



An awakening through
music and exercise

Description

Movement and Breathing exercises combined with music help the elderly with Dementia

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Previously published on January 20, 2016

I walk into my exercise class on the second floor of the residence. This is a closed unit. I greet the group with a big “hello”. The more aware of them recognize me and say “hi” back. And then there are the others, those who are suffering from Alzheimer’s and Dementia — they look at me with faraway eyes with very little if no recognition.

I unpack my gear consisting of my iPhone and speaker and switch on my music. I start to move my feet to the beat and music of Sentimental Journey. At first, just a couple of my residents start to move their feet marching in time with mine. As we move along together with the beat, more of them start to join in. In fact, I start to notice that those who seemed to be the furthest away in cognition are moving their feet too. Some of them are even starting to sing along with the song they know so well from their youth. I use a playlist of music from the forties and fifties. I have made a connection and now I have them for the rest of the 45-minute class. I have broken through — is it a miracle? Maybe — maybe not. Science has an explanation of why this breakthrough, even though quite amazing, happens all the time.

According to research, the part of the memory that is affected last by Dementia and Alzheimer’s is the part of the brain that holds the memories of music. Therefore, music acts as a back door conduit to awaken a person from the symptoms of Dementia. This is demonstrated time and again in the documentary movie called [Alive Inside: a Story of Music and Memory](#).

In this documentary, patients suffering from Dementia were given a small iPod with a playlist of songs — selected music from their youth — and a set of headphones. Researchers found that the music lit up the cognition of those



with Alzheimer's and Dementia. Patients exposed to a playlist of songs from their youth were able to recall memories from their youth that they couldn't only momentarily before. And in one case, a woman who walked with a walker started dancing without her walker, like a young person. Quite a miracle! I recommend this documentary to those who have aging parents suffering from Dementia because it offers hope.

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In my exercise class, I combine gentle Tai Chi movements with breathing exercises. These movements were selected because they are easy to follow. To my delight, I notice that everyone in the class has no difficulty in following and that their movement and breathing becomes synchronized effortlessly. These kinds of movements are specifically good for those with dementia. We do arm exercises switching from the left side of the body to the right and then do gentle stretching exercises. We move onto task-based exercises to mimic functional movements that participants used to do, like reaching up to get something off of a shelf. All movement-based exercises are good for making use of the ability of the brain to create new pathways through brain plasticity. A 2010 study published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry found that mind/body exercise (Tai Chi) training had the effect of reducing symptoms. A group of 171 patients was trained in a simple Tai Chi form and another group of 218 patients was given stretching and general toning exercises. After 5 months both groups showed "improvements in global cognitive function, delayed recall and subjective cognitive complaints."¹

Breathing exercises bring additional benefits for those suffering from Dementia or Alzheimer's. Deep controlled breathing helps lower blood pressure and this has the effect of relaxing the student. Many people suffering from Dementia are prone to panic, nervousness, and depression. Breathing deeply and correctly acts as an antidote to these symptoms. I have found that training someone to focus on their breathing can not only reverse panic, but it can also prevent it in the first place.

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As I reach the end of the class I notice that everyone seems more alert, alive and uplifted. It is quite a different group of people than the one I entered 45 minutes earlier. Movement, breathing and music seem to be a powerful amalgam in reaching into the minds of those with Dementia. More studies need to be done on this wonderful phenomenon.

¹ Lam, L. C. W., Chau, R. C. M., Wong, B. M. L., Fung, A. W. T., Lui, V. W. C., Tam, C. C. W., Leung, G. T. Y., Kwok, T. C. Y., Chiu, H. F. K., Ng, S. and Chan, W. M. (2011), *Interim follow-up of a randomized controlled trial comparing Chinese style mind body (Tai Chi) and stretching exercises on cognitive function in subjects at risk of progressive cognitive decline. Int. J. Geriatr. Psychiatry, 26: 733–740. doi: 10.1002/gps.2602*

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- 6. music therapy
- 7. tai-chi

Date Created

January 2023