

USING MUSIC TO REACH PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

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Writing about people with Alzheimer's disease, Dr. Oliver Sacks states in his best-selling book, *Musicophilia*, "Music is no luxury to them but a necessity, and can have power beyond anything to restore them to themselves and to others at least for a while." In this eye-opening book, he devotes an entire chapter to "Music and Identity: Dementia and Music Therapy."

Familiar music is the key to eliciting emotions and unlocking words long forgotten. Researchers have discovered that the teen years, particularly about the age of 14, are when musical preferences and memories are formed. Daniel Levitin in his book, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, states, "We tend to remember things that have an emotional component because our amygdala and neurotransmitters act in concert to tag as important the memories of these emotionally charged years of self-discovery." That means that people with Alzheimer's disease can often sing the songs they heard during their teen years, even when they can no longer remember the names of their children. This fact is also well documented in people with advanced dementia.

As a Music Therapist in nursing homes for the past 13 years, I have first-hand experience with the therapeutic 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 the music. Plus, the benefits of music and singing, such as mood improvement and calmer behavior, often persist for hours after the music has stopped.

My formula for success, which can be replicated by family caregivers at home, is a two-part session. In the first part, I feature musical CDs of favorite, familiar recording artists such as Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. During the second part, I lead an old-fashioned sing-along while playing piano accompaniment. All of my students are given large-print lyrics of each song so they can fully participate, and they do! Here are some ideas to consider:

- ♪ Songs should be familiar such as songs from the period when the person was a teen. Artists like Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, Broadway shows such as *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma*, and works of composers like George Gershwin are but a few possibilities. A visit to your local music store or library will uncover many treasures.
- ♪ If you play an instrument, do it at a slower pace and in a lower key. Copy lyrics from the Internet and print them out in an enlarged typeface.
- ♪ There are many ready-made sing-along video and DVD resources available through senior product catalogs such as S&S Worldwide (www.ssw.com, 1-800-288-9941), Sea Bay Games (www.seabaygame.com, 1-800-568-0188), and Nasco (www.enasco.com, 1-800-558-9595). Catalogs from these companies are available at no cost.
- ♪ Based on an individual's interests, borrow a DVD from the library of an opera or familiar Broadway show or play a classical music channel on the radio or television.
- ♪ Add singing, whistling, and humming to one-to-one interactions and encourage the person to join in and sing.

Here is an experience I had in a secure Alzheimer's community which I describe to encourage you to take action so that you can improve the lives of your loved ones with music.

... During my first class, 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 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.

I had always known music could open hearts. Through my experience, reinforced by recent research, I have also seen how it opens minds.

Barbara is a Music Therapist who has produced a series of musical sing-along DVDs for Alzheimer's patients and seniors. See www.frontrowseatvideos.com or e-mail Barbara at Barbara@CustomVideoSF.com. ☺