

Does music help dementia – Mealtimes

FEBRUARY 3, 2020

Does Music Help Dementia – Mealtimes

Often people ask us does music help dementia? And specifically, how? I wanted to take this question and explore how music helps during mealtimes. I came across a twitter post the other day around background music and how it can be detrimental during mealtimes. I entered the discussion and found it insightful to hear the different views on this. One school of thought is that the use of music during mealtimes detracted from the social element of eating together and would stop carers from socially engaging with their residents. On the other hand, the other argument is that music during mealtimes could in fact bring people together.

I think both arguments are perfectly valid, and like with any art form, the use of music is a complex issue and I feel shouldn't be brushed with a 'one size fits all' approach. There is a breadth of literature on the benefits of background music during mealtimes, with the main benefit being around reducing agitation and lengthening the time spent at the dining table and therefore an increase in calorie consumption – In [Thomas and Smith's study \(2009\)](#) their results indicated that 'subjects consumed 20% more calories when familiar background music was played compared to an eating environment without music.'

In [Whear et al's \(2014\) systematic review](#) – Effectiveness of Mealtime Interventions on Behavior Symptoms of People With Dementia Living in Care Homes; the studies included showed that relaxing background music significantly reduced displayed physical and verbal agitation. This reduction in agitation can often help to create connections between carers and their residents, increasing social interaction not taking away from it. I want to first add a caveat, in any use of music within dementia care it should never be used to replace human interaction, if used correctly in a meaningful way, music should be used to enhance social interactions.

What can often be lacking in the current research is the intricacies of what type of background music works, what might be classed as 'background', how to deliver the music within the environment and how to engage socially through the music.

Talking with healthcare professionals, musicians and families of people living with dementia, I wanted to share some top tips on using background music during mealtimes.

- **Use relaxing music which doesn't over stimulate** – some ideas for this: quiet classical music, music from a single piano, melodious music with string instruments, quiet and peaceful music with no sudden changes in tempo.
- **Sit down and talk about the music** – engage the residents in a discussion about the music and any memories they may have with certain pieces.
- **Link with personalised playlists** – perhaps keep a mealtime playlist which includes pieces from each residents' individual playlists
- **Don't play the same music over and over** – keep the music fresh, don't play the same CD or playlist at every meal.
- **Keep the volume low** – keep the volume low enough to have a conversation, but loud enough to hear (this one can be difficult!)
- **Keep a note of particular pieces of interest** – don't forget to add any pieces the residents particularly seem to like and add this to their own individual playlist, to then be used at other times of the day.

These are just ideas I have gathered through discussions and my own experience. I would love to hear your thoughts, do you use background music at mealtimes in your care home or have you found it not to work with your residents? What are your views on using background music within dementia care? There is no right or wrong way to approach this, and by sharing we can all learn from each other.

Source: <https://musica-music.co.uk/2020/02/03/does-music-help-dementia-mealtimes/>