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How to Create a Personalized Playlist for Your Loved One at Home

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How to Create a Personalized Playlist for Your Loved One at Home

When someone you love struggles with Alzheimer's, dementia, Parkinson's or another form of cognitive or physical impairment, it can be a tremendous challenge to communicate and find ways to help him or her rediscover pleasure in the world.

Personalized music can bridge that gap and enable you to reconnect with one another. This guide will help you to set up a personalized playlist for your loved one at home using a computer, an iTunes account and an iPod with headphones.

Grounded in extensive neuroscience research, our work with hundreds of individuals in elder care facilities has shown that many people benefit profoundly from hearing their favorite songs that tap fond memories. Here are some outcomes you and your loved one may experience:

- Someone who has been silent or less communicative may begin to talk and be more social.
- Someone who has been sad and depressed may feel happier.
- Someone who has been less mobile may become more physically active.

Each individual's response is unique, and your loved one's ability to benefit from personalized music will depend in large part on the particulars of his or her cognitive impairment. But chances are good that she or he will find more pleasure in life once again, and that you will gain a peaceful, relaxing way to renew your relationship.

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A Little Background

Music & Memory is all about bringing joy into the lives of people suffering from Alzheimer's, other forms of dementia and a wide range of cognitive and physical impairments.

Our approach is simple, elegant and effective: We train professionals in nursing homes and other elder care settings how to set up a personalized music program that integrates smoothly into the life of the care organization. Musical favorites tap deep memories not lost to dementia and can reawaken loved ones, enabling them to feel like themselves again, converse, socialize and stay present.

How Music & Memory Began

Executive Director Dan Cohen founded Music & Memory with a simple idea: Someday, if he ended up in a nursing home, he wanted to be able to listen to his favorite '60s music. He'd heard a recent news report about how iPods have grown so popular. Why not bring used iPods as well as new ones into nursing homes to provide personalized music for residents?

When Dan had his brainstorm in 2006, he discovered that none of the 16,000 long-term care facilities in the U.S. used iPods for their residents. Drawing on his background in leveraging technology to benefit people who would otherwise have no access, he volunteered at a local nursing home in Greater New York, creating personalized playlists for residents. The program was a hit with residents, staff and families, and became the prototype for a bigger effort.

With funding from the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation in 2008, Dan brought 200 iPods to residents of four New York long-term care facilities and tested the program on a larger scale. Successful outcomes spurred the creation of Music & Memory as a 501c3 non-profit.

Since then, we have implemented iPod personalized music programs in more than 60 care facilities throughout the U.S. and Canada. A 2011 matching grant outreach effort provided digital music players, headphones, music, training and support to qualifying facilities and has significantly helped to advance our mission.

In April 2012, a documentary about our work, *Alive Inside: The Story of Music and Memory*, was screened at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. A [video clip of Henry](#), one of the residents reawakened by listening to his Cab Calloway favorites, went viral, with more than 7 million views. The resulting outpouring of interest and support for our work gives us great hope that our vision of personalized music as a gold standard of elder care will be realized.

The Brain-Music Connection

As we all know from hearing that song associated with a first love or the hits that were popular when you left home to make it on your own, music is profoundly linked to personal memories. In fact, our brains are hard-wired to connect music with long-term memory.

Even for persons with severe dementia, music can tap deep emotional recall. For individuals suffering from Alzheimer's, more recent memory for things—names, places, facts—is compromised, but memories from our teenage years can be well-preserved.

Favorite music or songs associated with important personal events can trigger memory of lyrics and the experience connected to the music. Beloved music often calms chaotic brain activity and enables the listener to focus on the present moment and regain a connection to others.

The benefits of this form of music therapy have been well-studied and documented by distinguished researchers, including Music & Memory board member Dr. Connie Tomaino and Dr. Oliver Sacks, author of *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, co-founders of the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function.

How to Set Up a Personalized Playlist

To create a personalized playlist, you'll need three pieces of equipment:

- **A personal computer or tablet.** It does not have to be an Apple product.
- **An iPod.** While you can use an MP3 player by another manufacturer, we've learned from experience with many elders that iPods are the easiest to use and the most durable personal music devices. The simplest, most affordable device is the iPod Shuffle, which retails for \$49.
- **A pair of lightweight, adjustable, over-the-ear headphones.** You can find good, reasonably priced equipment at Target, Best Buy, RadioShack or other stores that sell electronics, or

order online from Amazon. Expect to spend about \$20. The earbuds that come with iPods are difficult for elders to use, so we recommend against them.

Find Your Loved One's Favorite Music

To set up a personalized playlist for your loved one, your first step is to sit down together to select the right music. The iPod Shuffle can hold about 300 songs. Other iPods have a larger capacity, and you can expand your range of selections as you develop playlists. Whichever iPod you use for your loved one, however, your goal is to identify 80 to 100 selections to start. Think in terms of 10 to 15 artists that are his or her favorites.

While you might assume that the easiest way to go about this is to pick artists and songs that were popular when your loved one was young, that can be a hit-or-miss process. The best place to start is to ask. If your loved one has trouble communicating, you may need the help of another family member or good friend who can fill in the blanks.

