

EARTHTONES NW PRESENTS A GUIDE TO:

BUILDING NEW CONNECTIONS: MUSIC & DEMENTIA

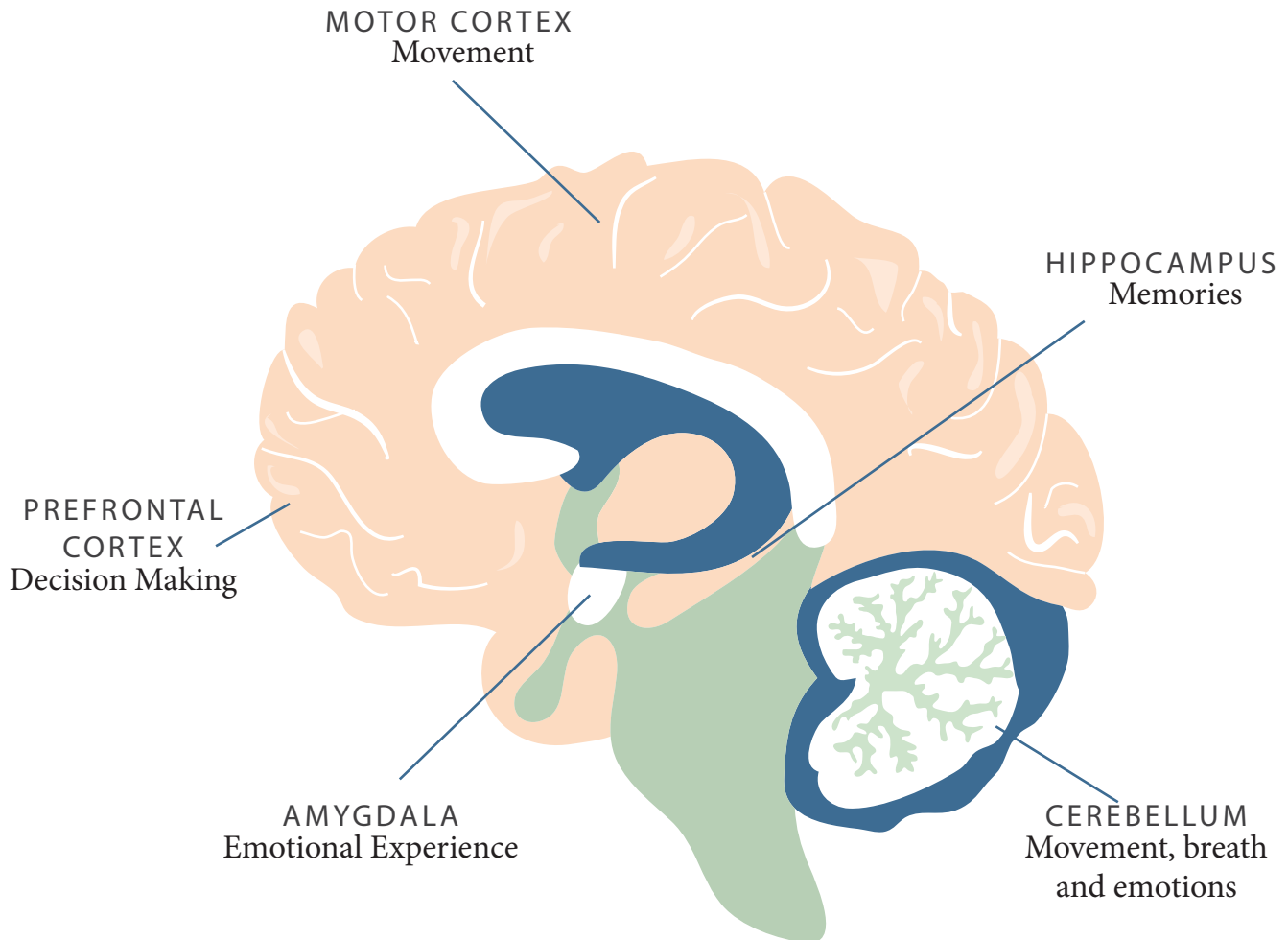
Music is a lifelong companion, bringing us hope, joy, and solace in our most important moments. This is especially true for people with dementia, for whom daily activities and interactions become increasingly hard. This time can be challenging as we adapt to new roles and ways of supporting our loved ones. Music is a lasting experience that can activate engagement, deeply held memories, and moments of connection for people with dementia and their loved ones.

As board-certified music therapists we have worked with hundreds of clients with dementia and their families. We are trained to understand how music impacts a whole person, supports cognitive health and builds relationships. Music can even impact our responses to disease and how it is interpreted in the brain. Throughout this resource we will be sharing how you can apply this knowledge to bring strength and healing into your relationship with your loved one with dementia.



