

Working with Individual with Cognitive Decline and/or Dementia

"Hi, I'm Allegra, a board-certified music therapist who consults with Perfect Harmony. In Music Therapy, we use music in a clinical setting to improve functioning in areas such as cognition, communication, physical ability, social ability, mental and emotional health. Approaches to treatment vary within the field, as music therapists work with a variety of populations; however, board-certified music therapists are trained to achieve greater responses to non-musical goals as compared to those using music for entertainment or recreation. Although music therapists are the only professionals trained to use music as therapy, there are many non-clinical ways to use music with older adults." - *Allegra Hein* (MM, MT-BC)

Here are some considerations to help your musical experience be most successful when working with an individual with cognitive decline and/or dementia:

General Considerations

1. Individuals with cognitive decline and/or dementia require more time for processing information. It is important to wait at least **5 seconds** between asking a question, or giving a directive, and expecting a response.
2. Some individuals with cognitive decline and/or dementia may find it difficult to communicate verbally. Consider incorporating other forms of communication including **gestures, visuals, or music!**
3. Always be mindful of and adapt to the individual's physical, aural, or visual needs.
4. Maintaining a **person-centered approach**, meaning you are focused on the individual rather than their diagnosis, is important when caring for someone with dementia. Speak slowly, calmly and remain patient, flexible, understanding and genuine in all interactions.

This resource was created in collaboration with a board-certified music therapist.



The Great American
Songbook Foundation
Michael Feinstein, Founder

Musical Considerations

- Physiological responses to music occur naturally and can last a lifetime. Most individuals develop a personal connection with music and associate various songs or artists with life events. Individuals with cognitive decline and/or dementia often recall musical memories more vividly than nonmusical memories. This is because processing of music occurs throughout the brain, rather than in one localized region.
- Music should be incorporated into the daily life of an individual with cognitive decline and/or dementia. When providing assistance with Activities of Daily Living, consider singing a familiar song with the individual or playing their favorite music on a nearby audio device. When appropriate, encourage singing or movement to the music.

When engaging in a music activity with an individual with a cognitive decline and/or dementia, keep these tips in mind:

- Music should always come first! Engaging in music prior to discussion will help this experience be most successful.
- Have fun! Music is motivational and enjoyable. Perfect Harmony's resources provide the opportunity for socialization and meaningful interactions through music.
- An individual may require physical prompts when participating in movement. Using Perfect Harmony's suggested seated movements as a guide, support the individual by providing hand-over-hand assistance, when necessary, or adapting the movement to best meet the individual's needs.



Keep in mind:

It is important to know that an individual may cry or appear upset when participating in a musical activity. This does not always mean they are having a negative experience; however, it is important to validate their response and not ignore it. Be genuine, comforting, and acknowledge how you interpret them to be feeling.

If you begin to notice particularly distressing behaviors, the individual may be experiencing emotions representative of a deeper matter. At this time, it would be important for you to contact a music therapist, social worker, doctor, counselor, or other healthcare professional.

If you observe sudden and/or frequent changes in behavior, consult with a:

- Board-Certified Music Therapist, Social Worker, Doctor, Counselor or other Healthcare professional
- This is a non-clinical tool for using music for social engagement in the care of an individual with dementia. Some individuals will need more. If that is the case, we encourage you to visit www.musictherapy.org to learn more about Music Therapy, an established healthcare profession that uses music to address clinical goals.

