

Music and Alzheimer: a world of emotions

“Tell me how the song starts... I want to sing it” says Esperanza with a wide smile. She is over 80 years old, although she could see just half of her age –she got blind in an accident– and she cannot remember the last five years. She is a patient of Alzheimer in medium-stage.

Everyone in Esperanza’s therapeutic group is surprised with her wanting to sing. “If I want to sing it I don’t know how, but if you tell me how the song starts I can go on from there”, she says. When she finishes singing, without even forgetting a comma, everyone applauds. Esperanza has connected with her environment, even though it was just for a few minutes.

Music is a very helpful tool in order to communicate with people suffering from this disease. It’s an emotional language that many patients until the last stage of the illness already know and understand. Knowing this particular “language” allows the professional stimulate the cognitive abilities and the communication in an emotional level. Everyone understands what’s happening in the room of a therapeutic session whenever music is played, sang or danced.

Alzheimer patients can remember the lyrics, rhythm and melody of songs even though they’ve even forgotten the name of their beloved ones. This is because of the emotional burden music carries. The brain uses some regions such as the tonsils and some other parts of the limbic system to settle memories bounded to emotions. Something that made us feel a great emotion has to be remembered and to do so, the brain will use its best resources to secure that information.

In the last decades, many researchers and teams such as Stefan Koelch, Johnsen, Betés de Toro, Tam, Miu, Pereira or Omar amongst others have tried to leave proof of the use of music in a therapeutic context. Exhaustive investigation and the publication of significant data are still tasks ahead in order to make progress in this field.

However we are starting to understand that the brain regions that are activated with music are not as affected as others by Alzheimer. Therefore, studies encourage working with musical stimulus with Alzheimer patients.

Not everything works, though. It’s important to understand that music is a very useful therapeutic tool for some, but not for all. To be able to communicate with emotions, the patient needs to be receptive and, above everything, it’s important to be sure about the therapeutic aims.

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