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Caregiving Innovations: Therapeutic Music Support • February 11, 2015

EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

Caregiving Innovations: Therapeutic Music Support

Ron Gregory discusses the breakthroughs in technologically enhanced music for people living with Alzheimer's and dementia and their family caregivers.

Gary Barg: How did you come up with Alzheimer's Music Connect?

Ron Gregory: I spent 30 plus years in the music industry. My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and I gravitated towards music anyway, because that was part of my career. I got together with a group of friends in the medical profession who did psychology work, neurologists, and a radiologist, and just started talking to them about whether we could take music and use it with an Alzheimer's patient, but also tweak the music in a way that would make the experience even more incredible. We were able to develop a technology that allowed us to actually alter the way an Alzheimer's patient's brain reacts to the music. Not only are you stimulating the remote memories that music formed for them between the ages of eight and 20 years old with some music selections, but we also have this technology that stimulates the brain waves that exist in every person's brain.

Gary Barg: Anecdotally, you and I have seen those YouTube clips of the person living with dementia or Alzheimer's. They hear music from their childhood or their youth and all of a sudden, they are responding. They are singing. They are following every word. They are tapping their toes. When the music is over, they go back to where they were.

Ron Gregory: Yes. It is that process that the brain goes through, pulling back the remote memories. These are things that are deeply inside of this person, and part of their development as a human being. Whether it is enhanced music or not, the music does stimulate people. We try to take a different tactic to make it an even better experience. I have seen this with people we have worked with and filmed, specifically one case where a man was in his 80s who had been non-communicative for quite some time. When we played the music for him, he became aware of the music and talked about not being sure that he really remembered the instruments because it had been so many years, but he knew it was an orchestra. He began tapping his foot and humming along with the music.

The next thing is, he notices that the roads outside of his room are icy and cars are speeding. He comments on it. His daughter was dumbfounded. She said he hadn't been aware of his surroundings in a year. To watch that happen, time and time again, brings tears to your eyes. You realize that inside this person are still the moments and memories that, with the right trigger, come right back up to the surface. To have that person be reconnected to the moment is just such a positive feeling for the caregiver.

Gary Barg: How does Alzheimer's Music Connect work specifically?

Ron Gregory: The music is recorded and all of these brain waves—alpha, beta, and delta—are mixed in according to a formula. That is where the music producers come in. They know how to put this mixture together. They use an ancient chant of the Om sound, which has been practiced in religions for centuries. They put this formula underneath the music, at or slightly below the hearing threshold. It is not noticed by anyone, but the brain picks up those rhythms and that is what causes the stimulation. That part of it is one piece.

The other piece is that we use many of the same techniques that are applied by current radio stations to figure out which are the most popular and familiar songs to play for their audiences. While we are not guaranteeing that every song on a disk is going to be your loved one's favorite, on the other hand, we also know that nine out of ten are going to be a favorite. It is quite an interesting process. It is so rewarding when you get to the final piece and you hear the way the music blends. We even take care to make sure that, tempo-wise, we do not take the person from a slow tempo, speed them up, and then leave them hanging.

Gary Barg: Is construction of the time specific or age specific?

Ron Gregory: That is part of the consideration. We look at the person and we say, "All right, if we wanted music to hit this person's generation, what songs would have been part of their development?" We move through various

packages of music in that fashion, so that the 80-year-old to 90-year-old who would have grown up with “You Are My Sunshine” and those kinds of songs that were period pieces would get that package. For somebody that was a young person during World War II, we would have big band and the Frank Sinatra-type music. That is how it is divided out, so that the music is appropriate for their ages. We are basically applying demographic rules to it, and figuring out which music is going to resonate best.

Gary Barg: It seems like part of the goal is to connect your loved one to something that stimulates their memories, and yet another part is to help calm a loved one dealing with sun-downing, wandering, or emotional challenges.

Ron Gregory: There is priority 1 and 1A. That is the way we looked at it. The caregiver fatigue that I watched my father go through while caring for my mom was just like watching somebody with PTSD. He was shell-shocked in a way. We knew from a sizable national study that the impact of the music lasts on the listener/patient for up to three hours after the music has been played. One hour of exposure to music equals three hours of the person being calm and relaxed.

Caregivers reported back to us saying they had as much as two hours of time for themselves—to read a newspaper, to do some laundry, to even just relax and know that their loved one was in good hands, in a safe environment. They could get that important downtime for themselves. It was such a great benefit.

Gary Barg: What would the one most important piece of advice be that you would like to share with family caregivers?

Ron Gregory: Take care of yourself. While the music does wonderful things for their loved ones, it also gives the caregivers an opportunity to relax and rejuvenate themselves. I just think that is central to their ability to provide good care, but also in protecting their own longevity and health. That would be my piece of advice. It is not selfish to take care of yourself and make sure you are in good health.

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