



Book Review

Connecting through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers

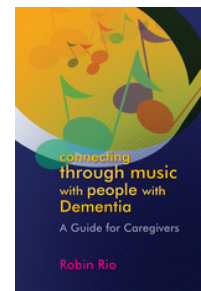
Robin Rio

Reviewed by Harriet Powell

Connecting through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers

Robin Rio

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144 pp, ISBN: 978-1-84310-905-1



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Communication is often very difficult between those with dementia and their caregivers. A book which can help by offering practical singing and music-making ideas and insights is a valuable, much needed resource. This straightforward and practical “self-study” book can certainly play a part in improving quality of life and interaction with others with the advice and support it offers to its aimed readership of professional and family caregivers, as well as music therapy students and practitioners.

Robin Rio, from a background of ten years as a music therapist and music therapy teacher, as well as previous care-giving experience with older people with dementia, relates information and ideas in an accessible, encouraging and enabling style. It is laid out in eight easy-to-read chapters. The introduction explains that the author’s experience

of training care-staff to use music to improve the quality of interactions with residents suffering from dementia led to the ‘steps’ the book takes the reader along to help them do the same.

As I read on, there was much to recommend the book, including some lively illustrative vignettes, both personal and professional. In the first chapter I liked the clarity of describing ‘why we use music’, and descriptions of different elements in accessible language. There are suggested lists of, for example, ten ways you might choose to sing a song to make a melodic connection; fifteen ways to use rhythm and percussion instruments. However, I have some reservations about the emphasis in these ‘how to use music’ sections in this and subsequent chapters. At times they tend to lean more towards what carers need to offer, choose, prepare or plan, as opposed to responding to those with dementia in a rather

more flexible and spontaneous person-centred approach.

In the section headed “Your Personal Touch”, variations of volume and speed are presented as changes the caregiver makes “your chance to be the conductor”. In my experience of supporting care-staff in their relationships with residents, it is important to help them understand the role of the resident with dementia as conductor, so that we follow and empower them, rather than the other way around. For instance, in the list of suggestions for making connections in movement the emphasis is on care-giver initiations, rather than suggestions that we might follow the initiations, rhythm, speed of the residents’ movements.

The chapter on singing and choosing songs has helpful suggestions for using the voice in different ways and to help become so comfortable with one’s own sounds that they can focus on the resident’s reactions and responses. There is much sensible advice on increasing confidence to sing, choosing songs and using alternatives to the words if the resident does not sing the words.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with assessment, evaluation and the continuation of structured and directed music-making sessions. These chapters seem more clinical in approach and perhaps more accessible to music therapy practitioners and students than caregivers. They also seem to set up rather a formal expectation of a session of a certain length and a necessary series of activities. This does not seem to allow for the possibility of interactions with residents with dementia which may be very brief, engaged in whilst on the move, for a restless or anxious person, or spontaneously happening unexpectedly during daily care routines.

Music therapy students who have not worked before with this client group but have, as part of their training, gained insight into subtleties of approach required, (now referred to in Chapter 5), will be able to take on board and use the information in the book effectively and flexibly, already understanding principles of ‘meeting where people are’ in terms of emotional state; ‘being in the moment’; and the uniqueness of the individual in the context of musical interaction. This is perhaps not so easily transferable by book to care-staff who are musically inexperienced and unconfident. At the same time it seems late in the book to bring up this aspect of responding to a resident’s needs, moods or feelings. The chapter begins with a simplistic statement about musical choices, those which either stimulate or relax. It goes on to deal with the more complex issues involved in music’s ability to match and alter mood.

Two informative chapters on musical memory and associations and the need to look after one’s

own health and happiness end with entreaties to “use your resources” and “make it up as you go”. I would have liked more about the need for this kind of spontaneous attitude earlier. A selection of songs to use completes the manual, as a starting point from which to collect more songs learnt from residents, one hopes, as well as finding others that might be suitable.

As I read and tried to put myself in the shoes of care-staff or family carers, perhaps those with little confidence to sing and make music themselves, I wondered how much they can use this book alone as a resource, without other support. (This is acknowledged by the author that the book is “the next best thing” to having a music therapist’s personal guidance). This method could, in unconfident hands, potentially restrict caregivers from a more listening, empowering, and spontaneous approach which can be vital when communicating musically and emotionally with older people with dementia.

I liked the clarity of conveying ideas such as the importance of the “live voice of a familiar person” and the value of unaccompanied singing rather than recorded music. However, the important explanation early in the book that musicality providing functional communication from birth has the same relevance when people with dementia no longer have words, and the importance of interpreting and responding to sounds indicating needs and desires is not carried through to the suggested practice. This, in my view, comes across more about doing *for* and seems less of a two way process. An approach to musical communication could hold in more balance the voice of the resident as well as the voice of the care-giver. I appreciate this is a challenge when attempting a self-help book to reach a wide readership.

Having in mind all the above, I would consider this book suitable for both family and professional caregivers with no former experience of music therapy. Also, music therapy students and entry level practitioners could benefit from range of ideas presented in this book.

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