

COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL, AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF REGULAR MUSICAL ACTIVITIES IN EARLY DEMENTIA: RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED STUDY

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Read the full article at: gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org

Globally, care for persons with dementia (PWDs) is provided primarily by family caregivers. These caregivers are often under substantial burden and psychological distress. This study seeks to investigate the efficacy of music intervention as part of daily care.

The Study

- 89 PWD-caregiver dyads comprising family members and nurses from day activity centres and inpatient centres in Helsinki and Espoo, Finland.
- Participants were randomised into three groups: Singing Group (SG), Music Listening Group (MLG), and a usual care Control Group (CG).
- Caregivers in the SG and MLG were encouraged and taught to either sing or listen to music regularly with their PWDs to “enhance mood, increase reciprocal communication as well as support the cognitive abilities of the PWD”.
- Participants were followed for nine months.
- Cognitive abilities, moods and quality of life (QOL) of PWDs, and psychological wellbeing of their family members were assessed at three points: Before the intervention (baseline), Immediately after the intervention (Follow-up 1: Three months from baseline), and Six months after the end of the intervention (Follow-up 2: Nine months from baseline).

Singing Group (SG)

- Led by a trained music teacher/music therapist weekly.
- Comprised group singing accompanied by the music teacher on the piano, guitar, or *kantele* (Finnish zither).
- Sessions occasionally involved vocal exercises and rhythmic movements during singing such as clapping and playing *maracas*.
- Sessions emphasised a supportive, engaging, and fun singing atmosphere.

Music Listening Group (MLG)

- Led by a trained music teacher/music therapist weekly.
- Comprised listening to compact discs (CDs).
- Emotions, thoughts, and memories these songs evoked were then discussed.
- Visual cues such as album covers were used to “stimulate reminiscence and discussion”.
- Sessions focused on building a soothing and relaxing atmosphere that would encourage emotional expression, free reminiscence, and open reciprocal communication.

For both the SG and MLG, songs comprised mainly traditional folk and popular songs from the 1920s to 1960s, and were chosen based on PWDs’ individual musical preferences. Participants in the CG continued with their normal everyday activities.

Findings

- PWDs can cognitively, emotionally, and socially benefit from everyday musical leisure activities such as singing and listening to familiar songs.
- Activities helped improve moods of PWDs and maintained/enhanced their general cognition; orientation, attention and executive function; and remote personal episodic memory.
- Singing also had a positive impact in terms of enhancing the short-term and working memory of PWDs as well as on the emotional wellbeing of their family members.
- Listening to music improved the QOL of PWDs in the long run. Caregivers also rated musical activities as being highly beneficial for themselves and their interaction with their PWDs.

Similar to previous studies, these findings indicate that:

- Emotional reactions to music are usually preserved in advanced dementia;
- Music therapy and caregiver-implemented music interventions can reduce agitation, depression, and anxiety; and
- Music-based interventions can temporarily improve verbal and episodic memory and overall cognitive functioning.

This study suggests that everyday musical activities can have long-term emotional and cognitive benefits in early dementia and stroke patients. It also highlights the therapeutic effects of singing or music listening. These are particularly informative in shedding light about the potential rehabilitative facets of music that are specific to more active production (singing) and more passive reception (listening) of music while controlling for the general effect of receiving therapeutic attention.

The study also concludes that coaching caregivers and nurses to conduct simple musical activities with PWDs is a cost-efficient way of bringing emotionally and cognitively stimulating, and enriching musical experiences to the lives of elderly PWDs.

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