



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Music and dementia



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Music has many benefits for people with dementia. Even in the later stages, when people may lose the ability to communicate in other ways, they can often sing, hum or tap along with the music they hear.

Research has shown that music can:

- improve attention, cognition (thinking), memory, speech and communication
- reduce heart rate and blood pressure
- trigger the release of hormones called endorphins, which have pain-killing properties and can boost mood
- reduce agitation, anxiety and depression in some people.

Music can help people with dementia express feelings and connect with memories. It can also help them communicate and engage with others, and form and maintain relationships.

Music can be used in a range of ways – individually, in a group, or in a care setting like a day centre or care home – such as:

- listening and/or singing along to favourite pieces of music
- listening to music played through headphones
- listening to the radio (particularly stations playing music from the person's past – see Sources of support on p11)
- watching a musical (live or on TV) or a film with a musical score
- singing in a group or choir
- playing instruments
- listening to a live performance
- dancing



It is important that these activities are tailored to the person's individual needs and preferences. They can be used as part of a care plan – for example, if someone is calmed by particular pieces of music, their care plan may suggest playing these if they are feeling anxious or agitated.

A person's musical preferences can also be included in their 'life story' – a record of their past and present life that helps give family, friends, carers and hospital staff a better understanding of them as an individual. Please see Sources of support on p10 for information on life stories.

How music can help a person with dementia

Listening to or participating in making music can:

- help a person with dementia express feelings and ideas
- encourage physical exercise, dance or movement
- provide interaction, reduce loneliness and promote participation in groups
- reduce distress – it may be particularly helpful while giving personal care
- help the person reminisce and talk about their life



Choosing music with or for a person with dementia

Ask the person with dementia and their family and friends what music they enjoy listening to.

If you are unable to find out about their likes and dislikes, experiment with popular music from their cultural background and era. You could use their age as a guide to the type of music they may like.

However, do not assume that the person will only enjoy music from their early life – music can cross generations, so they may like songs that remind them of their children’s younger years, or music that they hear on the radio now.

Watch how the person reacts to the music you choose. If they express a dislike for the music or seem uncomfortable or distressed, try something different. They may simply not like that type or piece of music; they may find it too loud or overstimulating; or it might remind them of unhappy times in their life.

If the person responds positively, use the music to engage with them. If they sing, tap their fingers or feet or hum, try joining in.

You could also:

- Create playlists of favourite music using services like Spotify or Amazon Music
- These can be played through a device such as a smart speaker, mobile phone or tablet so the person can select and play music independently
- Keep a selection of CDs near a CD player so the person can choose music and put it on. Keep a simple set of instructions next to the CD player or radio in case they need a reminder of how to do it
- Music and radio can also often be played via a smart TV

- Look for dementia-inclusive performances of musicals, concerts, films or opera taking place in local venues

Making music

The ability to make music – whether by singing or playing an instrument – may continue even when other abilities are lost. If the person with dementia has a musical background, encouraging them to continue with this could boost their self-esteem and help them focus on what they can do, rather than what they cannot.

If the person plays an instrument, keep it to hand with sheet music nearby if they can read it – for example, keep the piano open so they can see the keys or leave a guitar in their living room. Encourage them to play if they show an interest.

You could also look into music groups that they can participate in, such as community or church choirs; orchestras, bands or ensembles; and singing groups developed especially for people with dementia.

If they do not play an instrument or are no longer able to, you could provide simple percussion instruments such as a tambourine or maracas to help them engage with the music and bring a sense of joy.

Music and reminiscence

Music can trigger memories and emotions in a person with dementia. This provides an opportunity to talk and reminisce – for example, you could ask the person why they like a piece of music, what it makes them think and feel, and whether it evokes special memories.

Using pictures or photos alongside music can provide another way to reminisce and share memories.

Music and exercise

Dancing or moving to music can improve physical and mental health, so if the person with dementia is able to, encourage them to get up and move. If they are physically fit, you could look for dance-based exercise groups for them to join, such as aerobics or Zumba, or find home workouts online or on DVD that are set to music.

If they like to run or walk, playing music through earphones can be a good way to keep them motivated. If they are vulnerable when going out alone, you could go with them or arrange an exercise buddy for their walks or runs.





If they are less mobile, simply sitting and moving to music – for example by waving their arms, clapping or tapping their feet – can help them feel more engaged.

Tips

- Start by playing music quietly to see how the person responds. Some people find loud or fast music overwhelming
- Music may induce negative emotions and memories, so be prepared to turn it off if the person becomes distressed. However, do not be afraid if they express sadness – this may be a normal reaction to a memory or an association with the music. Just sitting with them and offering comfort may be the best response

- Be aware that background music can be distracting. The person may find it hard to process the different sounds that they are hearing, leading to distress. It can also get in the way of concentration, communication and conversation
- Consider the person's cultural and religious background. If English is not their first language, you could look for music in their own language. They might enjoy hymns, carols or other religious music

Music therapy

Music can be a form of therapy for people with dementia. It may form a part of cognitive stimulation therapy (CST) – a short-term programme of themed group activities for people with early- to mid-stage dementia, which aims to stimulate the brain and provide opportunities to socialise. It can also be used in individual cognitive stimulation therapy (iCST), which is similar to CST but delivered one-to-one.

Music therapy involves activities such as singing, listening to music, playing musical instruments and improvising. It can encourage reminiscence, reduce anxiety and depression, encourage people to interact and reduce agitation. It is sometimes used to improve quality of life for people with dementia who cannot take medication.

Music therapy may be available on the NHS – often through a memory clinic – or arranged privately. For more information on organisations that offer music therapy, please see Sources of support on p11.

Sources of support

If you are living with dementia or caring for someone with the condition, register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ at [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse, call our free Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

Dementia UK resources

Tips for better communication

[▶ dementiauk.org/better-communication](https://dementiauk.org/better-communication)

Anxiety, depression and dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression](https://dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression)

Creating a life story

[▶ dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story](https://dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story)

Difficulty with sounds

[▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-and-difficulty-with-sounds](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-and-difficulty-with-sounds)

Other resources

British Association of Music Therapists

➤ bamt.org

BBC Music Memories – playlists from the decades

➤ musicmemories.bbcrewind.co.uk

Memory Radio

➤ musicmemories.bbcrewind.co.uk/radioRecords

Live Music Now

➤ livemusicnow.org.uk/working-with-older-people

Music for Dementia Radio(m4d Radio)

➤ m4dradio.com

Music Mirrors

➤ musicmirrors.co.uk

Playlist for Life

➤ playlistforlife.org.uk

Singing for the Brain

➤ alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/your-support-services/singing-for-the-brain

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse
about any aspect of dementia:

Contact our Helpline:

0800 888 6678 or [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual appointment:

[▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us
support more families:

- Call 0300 365 5500
- Visit [▶ dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)
- Scan the QR code

Thank you.



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