

Using Music in a Therapeutic Way

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Music therapy is a credentialed profession that uses music purposefully to “support development, health, and well-being.” (Canadian Association of Music Therapists, 2020). While formal music therapy requires a Certified Music Therapist (MTA), caregivers can use music as a therapeutic tool. Here are 3 helpful tips:

1. Playing Instruments

Collaborative instrumental play is a form of music-making that can help people to feel connected and can be particularly meaningful for individuals living with dementia who are nonverbal, as it allows for expression through the non-verbal language of music. By establishing and synchronizing self-made rhythms, playing creative or steady rhythms to recorded or live music, or exploring sounds through free play, instruments can allow for connection, self-regulation, expression, stimulation, and relaxation. This all depends on the instrument and the music accompanying it.

If you and/or your care partner have no previous musical experience or training, there is an assortment of accessible handheld instruments to be utilized by musicians and non-musicians alike, such as shakers (i.e. maracas, egg shakers, etc.), tambourines, and hand drums (i.e. djembe, buffalo drums, bongos, ocean drum, steel tongue drum, etc.). It is recommended that you research instruments, and ideally test them, before purchase. Characteristics to consider are the quality of sound, the weight of the instrument, safety (i.e. no sharp edges), the dexterity needed, and the capabilities of the person who will be playing it. If you are looking for particular techniques, a variety of rhythmic activities can be found online.

2. Singing

For many individuals, singing is an activity that can feel vulnerable or uncomfortable. In music therapy, the words “good” and “bad” have no merit. We emphasize leaving judgment at the door and **using your authentic voice to express yourself**, no matter the sound that comes out. This can be easier said than done but is beneficial to try since singing is a powerful tool for connection.

Singing releases endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine in the brain: these hormones boost your mood and improve your sense of well-being. Singing with others also releases oxytocin—the “love hormone”—**which can alleviate anxiety and stress, and promote trust and bonding between individuals.** Putting on a preferred song from one’s past and singing along with your care partner is not only a fun and engaging way to spend time together, but can communicate unspoken feelings, and can even rekindle memories **(particularly when the music is familiar).**

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For individuals who are non-verbal, a technique called *toning* is suggested. Toning for 4-5 minutes at a time is a form of relaxation, helping to regulate and calm the nervous system. **To tone**, simply breathe in deeply and hum on the exhale, or exhale using vowel sounds *ah, oo, oh*, and/or *ee*. **Toning can be used alongside your care partner or independently as a self-care technique.**

3. Music Listening

Musical preferences are personal. **To benefit most from music listening, it is recommended** you sit down with your care partner and listen to a variety of styles together while observing **their** responses. You can also initiate conversations about the music by asking about their thoughts and feelings. **Observing and engaging with the music and your care partner** will help you to offer music-listening experiences more sensitively, intentionally, and effectively.

Music can be generally categorized as either stimulating or relaxing. This distinction is necessary when using music to enhance or alter your care partner's mood or energy level. The goal is to match the music with the mood. For example, to enhance feelings of relaxation, you can select a preferred piece of music that is slow, soft, repetitive, and harmonious. However, if a person is agitated, playing relaxing music might invalidate their distress. Selecting preferred music that is more in line with feelings of agitation and then gradually transitioning to calmer sounds can help your care partner to reach a more comfortable emotional state. This is known as the *iso-principle* in music therapy.

You can also use applications such as YouTube or Spotify to create tailored playlists. These can be specifically titled so the music is organized and easily accessible. For example: "To Stimulate," "To Relax," or "For Movement". This also offers the opportunity to adapt the music to match activities of daily living, such as "For Morning Rituals". **It is important to note that putting on music and leaving the room does not hold the same therapeutic value as being with your loved one while you are experiencing the music together.**