

The Power of Music, Preserving Dignity in Aging

After a series of strokes, Henry has spent the last 10 years in a nursing home. His daughter visits him regularly, and she says that for the most part, he spends his time sitting in his chair, relatively unresponsive to the world around him.

That catatonic state goes away as soon as the headphones go on. Henry is transformed by the music in his ears. His feet start moving, his hands wave. Most strikingly, his eyes open wide, and he becomes alive again.

Henry is part of a simple program called Music & Memory that is changing the face of long-term care. Music & Memory takes iPods, often donated, to nursing homes and trains the staff to fill them with playlists personalized to the “soundtrack” of each resident’s life. That generally means music that was popular when someone was in the prime of their youth, between the ages of 15-25.

The results are amazing. It’s clear that hearing their favorite music brings joy and enhances their quality of life. The music restores identities that may have been lost to illness or dementia. It increases communication and social engagement. Even after the headphones come off, the affects linger, making it possible for relatives to engage and for staff to build relationships. And it offers a distraction from a monotonous routine.

The idea for Music & Memory came when founder Dan Cohen decided that if he ended up in a nursing home at some point, he wanted to be able to listen to his favorite music from the ’60s. He volunteered at a local nursing home, using iPods to create a customized music list for each resident. The program was a hit, and it laid the groundwork for the current program. A grant from the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation in 2008 allowed him to buy 200 iPods to pilot the idea.

Music & Memory has since expanded to 3,000 programs across the U.S. and is in eight countries. It can be integrated into many kinds of care environments – skilled care, assisting living, home health, adult day programs, centers, hospice and even hospitals.

Today, Cohen’s team has expanded the program to incorporate the younger generation. A curriculum has been designed for members of high school HOSA (Future Health Professionals) chapters. Students are sent to certified facilities to create playlists as part of their service learning. It’s a great way to connect the two generations, with one student observing, “the clock turns back, and they become young again.”

Anyone interested in bringing Music & Memory to their community or to a loved one can receive certification thru a relatively easy process. Three 90-minute webinars explain what kind of iPod equipment is needed and how to get started. There is also training for additional staff, an online site with best practices and other resources, and monthly calls covering a variety of related topics.

Music & Memory, a sustainable and evidence-based program, is also a relatively inexpensive program to introduce. Costs include certification training and iPods. However, donated iPods are often used and provide an opportunity for kids and volunteers to get involved by organizing iPod donation drives. Foundations interested in bringing Music & Memory to the care facilities in their areas can provide funding support for the certification and iPods. For more information, please visit <https://musicandmemory.org/>.