MUSIC ACTIVATES MANY PARTS OF THE BRAIN

Neuroscience has shown an increased interest over the past few decades in how the brain responds to music. More and more, scientists confirm that our brains are wired for music. In fact, the brain has specific structures designed just to interpret and respond to music. The below structures of the brain are activated when music is experienced.



MOVING FORWARD WITH MUSIC

One thing that we know from our work as board-certified music therapists is that the diagnosis of dementia can create a cycle of grief and guilt. People caring for someone with dementia may feel their lives are eclipsed by this new role. This experience coupled with isolation can leave caretakers with little energy to build a new kind of relationship with their loved one. This can be unfulfilling for those diagnosed and their caretakers alike.

Our experience providing music therapy to those with dementia has revealed an alternative to this familiar narrative. Studies show that despite cognitive decline, people can continue to successfully participate in meaningful activities, especially in the realm of music. Since music can be accessed in so many parts of the brain, our musical lives remain intact even as certain cognitive functions decline.

Often times music can seem like magic for those living with dementia. Take Alan, who refused to participate in any other activities but attended weekly singalongs. Or Ida, who couldn't remember her daughter's name, but could hum along to her favorite song. Despite cognitive decline, music could still reach them. Here we have compiled music-based tips and activities for meaning and connection. We hope that you enjoy this process of creative discovery.

Warmly,
Kristen McSorley + The Earthtones Team

KRISTEN MCSORLEY

Kristen McSorley is a board-certified music therapist with Earthtones NW who strives to work collaboratively with clients, building upon their interests, strengths, and existing resources. Her music therapy work supports clients in accessing essential human experiences, such as play, creativity, joy, and belonging, through shared music experiences.



BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

Music can have a powerful effect on us; while this often leads to benefits, sometimes it can be agitating or overstimulating. If you notice music causing overstimulation or agitation, discontinue and reattempt at a later time. Switch up your approach or music genre and watch your loved one for signals. Also keep in mind that this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each person has their own unique relationship with music, rooted in their personal and cultural experiences.

We are excited that you are embarking on this journey. Music can bring so much to those living with Alzheimer's and other dementias. It reminds us of the past and helps us engage in the present and provides routine and structure in an otherwise chaotic inner world. It helps us connect with one another as we sing, dance, and listen together. It brings fulfillment and joy. Music expresses the deep parts of us and our emotions. It distracts us from pain-both physical and mental. It brings us to MOVE. Music reminds us to breathe and relax.

Finally, before you get started identify which stage of dementia that your loved one is experiencing. You will find this resource divided up by stage. Start with the suggestions for your loved one's stage. Observe closely, take notes if you need and most of all enjoy this shared experience.

STAGES OF DEMENTIA

EARLY STAGE

- Memory loss, particularly with recent conversations or events
- Misplacing items or leaving appliances on
- Difficulty Planning
- Mood swings and depression

MID-STAGE

- Forgetting memories or people
- Needing support for daily activities
- Confusion around time and place
- Agitation and anxiety

LATE STAGE

- Loss of communication abilities
- Changes in bodily control
- Limited response to their environment



EARLY STAGE DEMENTIA

Early stages of dementia can be especially challenging as families adjust to the new diagnosis and shifts in expectations of the future. This time is often characterized with increased forgetfulness, confusion, erratic behavior, and changes in mood and personality. Depression is common with people with dementia, as they cope with decreased independence, cognitive decline, and anxiety around the future.

During this stage, music can bring a sense of competency when other activities are challenging. Music can also provide relaxation and stress relief, meaningful experiences, and a way to connect with others.

Music Preference: Many people in early stage dementia can still communicate about their favorite music, so ask! If they need some support to identify preferences, you can start by offering several options of common music genres (soul, rock n roll, folk, jazz, classical, pop, swing, blues, rock, country). From there, search for songs popular in those genres when they were in their 20's. For someone born in 1950 that likes rock n roll, search "1970s rock n roll songs".

People with early stage dementia can participate in music in many of the ways they did previously. They may enjoy dancing, singing, or playing an instrument with music. Alternately, you might listen to music together and reminisce about associated memories or the music artist. Here are some easy-to-implement ideas to go beyond listening with your loved one:

MUSIC ACTIVITIES FOR EARLY STAGE DEMENTIA

CREATE A LIFE SOUNDTRACK

Songs can honor, celebrate, and share our histories. Create a soundtrack with your loved one that represents significant periods, events, and memories over their life. Aim to collect 10-20 songs and compile them into a chronological playlist. See p. 12 for sample questions to guide you.

