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 probably 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.
2. **Aim for 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 their own versions: the singer they loved, not a cover.
5. **Use what's easy to work.**
   A CD player, a simple music player, a tablet, or a smart speaker. 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. Tears aren't always bad, so stay with the person and ask.

Using it well

Keep it regular.
A few times a week beats once in a while. 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)

Make room for it.
Turn off the TV. In shared homes, some residents hold back so they won't disturb neighbors. (Paolantonio et al., 2022)

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)

Go easy 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 upset. 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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