

# Music in Dementia

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## How to Use Music to Connect with someone with Dementia

*Developed by Music Therapists in the NHS  
Lothian Arts Psychotherapies service*

Many of the barriers to connecting with others that people with dementia face often come down to a combination of difficulties in communication and emotional regulation. When people may no longer be able to communicate or regulate their emotions independently, support that is musical in nature can be used to help provide feelings of familiarity and comfort, to help reduce or increase arousal levels.

Music can help us to connect with people who may have difficulties with communicating, connecting, and emotional regulation. It can be a common-ground for people with dementia and those supporting them.

**This is a guide, developed by Music Therapists for anyone who would like to be able to more confidently use music to connect and interact with people who have dementia. You may be a family member, carer or friend; or you might be a nurse, support-worker, a doctor or another allied health professional. This guide is for all!**

Visit our more full online resource here:  
<https://services.nhslothian.scot/artsp psychotherapies/music-in-dementia/>

# HANDS

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*Using our hands can be a great way to connect through music.*

*You can offer supportive touch when you are using music with someone who is living with dementia. This should be reassuring, and you can usually gauge whether it is welcomed or not.*

## **Are they holding, but not playing an instrument?**

**DO** Try using your hands to play their instrument. This can support them to feel the vibration in their own hands, to hear the rhythm, or feel the change of texture when the instrument moves.

**DON'T** take their hands and start forcing their hands to play their instrument. While this can be done sensitively and therapeutically, please avoid coercing someone to play an instrument—read the resistance in their hands and body movements and pay attention to their facial expressions and body language. Stop if you find they seem uncomfortable or unwilling, or aren't obviously enjoying this.

# SINGING

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*Singing with someone is a wonderful way to feel connected and strengthen relationships. Singing is a way of relating to somebody when conversational skills may be lessening.*

**Is there a familiar song that you both know? Sing together!**

When you're singing with someone, **DO** make sure that they're able to see your face. Clearly mouth the words of the song so that they have visual and auditory clues to the lyrics. Be near them, alongside them or perhaps in front of them, and at eye level.

**DON'T** Stand behind someone and sing. While this may add to the sense that they are being sung with, it is much less relational and if they can't see you when you start to sing, this may be confusing, startling or disorienting.

# RHYTHYM

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*Sometimes, a person with dementia may be unable or unwilling to use or hold an instrument. Instruments may also not be available or appropriate to use where you are.*

## **Is the person unable or unwilling to hold an instrument?**

In this case, **DO** try gently tapping out the rhythm of the song as you hold a person's hand. You might tap their arm or their leg if you are sitting together and this is appropriate. This creates a multi-sensory experience when listening to music together.

**DON'T** accidentally (or purposefully) startle someone from behind with unexpected or non-consensual touch. Make sure to gauge response to rhythmic tapping by overt or subtle cues in their responses/vocalisations/body language. Do not maintain contact if it is clearly not desired.

# ENCOURAGEMENT

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*One of the best ways to encourage someone to join in with music making is to be participating yourself! Modelling ways-of-being can support someone to better understand the context of where they are and how they might behave in that context.*

**Does the person seem a bit hesitant or nervous to join in the music making?**

**DO** participate actively yourself! Play an instrument yourself to support a sense of togetherness with the person you are trying to encourage. It does not matter if you play well, or rhythmically. Even if everyone is a bit “rubbish” this can also sometimes be quite funny, fun and equalising.

**DON'T** repeatedly tell a person to join in or yell jovially over the music—this may sometimes have the opposite effect—as you might know yourself in certain situations. Make sure that the person you’re trying to connect with stays the centre of your attention.

# MUSIC

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*Learning as much as you can about a person's musical background and interests can support you to use music that is most meaningful to them, and most likely to trigger memories, conversation and connection. The "reminiscence bump" refers to the music that we store best, usually the music from when we were between the ages of 10 and 30 years old. These are the years when we are forming our identity and so our musical preferences are closely tied with this.*

## Does this person enjoy listening to music?

**DO** use music that is meaningful to the person. Consider using a person's Playlist for Life if they have one, and if they don't, consider creating a Playlist for Life with them! If you're not sure about the person's preferences and history and they can't communicate this to you, start with music from the decades in which they were between 10-30 years old, gauge their responses and go from there.

