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# Discovering Joy and Comfort at All Stages of Dementia

**E**nhancing the day-to-day experience of those with memory loss is always at the heart of caretaking. Shontaé Usman, AFA’s therapeutic program specialist, walks us through trusted activities for all stages of progression to encourage engagement and a sense of belonging.

## Tapping into the Power of Music

Music is one of the most reliable tools when looking for activities to engage someone with a memory loss condition. It ties the person to specific memories, particularly from when they were aged between 10 and 30.

“It’s a memory bump to the time that shaped you,” Usman said. “It has milestone significance.”

The music can be instrumental or vocal, and many people respond to spiritual music. Usman elaborated that spiritual music “makes them [feel] one with the divine — whatever that means to them. Music is what it needs to be.”

Usman recommends exploring music therapy with an open mind. “It’s trial and error. You don’t know what will trigger memory. Just do it.”

Playing recognizable albums from their collection is a great place to start. Pay attention to their facial expressions and take note if they are nodding their head or making other gestures.

It’s also helpful to use music as a cue, such as playing the same soothing music at the same time each day to indicate that it’s time for a meal.

“Stability is so important,” Usman said. “You give them that structure. It affects us too. It’s the gift that keeps giving.”

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## DISCOVERING JOY AND COMFORT AT ALL STAGES

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### Incorporating Pets and Caregiving

Like music, pets offer ongoing comfort at all stages of memory loss conditions. When real pets are not an option, Usman recommends stuffed animals and dolls.

“They can be electronic if you can’t do the real thing. They’re just as therapeutic and a great alternative.”

This is especially true for people who have been caregivers as parents for much of their lives. “That need to nurture never goes away. It’s beautiful to see. They may not be able to articulate it, but it brings back memories of having something to care for.”

### Additional Activities for Engagement

Each person’s interests and preferences will be unique and will likely change day by day. Explore activities that will add personal significance to their routine while maintaining a flexible mind.

### Early and Middle Stages

- Encourage movement and light dance when playing music they enjoy. Mirroring their movements can offer a sense of belonging.
- Explore online guided meditation scripts for those in the early days of memory loss. Not only can this aid in the sense of calm, but it can add structure to the day.
- Help them engage in music more deeply by clapping or tapping a table along to the rhythm. You can also use pots, pans, wooden spoons, or — if they have a background in music — available instruments as well.



- Look for multigenerational storytelling opportunities, particularly when younger generations are present. To remove the pressure of recalling details, begin the conversation by creating a made-up story together. “Sometimes through the process, sweet memories arise,” Usman said. “One memory may trigger more memories that come to them.”



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- Steer away from small talk by choosing a specific topic, such as a favorite meal or trip, and encourage them to share the memories that come to mind. Be sure to give them time to answer.
- Some people, especially those who cared for others throughout their lives, enjoy cleaning therapy. Offer them a wet washcloth to clean tables or countertops. Some people enjoy folding laundry, sweeping or drying dishes.
- Head outside to engage with the garden and landscape. You can also focus on indoor plants or windowsill gardens to trigger positive memories.
- Set aside a time each day to draw, color or paint. Offer simple, yet structured instructions, encouraging them to express emotions or recall a favorite place. Create art alongside them and celebrate their work as you go.

### Late Stages

- One-on-one guidance and support are even more important during this phase. Sit at their bedside and listen to music together. Hold their hand if they are all right with being touched.
- If you know their musical preferences, play the music softly, lightly tapping out rhythms on the bed or table to add interaction. This is often a time when they relate well to spiritual music.
- Reading or playing recordings of familiar stories can encourage a sense of comfort and familiarity. Choose short stories or poems from their collection when possible.
- Most importantly, always articulate that you are there to support them throughout the day. As their preferences change, remain open to changing your routine to create a warm and comfortable environment.