

# MUSIC AS THERAPY



*"Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything."*

– Plato

We all know the feelings and memories that different songs evoke – a song that harkens to our first love, reminds us of happy times in our childhood, that our parents use to play in the early evenings, that we used to sing with our friends.

Our loved ones have these same memories tucked away, too. And there is some evidence that these memories are easier for them to retrieve than names or faces. Current research indicates that the areas of the brain that store musical memories are relatively unaffected by Alzheimer's, dementia, and Parkinson's. Even playing an instrument is tucked away in a part of the brain that can remain untouched by their ailment. Some studies have reported that listening to music can even bridge the gap for a recall of specific memories.



In non-demented Parkinson's disease, music can lead to more fluid motor flow, such as dancing. The emotional experience of listening to music can increase the release of dopamine, which is a brain chemical lacking in those with Parkinson's disease. Unfortunately, this improvement stops the moment the music does. For dementia patients, the benefit of music can improve mood, behavior, and cognitive function far beyond when the music stops.

Healthy adults who are learning to play an instrument show improved performance on some cognitive tests. While playing music, multiple areas of the brain are activated and, in the long run, this can help reconnect the two sides of the brain. Perhaps it is never too early for all of us to start using music to help prevent cognitive decline.

Source: [Practical Neurology](#), [The Michael J Fox Foundation](#) and [Mayo Clinic](#)



## Playing Music

Playing music is a complex undertaking that engages multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, helping to improve brain health or, at a minimum, to slow decline. Playing an instrument requires:

- Fine motor movements and an intact sensory system to manipulate an instrument
- Immediate processing of visual and auditory elements of a melody
- Mathematical precision and internal rhythm to keep tempo
- Emotional interpretation of the sound
- Coordination with other performers

Source: [The Michael J Fox Foundation](#)

## What You Can Do at Home

While specific goals should be guided by a licensed Music Therapist, there is certainly a benefit to providing your loved one a musical outlet. Consider creating playlists they can use to sing along or tap their feet. If they used to play a musical instrument, perhaps giving them access will spark old memories

Combining songs with daily routine makes necessary activities like eating and washing easier. The practice develops a rhythm that helps recall memory of that activity, empowering someone whose body and mind needs all the help it can get.

Listen to the music with your senior, especially at first. Look for clues in their facial gestures and body language to gauge the effect the song is having on their mood. Music can be stimulating or soothing. It can conjure a range of emotions from elation and joy to melancholy and irritation. Music can turn a bad mood around, trigger lost memories, and ground people to the present moment. If you feel a song or playlist is having an adverse effect, remove it from the playlist.



## Choosing Music

Look at the top pop songs from the years when your loved one was between 18 and 25. Experts say that this is when we hone our musical tastes.



Certified musical therapist Rachel Rambach created a list called [12 Songs Every Music Therapist Should Know](#) that might be a good jumping off point to start your own list. Songs on her list include *Over the Rainbow*, *You Are My Sunshine*, and *Amazing Grace*. Even songs like *Take Me Out To The Ballgame* can inspire positive memories.

## As you're considering adding music to help a loved one who has Alzheimer's disease, consider these tips:

 **Think about their preferences.** Ask them directly or gauge their reactions to a range of music. Involve family and friends by asking them to suggest songs or make playlists.

 **Set the mood.** To calm your loved one during mealtime, sundown, or a morning hygiene routine, play music or sing a song that's soothing. To boost your loved one's mood or help them get moving, use more upbeat music.

 **Sing along.** Singing along to music together can boost the mood and enhance your relationship.

 **Avoid overstimulation.** When playing music, eliminate competing noises. Turn off the TV. Shut the door. Opt for music that isn't interrupted by commercials, which can cause confusion.

 **Encourage movement.** Help your loved one to clap along or tap his or her feet to the beat. If possible, consider dancing with your loved one.

 **Pay attention to your loved one's response.** If your loved one seems to enjoy particular songs, play them often. If your loved one reacts negatively to a song or type of music, choose something else.

Source: [A Place for Mom](#), [Mayo Clinic](#), and [Dementia Care Central](#)