



# Music as medicine

Using personally meaningful  
music as a self-management  
tool for living with dementia



**Playlist for Life is Scotland's leading music and dementia charity**



This booklet has been created in partnership with our Lived Experience Ambassadors. Look out for their hints and tips throughout.

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# Introduction

We all have things we do to improve our wellbeing. Whether it's going for a run, meeting up with friends or taking a long bath, we do things that we know will help us feel better.

But did you know that something as simple as listening to a song that means something to you can improve your wellbeing?

This resource will help you discover how the power of personally meaningful music can empower you to improve your overall wellbeing, live well and give people in your life a great way to support you.



**It's simple: keep listening to the music that you've loved all your life. Your all-time favourite songs, those pieces that are especially meaningful to you. Make that your brain gym."**

**- Professor Michael Thaut  
University of Toronto**



**Playlist for Life  
is so simple, that  
people don't  
believe its power!**

**Willy Gilder**

# Music as Medicine

Think about when you hear a song that you love. Does it make you feel happy? Does it remind you of a person, place or a time in your life?

When we listen to music that means something to us, we feel an emotional connection and a sense of familiarity.

## That feeling we get is rooted in science.

Music is neurologically special in the way that it stimulates many parts of the brain at once. This means that even if parts of the brain are damaged, music can reach and engage other parts. Decades of scientific research highlights the power of music to support people living with conditions such as dementia. Personally meaningful music, which stirs emotions or memories within the listener, is particularly powerful.



Scan this QR to find out more

# Real Life Stories

The following stories have been shared by people living with dementia and carers who have used music to manage symptoms of dementia and improve wellbeing.

Scan the QR codes to hear more from the people who have shared their stories



“

## ***Music improves my mood***

When I was diagnosed, I went into a depression. I did not want to see anyone or go anywhere. But music is a wonderful thing for the soul, whether you are happy or sad. When I'm sad or low or feeling grumpy, my husband puts on my CDs on and I'm up dancing and jumping.”



“

## ***Music helped my mum to sleep better***

Music helped my mum to sleep better. Music was able to give her this underlying feeling that she was calm and safe. The relationship, through the music, is a long lasting eternal bond that we will always have.”





### ***Music reduced medication***

We worked with a person whose dementia made them disorientated, unsettled, and agitated and was prescribed daily doses of medication to help ease these feelings. After listening to their personalised music, they felt more alert and for the first-time in a long-time, initiating conversation with their partner. They now require no ‘as required’ medication, just their music.”



**Willy**



### ***Music help me get back my hobby***

Music re-wired me, it enabled me to get back in connection with my hobby. I seemed to lose interest completely, I didn’t want to draw, I didn’t want to paint. I was lost because this was something that was central to me, it was part of my identity. So, I listened to 1960s music. Almost by magic my interest and desire to paint and draw returned. Hand on heart, doing this changed my life.”





**Kelly**



### ***Music helped my mum's speech***



I noticed a difference in mum's speech, which had become muddled due to her dementia. She knew what she wanted to say but the words weren't coming out. Since I've been playing the music for her, her speech is better. She's able to say more sentences, even though they're short, the words are in the correct order."



**Emma & Anne**



### ***Music to support hobbies***



Mum's playlist helps her with her art, and she has discovered she can paint. When we play music she can talk about things from the past and can go in a tangent about things from when she was young. It has made such a difference."



“

### ***Music made travelling easier***

At the airport, as we were queuing to go through security my husband was agitated and said he wasn't going to remove his shoes and belt. I put on our playlist through his headphones. He visibly calmed down and it was such a relief. By the time we got to the front of the queue he was happy to do as instructed by the staff. That's when I really understood the value of a playlist.”



“

### ***Music affirms who I am***

Music of my cultural heritage helps me evaluate, live well and understand the changing circumstances of my life, while reaffirming who I am. Music and remaining active have been such a valid and significant therapy in my life. It is astonishing how music and creativity rescues me.”







**Marie & Allen**



### **Music is a routine for us**

Music has become part of our routine. We have the radio on in the morning, Allen plays his piano and then his guitar later on. When Allen is anxious, we play The Beatles through headphones and it's very calming. I don't know what we would do without music because a lot has changed in our lives since Allen was diagnosed, but one thing that is a constant is music."



