



# How to Build and Use a Playlist to Ease Agitation in Dementia

Julie Martin, MT-BC  
Board Certified Music Therapist

## Build a playlist

1. Pick 10 to 12 songs that your person with dementia knows and likes.
  - a. Why? When your person hears their preferred music, they will be more likely to pay attention to it.
  - b. Not sure what music to use? Search online for lists of what songs were popular when your person was aged 15 to 18. Choose 10 to 12 songs from these lists.
  - c. Do you have a few songs but need more? Choose other songs from the artist or group or genre already in your playlist.
2. Order the songs in the playlist from generally faster to slower.
  - a. Why? As the intensity of the music decreases (i.e. gets slower, more gentle), your person will follow the music into a calmer state.

## Use the playlist - 3 times per week to daily

1. Play the music about 30 minutes before agitation usually begins.
2. Before you start the music, turn the volume to low on the player. Then, increase the volume. This prevents your person from startling if the music is too loud when it starts.
3. Help your person engage with the music.
  - a. Hold their hands and move gently to the beat.
  - b. Comment on how your person is responding:
    - i. "This song makes you smile."
    - ii. "I can tell you like this song."
    - iii. "How does this song make you feel?"
    - iv. Avoid asking, "Do you remember this song?"
  - c. If you know the song, sing and invite your person to sing, too.

## Special notes

- Some music can bring back sad memories. If your person becomes sad or has a negative reaction to a song, skip to the next song. If your person does not return to a happier or calm state, turn the music off for this time. Remember to take that song out of the playlist for next time.
- Some people do not tolerate headphones or earbuds, so you may need a small speaker.
- You may find that the music works better with repetition. Use the playlist at least 3 times a week.