

Around the World

Taking Non-Pharm Seriously: Spreading the Benefits of Music for People with Dementia

Dan Cohen (MSW)

Highlights:

1. Our favorite music is not lost to cognitive decline.
2. Listening to the music we love is an effective way to improve quality of life for people with dementia.
3. Favorite music often outperforms antipsychotics as a more humane and effective approach.

The global dementia healthcare system might be underutilizing a simple tool that can greatly improve the quality of life for persons with dementia—listening to favorite music.

We are all our own experts on music. Most people probably can't even recall when they started listening to music, because it is so interwoven with daily life. Globally, on average, people listen to more than two hours of music each day, 1.3 million songs in their lifetimes. We all choose what songs we listen to, when and for how long. But that changes in old age when people lose their dexterity or are unfamiliar with streaming music and related devices, they can no longer access their music.

Access is the key. Even though advancing dementia may eviscerate short-term memory, our favorite music is preserved, and we can respond just as viscerally as we did when we were young. There's nothing like watching people "light up" when they are re-connected to a favorite tune.

Indeed, approximately two-thirds of adults say that music is important to their mental health and well-being. Why, then, don't we ensure that this lifelong benefit is sustained? One 2015 US government study found that, on average, nursing home residents experienced only 11 minutes of meaningful engagement each day, 20 minutes in more upscale assisted living communities. Such lack of meaningful engagement results in social isolation and its related pervasive anxiety, depression, and loneliness. But listening to favorite music can significantly ameliorate these feelings.

Founding Music & Memory

In 2006, when I heard a journalist state that iPods were ubiquitous, that everybody has them, it just didn't sound accurate for older folks, especially persons living with dementia. I started

visiting nursing homes to see what would happen if we re-connected people with music that held meaning for them. There is no shortage of music in nursing homes and other healthcare services, but how often is it music that moves people? Or is it only perceived as background noise?

I was amazed at how well they responded. But discovering someone's favorite music and helping them to access it take time and effort. In 2010, I founded the NGO Music & Memory to train teams in more than 5,000 long-term care settings, hospitals, hospices, adult day and home care programs on how to re-connect all who might benefit to their favorite music.

As this was only a small percentage of such settings globally, to help raise awareness, I worked with filmmaker Michael Rossato-Bennett to produce a documentary, *Alive Inside*, which won global recognition at film festivals and surpassed 4,000 other Sundance Film Festival documentaries to win the Sundance Audience Award. The 78-minute film continues to be shown widely in communities, healthcare, and healthcare education (it is available for free on [YouTube](#).)

The Power of Music

Recognition of music's potential to help people with dementia, as documented in *Alive Inside* and significant research, is growing. Music can improve quality of life in many ways, including reduced falls, delirium, agitation, brain fog, stress and pain. It can improve appetite, gait, mood, physical activity, social interaction, speech and communication. It can also improve one's sense of control as well as quality and quantity of sleep. Successful approaches include not only listening, especially together with others, but also singing to oneself or with others (perhaps with a dementia choir), dancing, or playing an instrument.

The late Dr. Peter Davies, who discovered the underlying science behind the first wave of dementia medications, once told me that if he could have discovered medications that generated the same outcomes as music, such a drug would easily become a multi-billion-dollar blockbuster that every doctor would prescribe and every family would demand.

There is a massive research effort to find a cure for dementia, but it will continue to take time. While we wait for medications to substantially change the course of disease progression, let's elevate awareness of music's efficacy here and now in order to suppress negative symptoms and bring more joy to daily life.

So, why is adoption of music not happening more quickly? We have this tool that we know well, is inexpensive and easy to apply with little downside. But resistance is high, because of a bias toward medication as best treatment practice. Even for a medication with a long list of potential side effects and, limited impact, the default is to recommend it, pay for it, and try it.

Music's positive impact on reducing anxiety and depression has been extensively researched. It needs to be acknowledged, especially for those living with dementia, who face stigma, loneliness, reduced self-confidence, and poor sense of self. Friends and family are often hesitant to visit not knowing how to behave, exacerbating that sense of isolation.

The right music can help on all those fronts. It is not a cure and does not work for everyone, but if we find the right music and deliver it in the right way at the right time, it will help to improve quality of life most of the time. To that end, the Alzheimer's Society of Toronto has distributed 8,000 free MP3 players to Ontario residents with dementia. They discover the person's favorite music, load it onto the MP3 player, and teach caregivers how to use it. In the US, the North Carolina Dementia Alliance provides a similar, exemplary program for all residents of the state living with dementia.

How to Help Spread the Music

Most people with dementia live at home. Everyone who cares for a person with dementia, whether at home or at work, can help them stay connected with music by building a daily routine of enjoyable music in an appropriate form. The key is not simply to provide any music, even any music in one's favorite genre. We need to find out, record, and grow that list of the individual's musical favorites. Tips in this process include:

- Learn what artists and songs they love.
- Set up music access that will really work.
- Plan frequency of music access.
- Make sure someone is responsible for success.
- Check in to make sure all is going as planned.

Whether you are a person living with dementia or caring for a loved one with the disease, a dementia diagnostician or researcher, involved in dementia support and training, or a caregiver working in a hospital, long-term care setting, or home care, make sure to discuss ways to integrate favorite music into daily routines. Most people remain unaware of the benefits that music offers but are most grateful to learn about this simple, tangible way to improve quality of life.

Research is accelerating globally regarding the proper “dosing” of music—how much music of what kind is most effective for what stage or type of dementia. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the US has funded a [Music and Dementia Research Network](#) to coordinate these research efforts. NIH has also published an [intervention toolkit](#) for researchers to improve the quality of their work. These are important developments, but we needn't wait to act. Let's build on the progress already made and demonstrate how we can focus on care as much as the cure.

To get involved: The International Music Advocacy Coalition helps to support the benefits of music for people with dementia worldwide. It includes representatives from Australia, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Germany, India, Italy, Nigeria, Norway, UK, and the US. Representatives of other countries interested in learning more, please contact me at dcohen@righttomusic.com.



Dan Cohen, MSW, founder and CEO of [Right to Music](#), advocates for integrating best practice music-based interventions into healthcare, especially long-term care and for all persons with dementia. He founded Music & Memory, a nonprofit organization that promotes the use of personalized music to improve the lives of the elderly and infirm. The therapeutic outcomes of his work are portrayed in the Sundance audience award-winning documentary, "Alive Inside."