**DON'T** use newer music or music that you personally enjoy (unless the person with dementia has interest and preference for these). This might have an effect but it is better to begin with what's familiar to them to support feelings of comfort, and identity.

# TURN-TAKING

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*Turn-taking is a way of having a musical conversation and connecting without words. You can do this by sharing an instrument to begin with, and then perhaps moving to separate instruments. Or you might use body percussion to clap or tap your knees.*

## Does this person have difficulties with verbal conversation?

**DO** leave a gap for the person to play after you play something. Start with simple rhythms, one or two taps on the drum or a well-known 'door knocking' pattern. You might not get an immediate response, so leave time and space for them to respond. Take another turn if the gap is very long or tap their instrument to model the effect. You might support their hand to the instrument as we've learned in the *Hand* and *Rhythm* sections previously.

**DON'T** force it. If you try and don't get a response, that's okay! Just acknowledge that it wasn't for them and move on. This recognition of their response will still be valuable and help them to be seen.

# EMOTIONS

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*Sometimes certain songs will illicit an emotional response. This can also happen when using non-recorded music helps a person to feel connected for the first time in what might feel like a very long time. This may look like someone being very excited and joyful, or it may be that they become tearful and express sadness.*

**Is the person expressing emotions? For example are they tearful, laughing, smiling, appearing angry, etc?**

When and if this happens, **DO** validate the experience. It's important that people are able to feel these emotions, especially if they've not been able to express them for some time. Mention what you notice (like a tear or a smile), then name the emotions and validate them. It is important that people feel listened to at these times, and you can direct back to the music, perhaps a new song choice when you feel that they are ready to move on.

**DON'T** move on immediately if someone becomes emotional. While it can be unsettling for us to see especially the more difficult emotions expressed, if you don't recognise, validate and give space to these emotions, this could stifle these emotions and make the person feel less seen and less valuable.



# MOVEMENT

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*Moving to music is almost a reflex. Using more upbeat music can help to activate or stimulate movement.*

## Is the person moving to the music?

If someone is clapping or swaying, waving their hands or dancing, **DO** join in! Mirror their movements and maybe extend them into new movements. Make sure everyone is moving safely. As with the turn-taking, allow time for a person to respond to the music. It may take 2 or 3 songs before someone's fully orientated to the music and ready to dance or sway.

**DON'T** force movement if someone very obviously does not want to move or dance. Gentle encouragement may help some people to initiate these movements, but read their cues and don't continue if they're giving you clear signs that they don't want to move/dance.

# MOOD AND MUSIC

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*Music can both validate and influence people's mood, both of which have valuable uses.*

**Have you noticed a shift in mood for the person when they're around music?**

**DO** consider the mood of the person you are supporting and try to begin with music that matches this mood when choosing music to listen, sing or play along to. Over the course of 3 or 4 songs, you may be able to try different music if and as their mood changes. If someone is feeling sleepy or in a low mood, start quieter and move into more dynamic music so as not to shock them awake. If someone becomes distressed or upset and the music is more lively, perhaps shift gears again into quieter music, or allow some silence.

**DON'T** be afraid of silence. If it seems that the music is overstimulating to the person, silence may be what's best in the moment.

# YOU

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*It is important that you are your authentic self when you are interacting with a person. You will have specific knowledge of the person you are supporting, an existing relationship that is important and valuable. Introducing music into this relationship based on your knowledge and experience of the person will make it more personal to you both. It really does not matter if you have a beautiful singing voice or not, or whether you can hold a beat or not, what matters is that you are creating opportunities to connect with someone in a way that doesn't require words, when words might be failing them.*

**Are you feeling unsure about how to participate or use music with someone? Are you worried you “can’t” sing or play instruments?**

If you are shy and awkward about using music, **DO** be shy and awkward about it, admit this to the person if you want, and use music anyway – this could be a shared experience and even support you to make a connection with someone.

**DON'T** worry about being a good singer or musician, just be yourself.