

Down memory lane

Music can be one of the last memories to fade as we age, providing a link to our past and an important way to engage with the present.

At 83, Rose Klooger has lived at a Melbourne nursing home for nine months. Until recently when she has been able to spend some time in a high-backed 'princess' chair, she has been mostly bedbound - a situation which has contributed to her feelings of isolation and anxiety. Although she has a loving and involved family who share a roster of regular visits, Rose's transition from her own home to a nursing home has not been an easy one for her. Nursing staff report Rose often becomes distressed and miserable when she is alone.

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Even when she has been unwell and experienced confusion and memory loss, Rose's ability to remember songs has remained intact. In her weekly sessions with Rose, Calvary Health Care Bethlehem music therapist, Eleanor McNab, says she is continually surprised at the extensive library of songs Rose holds in her memory.



As anyone who sings or plays a musical instrument will tell you, making music, especially with others, is great for the mind, body and soul. And the benefits flow whether you are

an accomplished musician or an enthusiastic amateur. In music therapy trained health professionals - registered music therapists - draw on the benefits of music to help people of all ages and abilities to attain and maintain good health and wellbeing. Music therapists work in a range of places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools and the community, delivering tailor-made programs to meet specific needs.

Music therapy can play an important role in the care of older people. Indeed, many of the 400+ registered music therapists in Australia work in aged care settings. Collaborating with their colleagues such as doctors, nurses and social workers, music therapists use their clinical and musical skills to support aged clients and their families, helping improve quality of life through physical, social, emotional and spiritual health.

Common methods used by music therapists in aged care include playing live and/or recorded music, facilitating song choice, active music making and improvisation, and 'musical life review' where patients and/or their loved ones make compilation CDs of music meaningful to them. The therapist may also use a special technique in which music is improvised to match and slow a patient's breathing rate, to help reduce anxiety and lessen the need for medication. Music and guided imagery relaxation techniques can be used to reduce pain and anxiety.

"Her connection with music is so important to Rose," says Eleanor. "It's been a big part of her life and she's always loved to sing. While she may have lost a lot of other abilities, she gets a lot of enjoyment from the fact that she can still sing and remember so many songs. I see that in older people all the time.

"Rose likes old time songs and knows a lot of tunes ranging from about 1900 up to 1950. Often I will read out song titles from a book of 1001 old songs and she will start singing them as soon as she hears the title and knows many more of them than I do! She invariably remembers most of the words. Sometimes she'll start to sing something that is unfamiliar to me so I'll go away and make sure I know it for next time."

Eleanor's sessions with Rose involve singing familiar songs and sharing thoughts and memories associated with the music.

"She has kept me on my toes with her remarkable memory for songs and her knowledge of old films. There is a song called "Nellie Kellie I Love You" which comes from the film "Little Nellie Kellie". Rose shared with me that this was her father's favourite film and always remembers him when we sing the song together. Sometimes she'll cry while she's singing."

As Rose's mobility has improved in recent weeks, Eleanor has started to move her sessions from being one-on-one to group sessions with some of the other residents. In this way, she says, she is able to help build social interactions for Rose and for the others.

"The music sessions are a kind of containing space to meet other people: the music is familiar and they can interact with each other without needing verbal communication. That can help reduce the effects of confusion and remove some of the hesitation they can have about socialising.

Rose and I have already built a relationship around music, so if someone throws a new song into the mix to sing I can say: 'I know Rose likes that song' and it becomes an effective and informal way to include her.

Sometimes residents can be worried about whether they will meet anyone they can relate to, especially if they are cognitively alert and others are not - I know that has been a big concern for Rose. But the music has been a kind of common ground through which they are able to get to know each other. A lot of the time they won't come out to any other activity than the music therapy."

Eleanor and her colleagues notice a marked change in mood for Rose following the music therapy sessions and rarely see her as animated and happy as she is during those times.

Eleanor says the engagement with music helps remind Rose of something she's good at and gives her opportunities to shine and experience an improved quality of life.

"She is always engaged and responds with smiles and laughter during our sessions. Always."



what we know about...

music and ageing

"Ageing is not always associated with decline, however the growing number of older people in the Australian community means there will be many suffering from diseases such as Alzheimer's as well as facing other challenges to their quality of life. Even as other abilities decline, music engages the brain through an extensive set of processes that are preserved and functional. The brain processes that are activated during singing and listening to music work at a higher level and can transform dysfunctional processes. This is illustrated most clearly when people who are no longer able to speak are still able to sing.

In addition to brain processes, music also transcends challenges created in social situations. The inclusion of music in a social encounter adds meaning by providing a pleasurable focus that unites people in action or discussion. A social encounter without music relies on discussions that demand a high level of capacity, whereas the introduction of music removes obstacles and engages everyone involved at a personal and emotional level. This engagement is unrelated to cultural background or political beliefs and can bring a new meaning to a social encounter that combines pleasure, connection and purpose."

Dr Katrina McFerran, University of Melbourne



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