

# The use of music engagement / personalised playlists in dementia care



Using music which is familiar and preferred by the person living with dementia can provide an opportunity to engage in an activity that may stimulate emotions and movement (dance), address social and spiritual needs and help connect the care partner to the person.

## Why use music?

- Music can provide stimulating and emotional experiences and help people tap into deep memories which may be linked to significant life events, for example, a wedding, birth of children and memories from childhood.
- It may move people emotionally without depending on memory and help with mood elevation and the reduction of anxiety, pain and depression.
- This can be useful if utilized prior to an event which can be distressing for the person, for example engaging in personal care. It may also encourage people to relax before retiring before bed, or help them to relax during the day.
- Music can stimulate a physical response which can present as dancing, clapping, tapping thus encouraging gentle exercise and promoting physical well-being.
- Listening to music with another person can help to create connections, encourage conversation and form relationships.
- Music may assist a person with dementia to maintain their identity and provide them with another form of expression (singing, humming, whistling) or stimulate speech itself.



## Music has often been used as an alternative to medication to reduce the impact of behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia, and such unmet needs as:

- Agitation
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Cultural and Spiritual Needs
- Lack of Meaningful Stimulation / Occupation
- Loneliness / Social Isolation
- Reduced Sleep and Appetite

## Who is likely to benefit?

Depending on their level of interest, the following people are most likely to benefit from music engagement –

- People who have had an historical interest in music and respond well to it when played now
- People who have played a musical instrument in the past (or still do)
- People for whom music has played an important role in their cultural and/or spiritual expression
- Research shows that music can be effective in supporting people at all stages of dementia, but enjoyment of music can diminish over time for some people. As dementia advances music may need to be altered by a Registered Music Therapist to extend the enjoyment of it.

## Introducing the person to music engagement

It's important that carers and family members are informed of the purpose and value of using music engagement. They may also be the best source of knowledge of what the person used to enjoy listening to and, very importantly, what music they have **not** enjoyed listening to.

### Some suggested approaches could include:

- If using headphones, ensure that the person wearing them is able to wear them comfortably and is happy for these to be on their head, in their ear, etc. for a period of time.
- When playing music, be mindful of the volume level – which may be too soft or too loud and adjust accordingly if the person expresses it so. If the person is unable to communicate this directly with speech, look for signs that they are uncomfortable with the volume level.
- You may wish to trial the volume of the headphones first. If done in front of the person, this can lead you to visually inviting the person to listen to them.
- To begin with, music engagement can be used for a definitive period of time, for example five – ten minutes, depending on the person's attention and engagement with it.
- When listening to the music, be sure to monitor the person's engagement; are they nodding, tapping, singing along? Or do they appear disengaged and uninterested?
- If the person removes the headphones themselves or becomes uncomfortable, stop the activity and try again at another time.
- Those facilitating the activity are encouraged to have some knowledge of the music that is being played so as to better gauge the person's response if they don't like a particular song or would prefer more of the same.

## Special considerations and precautions

- It's important not to impose this activity on people who haven't shown any interest in music as not everyone will respond to it. This may depend of the person's background, culture or experiences of listening to music.
- If someone has a diagnosis of depression, or any negative experiences of listening to music (e.g. funeral songs, war songs or any music that reminds people of sad times in their life), it is important to establish this and ensure they are not exposed to this type of music. Music which creates an emotional expression may still be appropriate, but support for the person in the event of an adverse reaction, should be given careful consideration.
- Try to avoid having a conversation with the person when they are wearing the headphones. Prior to removing them, ensure that the person can see you first to help them prepare. Place your hands on the headphones first before slowly removing them.
- As a person's dementia progresses, their engagement or interest in music may also change. They may come to a stage in which listening to music may not have any therapeutic effect.

---

## Infection control and risk management

Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for use, care and cleaning of the headphones, particularly if they are being used by multiple people during the trial or if the person with dementia wishes to share what they are listening to.



### Useful resource

Music Remembers Me – Kirsty Beilharz

Phone: [07787 168 168](tel:07787168168)

Email: [dsuk@hammondcare.com](mailto:dsuk@hammondcare.com)

Online: [dementiasupportuk.org](http://dementiasupportuk.org)