

Music Therapy and Memory Deficits

What would you think if you knew a person who couldn't remember her own name, but could recall the words to a favorite song? A person who did not recognize the members of her family, but could learn the words to a new song? You might call it amazing, a miracle, even. But we see this every day in our work with people with memory deficits.

Based on years of clinical evidence, familiar music has the capacity to stimulate seemingly lost memories in individuals with memory deficits due to dementia, head trauma, or stroke. In our specialized dementia unit we have residents who respond to familiar songs even when recognition of language and visual objects is no longer possible. This suggests that music memory may utilize a different memory system in the brain -- and a pathway that may still be available within the "silent" brain of the Alzheimer patient.

How it works:

Past memories, images and personal experiences can all be stimulated by certain songs. Through interviews with patients and their caregivers, these specific songs are identified so that they can be applied in Music Therapy sessions. The same technique that helped us learn the alphabet can be used to help us memorize new information such as names, phone numbers, etc.

What happens during a session:

- Familiar songs are used to stimulate memory.
- Musical improvisation is used to enhance self-expression when meaningful words are no longer possible.
- Rhythm-based activities are used to increase attention and focus.
- Phrases are put to music to aid memory recall.

Outcomes:

- Improved memory
- Increased attention, motivation and focus
- Improved cognitive skills
- Increased self-expression
- Increased awareness of self and others
- Reduced agitation

The exciting questions are "Does music memory use alternate pathways to memory recognition and retrieval?" and "Can the use of music therapy in early stages of dementia and Alzheimer's disease maintain the integrity of such systems so that the process of memory loss is slowed down?"

To learn more about the benefits of music therapy on patients with Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias, below are recommended readings:

[The Healing Sounds of Music](#)

Lois Morton, EdD, LIAF Line, February 2004

[When Music Heals Body and Soul](#)

Oliver Sacks, Parade Magazine, March 31, 2002

[Music Therapy for People with Alzheimer's or Parkinson's Disease](#)

Education Update Online, May 2001

[Music Therapy for Parkinsons and Dementia](#)

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