

Music can call back loved ones lost in Alzheimer's darkness: 'So much we can do to improve quality of life'



Residents of Silverado Memory Care in Morton Grove are part of a 12-week music therapy research program through Northwestern University for those with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

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An audience of patients with Alzheimer's disease listens in rapt attention as a young woman sings the French song "Beau Soir." Despite his failing mind, one of the men in the crowd, Les Dean, translates the words into English for a friend.

"See how the setting sun paints a river with roses," he whispers. "Tremulous vision floats over fields of grain."

And when the audience joins in a singalong on another tune, Dean's voice rumbles in a resonant baritone, "Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise. All lost in a wonderland, a stranger in paradise."

Dean, 76, once taught music at Senn High School, invented and sold his own music education system and sang with the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Now, like many patients with Alzheimer's, he is to some extent lost in the

past, a stranger to the present. He asks a visitor, “How are the children?” Five minutes later, he asks again, and again, unable to recall the question or the answer. But when the music plays, he smiles, and is transported to a place of beauty, where everything still makes sense.

In recent years, music therapy has grown in popularity for its seeming ability to help calm people with [dementia](#) and reconnect them with their memories. Now a Northwestern University researcher is testing whether music played for residents of a suburban nursing home can be therapeutic, whether it can improve cognition, conversation and relationships.

As the number of dementia patients grows — to nearly one in three seniors by the time of death — advocates hope to get insurance and Medicare to extend music therapy to everyone who could benefit from it.

In the process, caregivers whose parents or partners have grown distant, confused and agitated are finding new ways to share meaningful moments with the ones they love.

Is there anybody in there?

A person with dementia can recede so far that he or she is no longer responsive, suggesting personality and consciousness have been lost. But in his book “Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain,” the renowned late neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks wrote that he’d seen such patients shiver or weep while listening to music.

“Once one has seen such responses,” he wrote, “one knows that there is still a self to be called upon, even if music, and only music, can do the calling.”

Research has suggested benefits from music therapy for people with autism, depression, schizophrenia, brain injuries and cancer. Newborns in intensive care have been found to gain weight faster when exposed to music.

For people recovering from a stroke, the rhythm of music can help them regain their gait. Those with aphasia, who’ve lost the ability to speak, sometimes can sing familiar songs, and some can eventually be taught to transition from singing to talking.

Such therapy, known as melodic intonation treatment, was used to help Arizona congresswoman [Gabrielle Giffords](#) recover her speech after she was shot in the head.

Researchers suspect this may be particularly useful for patients with damage to the left side of the brain, because music emphasizes use of the right side of the brain, providing a potential alternate route to develop new nerve pathways.

For some people with dementia, music therapy has been shown to enhance attention and cognition, to improve behavior while reducing the use of psychoactive drugs, and to reduce anxiety and depression. Singing songs can help prompt specific memories that otherwise might have been forgotten completely, experts say.

And because music is also processed in part in a core part of the brain called the cerebellum, doctors say patients can retain the ability to dance and sing long after ability to talk has diminished.

Some patients get very agitated by being disoriented, and might throw things or lash out at others. But when they hear music from their youth, it can put them in a familiar environment and help them feel more at ease.

On the other end of the spectrum, some patients are so nonresponsive, or so heavily medicated, they may need music to wake them up and get them moving.

Intrigued by the potential benefits, Dr. Borna Bonakdarpour, a neurologist with Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, put together a music therapy study this spring at Silverado Orchard Park Memory Care Community in Morton Grove.

Each week for 12 weeks, the Evanston-based nonprofit Institute for Therapy Through the Arts held concerts for 10 Silverado residents. The musicians are specially trained to apply their skills to therapy, often by interacting with patients during performances, and getting them to beat on drums, sing, and dance. The \$84,000 program is funded by an anonymous donor.

A similar group of residents in another nursing home went without the therapy to compare results. Since finishing the initial study period in April, researchers are analyzing the results, and hope to try the same treatment for the opposite group in the future.

"Music therapy is gaining more confidence now as an intervention, so this is a very exciting time," Bonakdarpour said. "We thought when people get Alzheimer's, they're done, because there's no medicine to cure it. But there's so much we can do to have an impact and improve their quality of life."

