A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES AND CARE STAFF

Music & Memories

How to build a personal playlist for someone living with memory loss.

Test playlist
Scan for a sample playlist. Play it through and see what lands.

Musical memories last

Brain areas that hold long-familiar songs are relatively spared by Alzheimer's. (Jacobsen et al., 2015)

It can lift the mood

Five or more music therapy sessions may ease symptoms of depression a little for people with dementia. (van der Steen et al., 2025)

It brings people together

In a trial at 12 senior centers, choir members grew less lonely and more interested in life. (Johnson et al., 2020)

Build the playlist

1. **Ask the person first.**
   Even if words come slowly, play a few songs and watch the reaction. Then ask family and old friends for input.
2. **Find music from the teens and early adult years.**
   Familiar music tends to bring back memories from early adulthood, even for people with Alzheimer's. (Cuddy et al., 2017) Rule of thumb: born in 1940? Try music from about 1955 to 1965.
3. **Include their own culture and faith.**
   Hymns, gospel, music in their first language, songs from home. Music is tied closely to identity. (Paolantonio et al., 2022)
4. **Start with 10 to 15 songs.**
   Mix calm songs with livelier ones. Use the artists' own versions rather than cover songs.
5. **Use what's easy to work.**
   A CD player, a tablet, or a smart speaker. Something where they can just click “play.” Residents have said sore hands, small displays, and no radio in the room kept them from listening. (Paolantonio et al., 2022)

Questions that unlock songs

- What song did you dance to at your wedding?
- What music was playing at home when you were growing up?
- Who was your favorite singer or band?
- What did you sing at church, at holidays, or around the table?
- Is there a song you'd rather *not* hear?

Watch the reaction

● Keep playing

Smiling, humming, tapping, singing, relaxed shoulders, telling a story.

● Pause and check in

Restlessness, frowning, pushing away, distress are things to be careful of. Tears aren't always bad, so stay with the person and ask.

Using it well

Keep it regular.
A few times a week and more often is better. The benefits may not last once the music stops. (van der Steen et al., 2025)

Listen together when you can.
Sing along, tap along, and ask about the memories a song brings back. Families who wrote songs with a loved one called it a positive shared experience. (Clark et al., 2021)

Take notes in the moment.
A good record of how songs made them feel can really help to tailor certain songs for certain moments.

Match the moment.
Calm songs for evenings and bath time; livelier songs for mornings. Soothing music at bedtime helped older adults living at home sleep better. (Lai & Good, 2005)

Be careful with headphones.
Only if the person is comfortable and can take them off, and keep the volume moderate.

Keep the list alive.
Add songs that work. Take out any that elicit a negative response. Many residents want more music, including new music, not only the old. (Paolantonio et al., 2022)

Music is not a cure

Research is mixed on whether it helps memory and thinking, and benefits may not last after sessions end. (Fusar-Poli et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2025; van der Steen et al., 2025) It is a simple, low-cost way to bring comfort, connection, and moments of joy.

Ask for music in the care plan

Nearly half (46%) of nursing home residents have Alzheimer's or another dementia (Alzheimer's Association, 2025), and many have less access to music after moving in. (Paolantonio et al., 2022)

At the next care plan meeting, ask that personal music be part of daily activities. Federal rules require nursing homes to offer an ongoing activities program based on each resident's own preferences. (Quality of Life, 2025) In assisted living, rules vary by state, so start with the activities director.

My Music

Fill in together. Keep a copy in the room and in the care plan.

NAME

YEAR BORN · GREW UP IN

FAVORITE SINGERS OR BANDS

FAVORITE KINDS OF MUSIC

SONGS THAT MATTER TO ME

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

SONGS OR MUSIC TO AVOID (AND WHY, IF KNOWN)

THE STORY BEHIND A FAVORITE SONG

I LIKE TO LISTEN

- ☐ Mornings
- ☐ Afternoons
- ☐ Evenings
- ☐ At bath or care time
- ☐ Alone
- ☐ With others
- ☐ Singing along

Where to get help

Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline
800-272-3900
Free information and support, any time of day or night.

Eldercare Locator
1-800-677-1116
Connects you to local aging services and your Area Agency on Aging.

Michigan Long Term Care Ombudsman
866-485-9393
Free, confidential advocate for residents of nursing homes and other licensed care.
MLTCOP.org

Silver Club Memory Programs, Ann Arbor
734-998-9352
Michigan Medicine day programs for memory loss, with music and art. Cost based on ability to pay.

Music & Memory
musicandmemory.org
Nonprofit that trains care staff and families to create personal playlists.

Find a board-certified music therapist
musictherapy.org
Look for the credential **MT-BC** (Music Therapist–Board Certified).

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