

Fostering Musical Engagement



Thank you for taking the time to review this brief guide. The notes below are intended to help you better support musical engagement for your care partner or family member with Dementia during a music therapy session. If you have questions, please consult with your music therapist, recreation therapist, or other care team member.

Music can offer our bodies and minds many benefits such as emotional expression, motivation, respite, relaxation, cognitive stimulation, reminiscence, and social engagement. Some of these benefits happen 'under the surface' or in the hours after the musical encounter. As well, depending on the individual's personality, they may choose to exhibit their engagement or not. Our experience of music is very personal, and depending on factors of our daily lives, our health, and our past experiences with music, the benefits exist along a spectrum.

Music therapists receive specialized training to foster musical encounters that reach people in ways that best suit their abilities and needs. As well, sessions are structured around goals specific to the participant(s).

Below are some tips for fostering musical engagement during music therapy sessions.

1. **Allow time for a warm-up:** It can take up to 25 or 30 minutes of musical stimulation before some people exhibit any visible signs of engagement (toe tapping/singing/visual attention). Music is A LOT for our brains to process, so it takes time for systems to get up and running.
2. **Observe the group member and join:** Before intervening or modelling, observe the member to see how they are engaging. Are they humming? Then sing along yourself. Are they tapping their hand or foot? Then find the beat in your body and join them. Are they closing their eyes? Then join them in their moment of quiet listening.
3. **Try to listen for yourself and foster your own response to the music:** Sometimes, the best thing we can do is give permission to 'let loose' in the music by finding our own enjoyment. Allowing yourself to have an authentic experience will allow others to enjoy the music.
4. **Sleeping is not always a bad sign:** In some cases, music allows people to finally relax completely. You will know best the type of day the group member has had, so if they close their eyes to sleep, consider if this may be good for them. Was it a stimulating day? Did they have a bad sleep?
5. **Establish a C.L.E.A.N listening space:** Use the acrostic below to establish a space to foster optimal musical engagement and allow for best auditory experiences.

Close all other programs, windows, and application on your device – Zoom works best when your device is able to direct as much attention as possible to the call. Sometimes, sound transmission can suffer when other programs or applications are running.

Limit distractions – TV screens, other conversations, etc. can all distract the member from the group music therapy experience. While it may not seem like a distraction for you, it may be more distracting for the group member who is working to process visual, auditory, cognitive, emotional, and many other sensory stimuli.

Equipment - Technology allows us to experience music in so many ways. Hearing aids allow people to hear more sounds in their environments, but when turned up too high, can create feedback, pain, or distortion. As well, some device speakers (on a tablet, cell phone, or computer) may not be clear for the group member. If possible, adjust device volume to suit their hearing needs, or consider using over ear headphones (after checking the volume yourself to be sure it is safe for them) or external speakers. If using headphones, be sure to monitor the group member's response to the program.

Avoid directing – Keeping in mind the other tips above, try to avoid telling the member what to do (ie. clap, sing, look). This presents additional information to process when the group members may be already working to process what has already been presented. If the music has already started, their brain may be consumed by the musical stimulus.

Not just ears hear – Be sure the group member has the tools they need for the best experience with the group. Do they have their glasses? Is the sunlight in their eyes? Are they seated comfortably? Is there a way to make the video clearer for them? In some cases, tablets or cell phones can present very tiny for some people. Cables can connect to larger computer screens or even more modern TVs.

Finally, there is no expectation for participants to perform in specific ways in music therapy. This work is in no way performative. The value of the work is in the process – the process of being there, of listening, of feeling. Our experience with music is highly personal and we should never assume we know the experience of another person based only on what we see. Musical experiences can ignite internal responses, which can present during and after the session. Follow the cues from your partner, and be patient. Musical engagement is a complex and intricate process for our brains and bodies. Our systems are designed to respond to musical stimulus. Trust that system, and when in doubt, consult with the professionals you work with. We've got you covered 😊

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