

Music helps reduce agitation of Alzheimer's



Jim Miller

SAVVY SENIOR

Dear Savvy Senior,

What can you tell me about music therapy for Alzheimer's patients? I'm helping my dad take care of my 80-year-old mother, who has mid-stage Alzheimer's disease and thought it might be something worth trying. How do we proceed?

Unmusical Mary

Dear Mary,

Music has amazing power, especially for people with Alzheimer's disease. Studies have shown that listening to familiar music can significantly improve mood and alertness, reduce agitation, and can help with a number of behavioral issues that are common in the middle stages of the disease. Even in the late stages of Alzheimer's, a person may be able to tap a beat or sing lyrics to a song from childhood.

Sitting and listening to music together also can provide a way for you and your dad to connect and bond with your mom, even after she stops recognizing your names and faces.

Here are a few tips to help create a music therapy program.

Create a playlist

Your first step is to

identify the music that's familiar and enjoyable to your mom. Does she like jazz, classical or Frank Sinatra? What songs make her want to get up and dance? Then go back to the era when she was a teenager through her early 20s. Research shows that music during this time period seems to get the best response and triggers the most memories.

If you need some help creating a playlist, the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function provides a suggested list of top songs by era and genre on its website at musictherapy.imnf.org. Click on "Outpatient Services," then on "Top 10's For Memory."

The website pandora.com will also tailor a radio station to match your mom's musical taste when you select an artist, song or genre. And, musicandmemory.org offers a free guide to creating a personalized playlist.

You can also get help from a music therapist. The American Music Therapy Association offers a national directory of more than 6,000 therapists at musictherapy.org to help you find someone in your area.

To keep things fresh, it's best to create a diverse playlist of numerous artists, with no more than five to 10 songs per artist. It's also important to keep tweaking their playlist. Every week or so, ask your mom which songs

she likes and which ones are just so-so. Remove the so-so ones, and build on the successful ones so you end up with 100 or 200 songs that all resonate.

Music delivery

There are a number of ways you can deliver your mom's favorite music: a digital listening device, CD player, a computer or tablet or even an old record player. If you don't have any music and are on a tight budget, check with your local public library. It may have CD selections you can check out.

Digital listening devices like an iPod or MP3 player are the most convenient and widely used options among music therapists for delivering music, because it's easy to add and remove songs from them.

The \$49 Apple iPod Shuffle (apple.com/ipod-shuffle), and \$40 SanDisk Sansa Clip MP3 Player (sandisk.com), which require headphones, and the \$60 Peabod SweetPea3 MP3 Player (sweetpea-toyco.com), which has an external speaker, are excellent devices that are extremely simple to use and very affordable.

Another option to consider for listening to music together is through an online radio service like spotify.com or rhapsody.com. These services will let you create a customized playlist (for free or a small monthly subscription fee) that your mom



and you can listen to via computer, mobile device, home entertainment system, or a home Internet radio like the \$180 Logitech UE Smart Radio (ue.logitech.com), which is a great alternative that's simple to use and compatible with most on-line radio services.

*Send your questions to:
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