



# Connecting Through Music



# **Building Connection Through Music**

Music can be a powerful tool to support caregivers. We all use music in our lives, and with a bit of intention and awareness, it can be effectively used to share moments, support activities, and build connections.

From the perspective of a music therapist with over 25 years of experience witnessing the impact that clinical music therapy has on people's lives, it has become clear to me that using music with intention, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity can yield amazing results.

Join me on a journey to learn how to safely use some of the ideas I have accumulated over the years to support you as a caregiver and your participant. Whether you want to create a relaxing mood in a living space, improve your relationships, or boost someone's energy (and your own), music can joyfully support the participant and the caregiver while increasing connection.



# Musical Caregiving: Passive vs. Active Musical Experiences

Thinking about realistic goals for using music in caregiving — and choosing specific types of music to support those goals — is an important first step toward using music effectively in care settings.

A helpful way to approach this process is by learning the difference between active and passive musical experiences.

- **Active music experiences** involve directly participating in or making music. This could include singing, playing an instrument, clapping, or dancing.
- **Passive music experiences** focus on listening instead. The music is used in the background, much like a soundtrack supports a scene in a movie.

To best use active or passive musical experiences, you need to think about your overall goal, what type of musical experience will best support and engage, and how are you going to choose and use music with your participant.

**Musical experiences fall into the active or passive categories.** Recognizing the difference can make it easier to choose the right kind of music for a particular task, event, or purpose.



# Follow Their Lead

Another thing to remember is that you should always follow the lead of those you're working with.

And while it might seem somewhat complicated to allow someone else to lead your musical programming, the reality is this: When it comes to using music in caregiving, try to think of your participant as your "musical boss." It is your job to follow and support their musical desires, placing their preferences above your own. This allows your loved one to feel seen and heard, which is important at every stage of life.

**Let Participants Take the Lead:** Everyone has different interests, needs and skill levels. When they lead and you supply the tunes that are engaging and meaningful to them, then the music does the work. In this way, it makes your job as a supportive caregiver easier.



Avoid making statements such as "sing louder, you love this song," which could put pressure on the participant. Instead, remember: you are empowering your participant by helping them fulfill and express their musical preferences at the time, whether that's to sing out or just sit back and listen is up to them.

This relaxed approach can benefit your relationship with the participant and keep the link to music positive for everyone. As a caregiver, really listening to what someone says, as well as reading their body language, facial expressions, and energy level, can help you and your participant clearly identify the most engaging musical path to share.

# Choosing Music in Caregiving

Connection through music often comes from having the right music selected at the correct time and for a specific purpose. You must think about your goals.

- If your goal is to wake someone gently, get them organized, and get them dressed, you could use a soft wake-up song (passive music).
- If you want to energize someone who is wheelchair-bound, you might try singing their preferred songs (active music).



Keep in mind that setting a goal in advance will help you choose the right music.



Think like a DJ. A DJ has to read the room. They get people moving by first matching the music to a mellow energy in a room. They gradually increase tempo to boost engagement and dancing, taking people on an energetic journey.

Just as with clubs and dance scenes, you can also match music to your participant or participants' energy levels. Once your participant engages with or accepts the music you have introduced, you can slowly begin experimenting with different tempos and energy levels of songs that move towards your caregiving goal. Big changes or jumps in energy from song to song is not recommended.



**Musical Energy Matching:** The following are a few examples to consider when choosing and matching music:

- **Creating a Mood:** Music builds connection by filling and organizing silence with supporting background sound, similar to a movie score. This use of music helps to reduce awkwardness in the room or simply to create a pleasant environment
- **Support an Activity:** Music builds connection by supporting a specific activity through lyrics, tempo, or mood. Often, matching these musical factors to activities can support the activity and, at the same time, increase participants' connection to you and the activity.
- **Organizing Music:** Music supports connection by matching it to your participant's mood. If successful, they are more likely to accept and engage in different music and activities.



# The Importance of Musical Preferences

Understanding musical preferences is very important when integrating music into care and having the right music can deepen connection instantly.

If possible, before you start integrating music regularly, consider getting to know their favorite songs. Preferred music carries more emotional weight and therefore can lead to a better connection for the participant.

You can find out more about their music preferences by:

- Getting their musical history from family members
- Getting their musical history from the participants
- Asking participants if they are willing to listen to some music and tell you what they like



## Using the Sticky Years To Find Preferred Music and Songs for Singing

As a caregiver, you may already know someone's favorite music or genres from experience, looking through their music collection, or asking them. However, if you don't know the person's preferences or if the person is having challenges and can't express them, the sticky years can be your guide.

The "sticky years" is a term that refers to music that was popular with a group of people between the ages of five and thirty. This is thought to be when the music is most embedded in our experiences.

A simple way to calculate someone's sticky years is to add 5 and 30 to their birth year. This gives you a range to explore. For example, for a person born in 1950, you would look for music that was popular between 1955 and 1980.

By bringing a participant's preferred music to the table, you are not just matching their preferences but also showing that you care through providing a thoughtful gift. You are giving them validation and acceptance, and, in the end, you are serving up music that can be the glue for many powerful interactions and connections in the future.

# Accessible Music Resources for Caregivers

There are many ways to find the right music for your interactions. And, there are fantastic tools and resources available to help you source and play that music, too.

When you're ready to implement music into caregiving via free resources or paid services, here are a few suggestions to check out:

- **Participants' Personal Collection of Music** - If they have records, cassette tapes, CDs, or existing song playlists, this would be a great place to start. This is a free way to access preferred music and musical experiences that are sure to come with great stories and memories.
- **Music Platforms** - These can be very useful for accessing many songs and often let you create personalized playlists for various purposes or individuals.
- **SingFit** - A music-based app for caregivers that makes it easy to connect with your participants through song. The app can provide song suggestions and has hundreds of playlists to help you match your participants' needs to the right music. SingFit will get your participant singing and engaged with the lyric coach/spoken-word cues (with no distracting reading). The caregiver does not need to be able to sing or know the songs for successful engagement. SingFit also lets you create personalized singing playlists and offers curated playlists designed by music therapists.

Visit the [SingFit - AARP Free Resource page](#) for more free caregiver resources

