchers found that listening to favorite music from a CD player for half an hour reduces pain by 50 percent in Alzheimer's elders, and the effect lasts for 30 minutes after the music stops.

In the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, researchers of Taipei University, Taiwan, report that twelve 30-minute music sessions, held twice weekly for six weeks, result in calmer and less physically and/or verbally aggressive dementia elders, up to one month after the end of the last session.

According to a study in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, singing once a week to a dementia elder, during the provision of morning care, can reduce combative behaviors, such as hitting and throwing objects.

Other research has shown that Alzheimer's elders are better able to remember words and sentences when these are sung instead of spoken.

Safe, pleasant and inexpensive

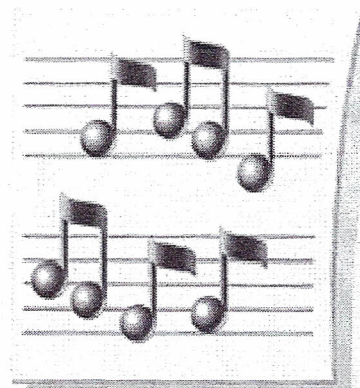
But it's not just for its many benefits that researchers and dementia care experts recommended music for the treatment of symptoms, such as depressed mood, agitation and aggressiveness.

As Mittelman's pointed out, "pharmaceutical interventions for these symptoms cause significant side effects."

For example, sedatives and antidepressants have been associated with a five-fold increased risk of falls, and a three-fold increased risk of stroke.

Music, on the other hand, is safe, pleasant and inexpensive.

Nursing home caregivers should use music regularly, to improve the quality of life of residents with dementia and make their job less stressful and more enjoyable.



The Silver Song Club

In other research, an activities program that combines singing with movement improves mental, social and physical functioning, researchers say.

The program is called Silver Song Club and consists of 90-minute monthly activities events during which small groups of elders sing together, while moving their arms, or playing small percussions, to the rhythm of the music.

Dr. Ann Skingley, and colleagues, from the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health of Christ Church University, in the UK, developed the program.

They also tested its effects on elders using data from 17 regular participants in the Silver Song Club.

The results, published in the *British Journal of Community Nursing*, show that, as a result of the mental effort involved in remembering the songs' words, performing movements in time to the music, and playing the instruments, participants in the program have enhanced memory and concentration skills.

"Your spirits are lightened... you just feel better... after a session like that, you just go off singing!"

Improved breathing

Not only that. The program – successfully implemented in more than 40 centers for older people across England – also appears to have a beneficial impact on physical health.

“The most frequently mentioned benefit, in this regard, is improved breathing,” Skingley says. And it occurs right where it is most needed, like elders with asthma and emphysema.

Improves social interaction

Another key finding of the study is that the Silver Song Club enhances social interaction.

That’s because alongside the singing there’s the pleasant chatting, the laughter and the camaraderie.

In fact, the program seems to give participants a huge sense of enjoyment – something to really look forward to.

One of them commented: “You just feel brighter for it. Your spirits are lightened... you just feel better... after a session like that, you just go off singing!”

According to Skingley, partly, this happens because old songs often bring back happy memories of the past, which greatly contributes to the elders’ emotional wellbeing.

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Silver Song activity example that you can do

Here is an example of Silver Song Club activity, as developed by Skingley and colleagues, and currently used at various centers for elders across England.

What you need

- Enough chairs for all participants, arranged in a semicircle.
- Small percussions, (e.g., wooden sticks, tambourines, maracas) and hand chimes.
- Song lyrics. Think of something your elders are familiar with, like popular songs from their youth. The choice, of course, also depends on whether you want to give the activity a theme. Let’s assume, for instance, that you want to celebrate the coming Valentine’s Day. Then, choose old love songs, like *My Funny Valentine*, *Let’s Fall in Love*, *Everybody Loves Somebody*, *Someday Sweetheart*, *You’ll Always Be the One I Love.....* and *How I Miss You Tonight*

Group size, and duration

Each Silver Song Club session is for 15 to 30 elders, who meet for one and a half hour, including a 30-minute break, to allow for some rest.

Note: Elders who can’t sing can, and should, participate in the club. They will enjoy listening to the others singing, and will gain enormous benefit from the fun, the company, and all that goes with it.

However, you should also consider that not everyone enjoys singing. For this reason, Skingley recommends to find out about the musical preferences and interests of your elders, before the activity.

Sing together

When it’s time for the activity to start, invite everyone to sit in the chairs, and distribute lyrics and instruments to those who wish to use them.

Next, all you have to do is begin singing one of the songs you have chosen for the day. Encourage your elders to join you, and to play their instruments, or move, in time to the music. Depending on the song, they will clap their hands, snap their fingers, wave their arms above their head, or perform any other movement that makes them feel good.

Find a cheerful audience!

Of course, a lively, happy crowd will add greatly to the joy of the event. So, welcome volunteers keen to help, listen and cheer. And invite relatives, especially young children and grandchildren, to heighten the fun and delight of your elders!

Music can provide you with a very effective method of involving friends, relatives, children and volunteers in your activities.