**Gerry**



### **Music reduces stress and anxiety**

Music is by far the most therapeutic thing I do. I have playlists for different moods that I'm feeling. For example, if I'm a bit stressed, or a bit down, or in a party mood. The music I was brought up with is what I want to listen to as my dementia progresses. It just gets my endorphins going and gets my memories going."



# Finding the right music for you



Just pick songs from you own life! It can be any song that you like that means something to you and brings back a memory.”

– Carol

## Think of:



- Songs that make you lift your mood or help you relax
- Music you grew up with, that reminds you of your youth or other times in your life
- Music that reminds you of people who are important to you
- Music that reminds you of your hometown or other places you have lived
- Music from the communities you are part of or the hobbies you love.

# Some online tools to help you

- **100 years book** – this will help you find songs from your youth or other important times in your life.
- **Spotify playlist maker** – This will give you prompts to think about songs from throughout your life and create a playlist for you to print out or listen to on Spotify.
- **Soundtrack to your life booklet** – a workbook that will prompt you to think of songs on a range of themes from throughout your life and write down the memories connected to these songs.
- **Visit [www.playlistforlife.org.uk/get-started](http://www.playlistforlife.org.uk/get-started)** to find these resources and more.



## Watch out for red flag songs

There may be songs that bring up unwanted memories or emotions for you, or even songs you just really don't like. It's important to write these down as well so others are aware not to play them.

“

It's like making a mixtape for yourself. Don't stress, just start with one or two songs and build from there.

Emma

# Make a Playlist Plan



If you think you could use your own playlist to help you in time of stress, with difficult tasks or to generally improve your wellbeing then give it a go!

The next few pages include space for you to:

- ✓ Write down any songs you that are important to you.
- ✓ Note down how they help your wellbeing.
- ✓ Make a plan for how you will use music moving forward.

When you are finished, these pages could be cut out and stuck on the wall or kept somewhere safe so that you and anyone supporting you, at home or elsewhere, can refer to it easily.

# Your Playlist

Write down the personally meaningful songs you have chosen for your playlist.

**Song:**

**Memory:**

**Song:**

**Memory:**

**Song:**

**Memory:**

# Your Playlist

Write down the personally meaningful songs you have chosen for your playlist.

**Song:**

**Memory:**

**Song:**

**Memory:**

**Song:**

**Memory:**

## **How does my music help me?**

Use this space to write down how you have found music has improved your wellbeing.

## **How do I want music to be part of my my routine?**

Use this space to write down how you want music to be used. This could be added to a personal care plan, this is me document etc.



Sharing how you want music to be used as part of your care and support helps family, people in your community and health and social care professionals get to know you and understand you on a deeper level, and help them deliver the best care possible.

Everyone's experience of dementia is different and may change over time. So, the way you use a playlist will be unique and may change over time.



James

“

I have a list of songs that hold memories from my life. For now, I continue to listen to a range of music I enjoy, rather than this playlist. But, it's good to know it's there for me if I need it in the future”.

– James McKillop

# Listening to your playlist



You can listen to your chosen songs in whatever way is easiest for you. If you are comfortable listening to CDs or records then keep doing that.

Many people now use **Alexa** or other **smart speakers** (music playing devices) to support their daily routine – try using a smart speaker for your playlist.

Getting your playlist on to a smartphone or mp3 player can help you listen on the go.

Visit our Listening to music page to find out more about how to listen to your playlist.



# Share the power of music

If using personally meaningful music has made a difference for you then why not help us spread the word!



We want everyone to know about the power of music and sharing your personal experience can inspire others. Here are some ways you can help:

- Tell any friends who are also living with dementia to make a playlist, or help them get started
- Tell people in your community or professionals supporting people with dementia that music could help the people they work with.
- Are there any groups running musical activities in your area – get in touch and look for peer support.
- Get in touch and share your story with us. You can get in touch at [info@playlistforlife.org.uk](mailto:info@playlistforlife.org.uk)

**Thank you to our Lived Experience Ambassadors Carol Topper, Malcolm Topper, Willy Gilder, Emma McAuley, Anne Leivesley, and Gerry King, who have co-produced this resource with us.**

Thank you to all other friends and supporters who shared their stories and experiences of how music has helped them.

This resource has been funded by the Health and Social Care Alliance.

Cover artwork by Willy Gilder

[www.playlistforlife.org.uk](http://www.playlistforlife.org.uk)

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