

## **VIOLIN AND MIND: AN UNUSUAL MUSIC THERAPY PROJECT WITH PERSONS WITH ALZHEIMER'S**

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This new music therapy project, in which people with dementia work with the violin, is a continuation of a previous study in 2006 which had positive results. When we started the original project, we were concerned that this instrument might be unsuitable and might create a reaction of fear or rejection among the participants. The violin is normally excluded from a music therapy setting for the difficulty associated with the instrument, and for the image that has built up and been passed on over centuries: virtuoso, diabolical, impossible. In contrast, however, the hypothesis that the violin could be accepted and happily used by the participants has been proven true. They appreciate the characteristics of the violin: it is an instrument from our present day culture, it vibrates and it is held close to the body. Furthermore, it can be played in a group. The use of the violin in an active way

can now be considered part of a music therapy setting. We know that the use of

music in the care of people with dementia is becoming wide-spread. Supported by studies in neuroscience, it is now evident that stimulating creativity and expression can activate the damaged brain circuits.

People with dementia gradually lose memory and language, while the emotional and spiritual spheres remain preserved for a long time. Because of cognitive difficulties, people are not able to express themselves nor make themselves understood and sometimes they are excluded from relations with others, thus suffering painful isolation losing esteem and self-confidence.

Listening to music and even playing a music instrument are valuable tools to enable self-expression and communication, allowing people with dementia to still feel a

sense of belonging. As in non-verbal modes of expression, music bypasses the cognitive level and enables expression when there is an inability to use words, or because the person does not want to. Music has an effect on a person at different levels: corporal (bringing out body movement), emotive (recalling memory and autobiographical aspects), cognitive, relational and even spiritual, depending on the kind of music. In our project, the violin is not only listened to by the persons but also played by them, following a specific method of musical therapy integrated with the simple aspects of instrumental teaching. The violin becomes a real chamber music instrument and each group consists of 4 to 5 participants, each with his or her own violin.

The work is led by two music therapists who play the violin. The sessions last 50 minutes each and there are 12 – 16 sessions in total during the project. Each session is divided into four phases. The first is the **listening phase** when the music therapist and violinist play a specific musical theme at the start of each session. Music is then introduced from a wide repertoire including various musical genres from different eras – popular, classical, opera, Italian songs, marches, hymns, and folk music. The repertoire of about 100 pieces is selected on the basis of information obtained from interviews with the

participants and their families. Next is the **introductory phase** and the participants are introduced to the violin slowly by holding, stroking and tapping the violin. Then comes the **practical phase** when the participants start by strumming and plucking the strings of the violin. Then they play with their bows in a simple manner, like in a chamber music group. Finally, there is the **musical dialogue** when each participant has their personal time to improvise on their violin together with the therapist. There is a short conversation in which the participant shares what they feel, a very intense narrative moment during which the person expresses feelings, memories and thoughts which the music has brought out in a comfortable setting with the other participants. There is a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem and gratification.

### References

Ragni S. et al, (2014) *Proceedings of the 14th World congress of Music Therapy (WMTC) 2014*, Krems/Austria

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