

Caregiver's Corner Column (April 2011)

Music for Wellness

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It's all around us, from the time we are babies through the end of our life. It can be calming or it can be energizing. It helps us commemorate special events and express our feelings. Music plays different roles for different people. Sometimes music can be another way to communicate. For example, I had the pleasure of seeing a gentleman who was in the late stages of Dementia. He had not spoken to family or staff in over six months. I started singing "Let me call you Sweetheart" and watched as he began to sing along, not missing a word. By the end of the song, his eyes were full of tears. When I reported this to his daughter, she was amazed. She shared that this song held special meaning because it was a song that he would frequently sing to his wife. Music prompts memories, it provides security and familiarity in a disorganized environment it can give a feeling of belonging and allows for nonverbal communication. Music also can evoke feelings of success and satisfaction, when other activities are no longer successful.

How can you use music with the people you care for? You don't have to be a good singer or play an instrument to enjoy the benefits of music. Start off with something as simple as looking through records, tapes, or CDs together. This prompts memories and stimulates conversation. Finding music that you know they enjoy and playing it and listening, not passively as you do other things, but actively. If you are able and comfortable, sing along and encourage them to sing as well. Studies have shown the benefits of singing to include: fewer incidences of depression, easier breathing, enhanced feelings of relaxation and better posture. During the song try to find key phrases that may evoke more conversation. For example, the song "Let me call you Sweetheart," lends itself nicely to questions about dating, love and marriage. You may be surprised at the responses you get. This is beneficial even if you are the only one talking. You may have to provide the memories. For example, "I remember when you told me how you and Dad met" or "you once told me that Mom used to call you her big teddy bear." You are providing stimulation even if they are not talking.

Another way to use music is through dancing. Dancing is a great way to stimulate the senses. It is also an effective way for care giving spouses to once again experience emotional closeness with their loved one. You don't need to know all of the dance steps to experience the benefits. All you need to do is gently sway to the music. If standing up is not an option, just sway to the music using your arms. This works perfectly if, like me, you have two left feet. You may want to start with a waltz or perhaps the Beer Barrel Polka.

Music can provide a positive way to interact with the one you care for. It can promote verbal and nonverbal interaction, provide an opportunity to share memories, as well as create new memories. So dig out those old records and tapes, hum a tune or dance a little jig and see what new beautiful music you can make together.

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