TIPS

Hold onto this soundtrack for your loved one to listen to over time. These songs can help spark old memories as the disease progresses.

SONG PARODIES

Songwriting helps us access our creative and expressive side. If writing songs is new to you or your loved one, use one you love as a template. For example, “This Little Light” can be easily rewritten to write down their your favorite places, items, and activities. See p. 12 for a template.

This [favorite emotion] of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.
This [favorite person] of mine, I’m gonna [how you show love to them].

TIPS

If they aren’t sure how to answer, try providing two options for them to choose from.

SONGS FOR DEEPEÑED CONVERSATION

Songs can lead to interesting, thoughtful conversations with your loved one. Listen to an album or playlist together and use the songs as points of discussion. Questions can be about the song meaning, (What do you think this song is about? What feelings does this song evoke?) song memories, (When did you first hear this song? What does this song remind you of?), or about the music itself (What is your favorite instrument in the song?

TIPS

Cognitive stimulation and connection are the goals. This exercise can be done formally or informally (for example, in the car).



MID-STAGE DEMENTIA

People in mid-stage dementia start to lose their abilities to complete activities of daily living (ADLs) like cleaning or taking care of their hygiene. Shifting into this stage creates new challenges for everyone involved. In mid-stage dementia a person needs a higher level of support and begins to forget their family members. Other characteristics of this stage are an increase in anxiety, confusion, agitation, and pacing behaviors. They have shorter attention spans and may be unable to hold a conversation.

Your loved one may participate with music differently than how they did before. They may still enjoy singing, dancing, listening, or playing an instrument; however, adaptations may be needed to help them participate successfully. For example, they may sing with songs when they're slowed down. They may have been a skillful piano player before their diagnosis. They may still enjoy playing piano, or it may be a reminder of lost abilities and a source of frustration. If that happens, try another instrument that still utilizes their musicianship such as a harmonica, kazoo, drum, or a shaker.

These changes make it increasingly hard to connect with your loved one. In this time, music provides a medium for connection, familiarity in an otherwise confusing environment, and a space for play and fun. Rhythm, a core part of nearly all music, and a core part of the human body, is accessible even as language and other cognitive functions decline.

MUSIC ACTIVITIES FOR MID-STAGE DEMENTIA

DANCE TOGETHER

Dancing is one way to connect when other forms of intimacy aren't available. There is no wrong way to move to music! For those who can stand, you can slow-dance to a ballad or swing dance to Count Basie. Alternately, you can simply hold hands and sway to the music together or grasp their hands and tap the beat.

TIPS

If you feel shy about dancing, practice clapping or rhythmically tapping together to a tune.

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT SONGS

If your loved one seems unable to recall some of their favorite songs, access their more deeply rooted memories by playing traditional songs, often learned in childhood. Consider folk songs known by children and adults alike, like "You Are My Sunshine." Religious and patriotic songs are often also deeply ingrained in our memories. See p. 13 for a list of songs for English-speaking elders in the United States.

TIPS

No song is a one-size-fits-all. All families and communities have these songs unique to their culture.

SING TOGETHER

The original song recordings may be too high or too fast for your loved one. Singing together allows you to adapt the music so they can sing along. It also helps you bond in a familiar, expressive activity. Next time you notice your loved one isn't singing along, try singing the song slower and lower. Practice ahead of time by singing one of their favorite songs as is. Explore singing it slower, faster, lower, and higher.

TIPS

Two principles may help you and your loved one better sing together: sing it slow. Sing it low.



LATE STAGE DEMENTIA

The late stages of dementia are characterized by loss of language and physical capabilities, loss of bodily control, withdrawal, extended periods of sleep, and limited engagement with others or activities. Music is essential in this period of life. It can preserve dignity and bring comfort in a time of decline. It is a way to honor the person, celebrate their life, and connect with them. Though more rare, it can bring moments of lucidity.

Even when there is no outward indication of preference, music preference remains important in this stage of life. Hopefully you have been able to garner some information about their music preferences throughout their life before this stage. In this stage, it's important to look for subtle indications of liking or disliking music choices. Assess the following:

- Changes in their facial expression
- Moving towards or away from the music source
- Changes in breathing patterns
- Small movements (e.g. tapping their fingers)
- Looking around for the music
- Increased agitation or pacing

It's also important to consider the risk of overstimulation in this stage. Oftentimes, we've walked into people's rooms and found them listening to a radio station for hours per day without any ability to shut the radio off. As you share music, make note of any of the above and stop the music if your loved one seems bothered or overstimulated.

