

## Music therapy eases depression, soothes agitation in nursing home residents with dementia

Did you know that around the world there are over 35 million people living with dementia? People who are diagnosed with dementia, a progressively worsening disorder that affects memory, often experience a sad mood, agitation, and exhibit wandering behaviors.

As healthy adults, whenever we are feeling down, we often turn on the radio, find ourselves singing in the shower, or dancing to a song re-playing in our head. When you have dementia, you need assistance to find that happy, peaceful place. Music therapists are skilled not only to find and perform an individual's favorite piece that triggers memories or pleasurable moments, but to aid in processing feelings of depressed mood or agitation. Once the music stimulates memories, people with dementia often become more verbal and emotionally expressive. This creates an opportunity for a therapeutic intervention.

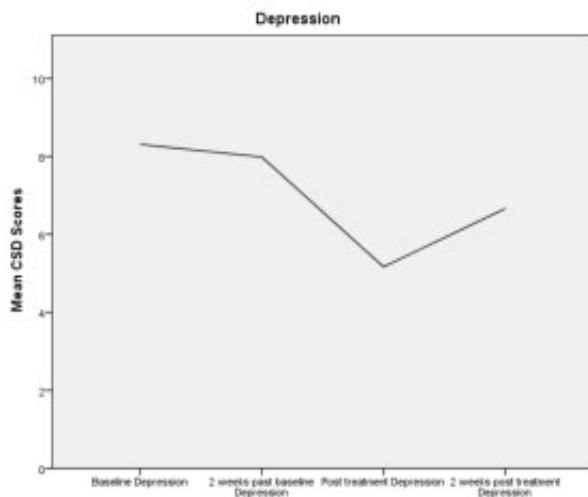


Fig. 1. Graph displaying change in agitation before and after music therapy.

Music therapy is a non-pharmacological intervention that caters to individuals' musical preference with consideration of cultural and historical needs in order to alleviate feelings of sadness or agitation for people with dementia. In some nursing homes around the U.S., people with dementia may be offered music therapy to aid in helping them feel better as dementia progresses. People with dementia often report having a joyful experience after participating in music therapy, but depression and agitation can be a serious problem, interfering with care and quality of life. How do we know that music therapy truly works?

In a recent study, conducted in 3 Brooklyn nursing homes, 132 nursing home residents with mid to late stage dementia who were experiencing symptoms of depression, agitation and wandering were selected to discover if music therapy could help. Even though the majority of the residents were taking medications to alleviate their symptoms, all of the nursing home residents who participated in this study still exhibited signs of depression, agitation and wandering. Led by nationally board certified music therapists, in small groups of 4-6 people, residents got together several times a week for at least 2 weeks and sang some of their favorite songs that were popular during their youth like, "You are my sunshine" and "Under the Boardwalk."

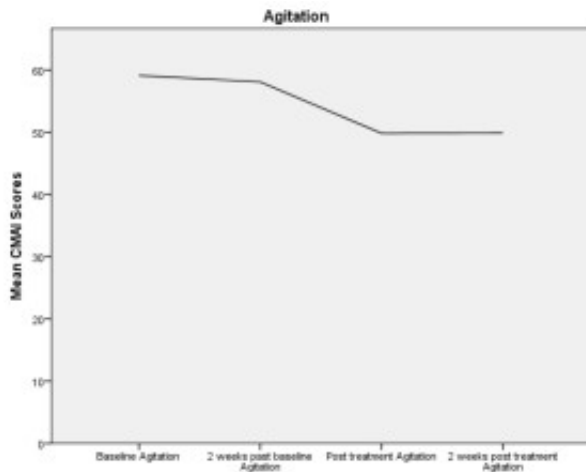


Fig. 2. Graph displaying change in depression before and after music therapy.

On other days, they played rhythm and tonal instruments and moved to familiar music with scarves and ribbons. During this time, the nursing home residents (who were able) talked about their past and present situations, which often included their former careers, family life, loss of loved ones and independence. The music therapists aided in addressing any feelings of down mood, attention to task issues, or feelings of discomfort or elation associated with hearing an old song.

We found that after only 2 weeks, nursing home residents who engaged in music therapy displayed fewer symptoms of depression and agitation. Wandering was not affected by the music therapy.

In conclusion, our results suggested that the music therapy interventions had effects on symptoms of depression and agitation, over and above any medication effects. We believe that music therapy should be considered for widespread non-pharmacological treatment in nursing homes for residents diagnosed with dementia.

**Kendra Ray**

## Publication

[Music therapy: A nonpharmacological approach to the care of agitation and depressive symptoms for nursing home residents with dementia.](#)

Ray KD, Mittelman MS.

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