One music therapy program, Songs by Heart, boasts locations in several states, including 18 sites in Illinois. It was started in 2015 by Evanston native Nancy Gustafson, a soprano who has performed in Europe's major opera houses with the likes of Luciano Pavarotti and Georg Solti.

Gustafson's mother had dementia and couldn't speak with or even recognize her daughter. But when Gustafson tried playing piano and singing for her, she says, her mother began singing along and talking, to her daughter's amazement.

Reconnecting with deep memories

At Silverado, before the concert began, some of the residents were subdued, showing little emotion, not saying much. The ensemble — a pianist, cellist, singer and percussionist — began to play. There were some classic instrumentals, like a piano-cello duet of "The Swan," and some crowd-pleasing singalongs, like "Get Happy." The group previously played "Over the Rainbow," but found that was too emotional for some of the residents.

Many in the audience followed the tempo with tambourines, small drums or hand claps. Some got up and danced. At least one still looked down, showing no reaction.

Administrators say some residents seem a bit livelier or more talkative the rest of the week. Even if the program doesn't make lasting changes for some, it's designed to at least recreate a connection between patients and their caregivers and families, said Silverado administrator Rachele Demaster.

"There's just that intimacy again, the holding of hands, the sparkle in the eye. It's really cute," she said. "They're rekindling their relationship and love for one another. It's something that often gets lost during the progression of this disease."

Not all of the nursing home residents have Alzheimer's. Doug Brown, the youngest member of the music therapy group at 57, has a brain tumor called glioblastoma, the same type as Sen. John McCain.

Originally from Mississippi, Brown played in an Irish folk band in the 1980s, his girlfriend Cris Noll said. The couple are huge music fans, and met by literally bumping into each other in line at a Paul McCartney appearance in London in 1997.

Brown worked as a computer programming analyst and lived with Noll until last year, when he began losing some of his rational thought, and Noll became afraid to leave him alone.

So Brown moved into the nursing home last year, where he remains seemingly content, though Noll called his disease "heartbreaking." He doesn't know what day it is, or when it was his birthday recently.

But when it comes to music, Noll said, "He loves watching the musicians play. He sang the songs. Even in his condition, it's funny how music will spark a memory."

After some of the sessions, Brown borrowed a musician's guitar and found he could still play the Eagles' "Peaceful Easy Feeling."

Another resident, Verna Sadock, was a well-known courtroom sketch artist in Chicago for years, covering trials of the Chicago 7, singer R. Kelly, and former governor Rod Blagojevich, producing drawings that were seen on the nightly news. She lived in Lake Point Tower with her husband, Bob Hirsch, sold paintings in local galleries and attended concerts in Millennium Park. But without her work, her thoughts became disjointed. She began hanging out in her building's lobby, had trouble finding her way home and started speaking out at inopportune times, such as in the middle of a concert — a symptom of the dementia invading her mind. She moved to the nursing home last year.

From the time as a toddler when she climbed on a chair and started drawing on the wall, Hirsch said, Sadock's first love was visual arts, and her paintings decorate her room — some depicting a lone, fashionably-dressed woman, possibly herself — in exotic locales. But her parents were musicians, and she was also musical, flabbergasting onlookers some years ago when she borrowed an accordion and played "Lady of Spain." When the therapists came to perform, she clapped, smiled, and played the tambourine.

"It really got to her," Hirsch said. "I could see she was engaged."

After the concerts at the nursing home, the residents broke into smaller groups to share their thoughts. When asked what he did for a living, Dean didn't answer that he was a retired music teacher, but simply said, "I'm a music teacher." He still occasionally plays piano, and sings for his own enjoyment. He recently went to his friend Lisabeth Weiner's home for Passover and chanted prayers in Hebrew that he learned as a child.

"As a musician, he goes to that zone and it all comes back to him," Weiner said. "Those are very deep memories. He can still reach in and find them and still do it beautifully.

"The thing you learn about Alzheimer's is, you have to help the patient enjoy life in the moment," she said. "It provides a lot of enjoyment for him in the moment."

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