MUSIC ACTIVITIES FOR LATE STAGE DEMENTIA

VIBROTACTILE SUPPORT

Music is a multi-sensory experience. Touch is considered the strongest sense towards the end of life. Help your loved one physically feel the music to engage this sense. Ideas include:

- Gently place their hand on a radio speaker
- Tap their shoulder while you sing to them
- Massage them while you listen to music
- Put their hands on a drum or guitar while you play

TIPS

Use larger speakers or instruments. Make sure to notice their responses to not over-stimulate them.

CONNECT WITH A SONG

Singing to your loved one can be a powerful experience for your family and a way to connect when communication is limited. Choose a song that reminds you of them or is special to your relationship. Sing, or play a recording if you prefer. Hold their hand and be with them intentionally in music.

TIPS

Even if your loved one doesn't respond, it is possible that they can still hear and feel the connection of your shared music.

MUSIC FOR RELAXATION AND COMFORT

Music can create a soothing, comforting environment and distract from pain or discomfort. Choose music that is soft, slow, and predictable. Think cool jazz, classical, R&B, world music, and folk. Songs like "At Last" by Etta James, "Air on a G String," by J.S. Bach or "Puff the Magic Dragon" by Peter, Paul & Mary can support your loved ones' rest and relaxation.


TIPS

Preference is key! If they don't enjoy it, it won't be relaxing. Use music genres you know they enjoyed throughout their life.

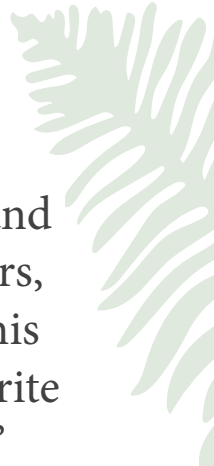
BEST WISHES ON YOUR JOURNEY

Studies show that despite cognitive decline, people can continue to successfully participate in meaningful music activities. As music can be accessed in so many parts of the brain, our musical lives remain intact even as certain cognitive functions decline. Until the end, we have the rhythm of our breath, of our heart.

Music can bring so much to those living with Alzheimer's and other dementias. Music reminds us of the past and helps us engage in the present. It provides routine and structure in an otherwise chaotic inner world. It helps us connect with one another as we sing, dance, and listen together. It brings fulfillment and joy. Music expresses the deep parts of us and our emotions. It distracts us from pain-both physical and mental. It brings us to MOVE. Music reminds us to breathe and relax.



“When I was encouraged by a music therapist to sing to my husband who had been lost in a fog of Alzheimer’s disease for so many years, he looked at me and seemed to recognize me. On the last day of his life, he opened his eyes and looked into mine when I sang his favorite hymn. I’ll always treasure that last moment we shared together.”



-Anonymous
(American Music Therapy Association website)

REFERENCES:::

LIFE SOUNDTRACK

What lullabies or nursery rhymes were sang to you?
What was your favorite song as a kid?
What songs did your parents love when you were growing up?
Who was your first favorite singer or band?
Name 3 songs that remind you of your teen years.
What song brings you comfort when you're feeling down?
Name some of your favorite singers or bands.
What was the first concert you went to?
What song makes you think of your wedding or spouse?
What song makes you think of your children?
What song represents you as a person?
What religious song holds meaning for you?
Name 3 songs that have been important to you throughout your life.
What is your favorite song right now?

THIS LITTLE LIGHT TEMPLATE

This [favorite person] of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This [favorite animal] of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This [favorite plant/nature] of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

This [favorite emotion] of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This [favorite quality of themselves], I'm gonna let it shine.
This [favorite memory], I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

It shines all over [place they grew up], I'm gonna let it shine.
It shines all over [where they live now], I'm gonna let it shine.
It shines all over [a place they love], I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

REFERENCES-CONTINUED

U.S FOLK SONGS		
SONG	SONGWRITER	YEAR
Battle Hymn of the Republic	William Steffe/Julia Ward Howe	1856/1861
Daisy Bell	Harry Dacre	1892
*Down by the Riverside	Unknown	Early 1800s
Home on the Range	Daniel E. Kelley/Brewster M.Higley	1847
My Bonnie	Unknown	(1700s-1800s)
Oh Shenandoah	Unknown	Early 1800s
Red River Valley	Unknown	1890s
*She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain	Unknown	Early 1800s
Star Spangled Banner	Francis Scott Key/John Stafford Smith	1773/1814
*This Little Light	Unknown	Unknown
*When the Saints Come Marching In	Recorded by Louis Armstrong	Early 1900s
*Whole World in His Hands	Unknown	Unknown
You Are My Sunshine	Jimmie Davis/Charles Mitchell	1939

*Starred songs are African American spirituals, originating from enslaved people in the south.