Here are some questions to get the conversation started:

- What music did you listen to when you were young?
- Did you sing at religious services? What were your favorite hymns or other religious music?
- Did you enjoy going to Broadway shows or musicals? Which ones?
- Do you still have any records or tapes that were favorites? What are they?
Where can I find them?
- Who was your favorite performer, group, band or orchestra?
- Who was your favorite classical composer?
- Can you hum any of your favorites?
- What songs did you dance to at your wedding? high school prom?

Make notes as you talk, and be sure to continue this conversation as your loved one begins to use the iPod, so you can modify and grow the number of selections and playlists.

Create an iTunes Account

Now that you've identified your loved one's favorite music, it's time to create an iTunes account on your computer. Your iTunes account serves as the master library for all of the music you select for your loved one's playlists that you will load onto his or her iPod. You can set up a variety of playlists, and you can also include other content, such as audio books, old-time radio programs and much more.

If you are an Apple user, the log-in is the same as your Apple ID and password. Apple provides a very helpful set of video tutorials that walk you through the process of setting up your account and adding music.

The iPod tutorials include guidance for how to download and install iTunes on an Apple or a PC, how to add music to your iTunes library from the iTunes store, as well as how to add music to your library from CDs that you already own—an important resource for building an iTunes library. You'll also learn how to set up a playlist and how to generate recommendations for adding music to a playlist using the Genius function. With your playlist established, you'll learn how to load the music into your iPod.

You'll find the instructions here: [Apple - iTunes - Tutorials - Learn about all things iTunes](#). If you find this all a bit intimidating, pass along this step in the process to a friend or relative who is familiar with iTunes, who can help you get started.

Once you've defined your loved one's tastes, as [described above](#), you can begin downloading the top 5 or 10 most popular songs of her or his favorite artists into your iTunes library. If you're not sure, you can use the iTunes sampling feature, which allows you to listen to 90 seconds of the selection for free. Sit with your loved one and play a few samples to see if you're on track.

The Genius feature in iTunes can help you to find more music that is similar to your initial selections. Highlight the song that you know is a winner and click on the Genius button. You'll see a range of recommendations that you can then sample with your loved one.

You can segment the music into a variety of playlists. See the [video tutorials](#) for directions. This can be helpful if your loved one would benefit from more up-beat music during the day, for example, and a more relaxing playlist to help reduce anxiety or ease into sleep at night. When you're satisfied with the playlists you've created, refer to the tutorials for how to load the music into your loved one's iPod.

Please note: Whatever music and other media that you add to your iTunes account, we urge you to respect copyright laws and follow legal music download practices. This means paying for any music that you download. iTunes cost about a dollar a song, but if you purchase a “best of” album collection, you’ll probably save money on more selections from your loved one’s favorite musician. Adding CDs that you already own is a perfectly legal way to build up your iTunes library.

Help Your Loved One Learn to Use the iPod

Tailor your approach to accommodate your loved one’s ability. If she or he can use a TV remote, then your loved one may be able to use an iPod Shuffle independently. We’ve found, however, that many elders need partial or total assistance. Be patient. Expect the process to take time and repetition as you introduce the iPod and teach how to operate it.

First, plug in the headphones and adjust them to a comfortable position on your loved one’s head. Be sure to place the headphones so L is on the left ear and R is on the right to ensure that they fit the head properly.

If your loved one uses hearing aides, test the headphones to see if they fit easily over the hearing aides. We’ve found that it may take some experimentation to see if your loved one is comfortable listening through the combination of hearing aides and headphones. If there is any concern about his or her ability to hear the music this way, consult with an audiologist.

Set the volume on the iPod and ask if it’s loud enough. Leave the power switch set to “ON.” This way, your loved one only needs to learn how to click the PLAY/PAUSE button on and off. Practice a few times, so your loved one gains confidence and you’re sure she or he understands what to do. If possible, teach how to skip to the next song, so that he or she will have more control over choices.

You can set the iPod to run through the playlist in the order that the songs were loaded or to automatically shuffle the songs to vary the listening experience. Experiment with your loved one to see which she or he prefers.

If your loved one becomes more agitated listening to music, it may mean that one or more of the music selections should be swapped out for something more calming. Wait and try different music at another time to evaluate.

Sometimes music brings back positive memories, sometimes negative. If your loved one becomes emotional while listening, keep in mind that it may be just fine for that to happen. You be the judge.

If your loved one needs to move into a care facility, we encourage you to make arrangements to take along his or her iPod and personalized music. Musical favorites can be a comforting presence in the midst of what is often a challenging and stressful transition. Work with the care facility staff to explain your loved one's personalized music set-up and listening schedule, and involve them in helping to manage the iPod. If they have any questions, please direct them to our website, www.musicandmemory.org, and to our guide, [*Making the Case for Personalized Music: A Guide for Elder Care Professionals*](#).

Creating a personalized playlist for your loved one is a musical journey for both of you. Your loved one will gain a wonderful way to relax, remember and find enjoyment—especially if music has played an important role in his or her life. And you will get to know each other even better as you share musical favorites and the memories that go with them. Both of you will gain quality time and peaceful moments together.

Personalized music is a gift that keeps on giving, in a way that few other gifts can, at this stage in your loved one's life. Congratulations on taking this important step to providing comfort and joy.