

Using Music in the Three Stages of Dementia



Early (Mild) Stage

Dementia can start with small changes in the person's behaviour or ability. Short-term memory loss is often the first symptom, the person may have difficulty recalling recent events or recently learned information. Someone in the early stages of Dementia may:

- Forget recent conversations
- Struggle to find the right word, or lose thread of the conversation
- Unwilling to try new things
- Lose track of day and time
- Find it harder to plan things and make decisions
- Have problems judging distance, for example when walking up stairs.
- Mislaid items around the house

It is important that a person with early Dementia is given the opportunity to do things for themselves, and are supported to maintain their independence. Focus on what the person can do, not what they are no longer able to do.

Using meaningful familiar music can help to re-orientate, reduce anxiety and promote self-identity. Singing the person's daily routine can help them remember certain tasks throughout the day.

Middle (Moderate) Stage

As the Dementia progresses, the changes become more noticeable. In Mid-stage Dementia a person may become more forgetful and confused, and as a result may be upset, distressed and angry because they are feeling frustrated. They may need more support with daily tasks, and may need to be frequently reminded to eat, drink, wash, brush their teeth, and go to the toilet. They are more likely to become forgetful, particularly forgetting familiar names and faces. They may repeat the same sentence or question over and over.

Other symptoms may include:

- Confusing day and night
- Behaving in ways that are out of character, for example becoming agitated
- Having delusions, believing things that are not true, and less often having hallucinations.
- Becoming confused about where they are

Listening to familiar music before a known trigger such as sundowning can help reduce agitation. Likewise, participating in group music activities can help to improve social engagement and also decrease caregiver burden.

Late (Severe) Stage

At this stage the person living with Dementia will need more support and may eventually become completely reliant on others for their care. Memory loss may be severe with the person unable to recognise familiar people such as their spouse or children. The person's walking may become more unsteady and they may become frailer. Other symptoms include:

- Difficulty eating and swallowing
- Incontinence – loss of bladder or bowel control
- Loss of speech
- Weight loss

The person living with Dementia may become more agitated, through frustration and lack of understanding of surroundings.

At this stage music is even more important as it can be used as a mechanism for communication, singing familiar songs may spark a sudden flash of recognition and can bring a deeper connection for the person and their families and carers.