



Dr. Daniel Levitin shares his knowledge about the inner workings of the brain during a TED talk.

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF MUSIC

How Music Can Heal the Brain of Those Living With Dementia

By Kenya McCullum

It's no secret that music can have a huge effect on people's moods. Whether they listen to sad love songs during a breakup or celebrate an important milestone with an upbeat song on the radio, music accompanies many people's lives. And according to award-winning neuroscientist and musician Dr. Daniel Levitin, author of "This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession," it also has the power to remodel the brain of older adults.

"The brain can change itself and heal itself, and music is one of several ways we can do that," he said.

Kim Campbell—who was the caregiver for her husband, country music legend Glen Campbell, when he battled Alzheimer's disease—can attest to the power that playing music can have on the health of someone living with dementia. In fact, after being diagnosed, the musician embarked on a 151 show-tour, which is chronicled in the documentary "Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me."



Kim Campbell

“Magically, when the lights came on and Glen walked on stage, it was like he was back. The music brought him back. It was just something so deeply embedded in him that it triggered his memory and made all of the connections start happening,” Campbell said. “The doctors all said they thought continuing to be active with music probably

helped Glen plateau longer than he otherwise would have.”

How is this possible? Levitin describes the influence music has on the brain this way: “Any instrument requires muscle movement, even singing. Learning to move those muscles in precise and subtle ways, and to coordinate those

this access to musical instruments can be significant, a fact that Levitin observed with his own grandmother.

“My grandmother came to this country as an immigrant to escape persecution in her native country, and when she was 80, she told my mother and me that she sang “God Bless America” every morning as soon as she woke up because America took her in,” he recalled. “We were so moved by this that we went out and bought her a little electronic keyboard. She didn’t know how to play, so we took pieces of masking tape and put them on the keys, and we put numbers on them so all she had to do was hit the keys in numeric order to play the melody. A year later, she had taken the masking tape off the keys because she learned what to press. She played that keyboard and sang every single morning until she died at 97. I have to think that her music making was a big part of what allowed her to live such a long life.”

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movements so they happen at the right time in the right way is a great workout for the brain. It requires planning, listening to what you do and getting feedback, and updating what you’re doing in case the noise you made isn’t the noise you intended to make,” he said. “These neural feedback loops are a great exercise for the brain, and they require that you engage with your own body in ways that are constantly changing, and they also require that you engage with the outside world.”

Although playing music can be extremely beneficial for people with dementia, Levitin notes that it also will improve brain health overall, including those who have healthy brains. Hearing a song can connect people to the outside world, which is especially important for older adults who might feel isolated—and it can help them remember their past and get in touch with their emotions, as well as pull them out of a seemingly catatonic state.

INCORPORATING MUSIC INTO RESIDENT CARE

Since music can be so beneficial in helping people with dementia, Levitin suggests that senior living professionals incorporate music into their resident care by making instruments available for them to learn and regularly play, even if it’s for as little as five minutes a day. The results of

According to Levitin, another way to make music a part of resident care is to offer music therapy.

“Music therapy is the evidence-based use of music for therapeutic purposes, and it can assist in creating specific programs for specific patients and populations to help them meet their goals. Some examples of music therapy successes are with people suffering from brain damage—perhaps due to Alzheimer’s or other issues—who have lost the ability to speak,” said Levitin. “Melodic intonation therapy teaches them to sing some essential things, like ‘I need to go to the bathroom’ or ‘I’m thirsty’. They can sing these requests even when they can’t speak them because music uses a specialized pathway that speech doesn’t have access to.”

To find out more on the relationship between music and the brain, as well as how senior living providers can create an optimum experience for residents and their families through music, see Dr. Daniel Levitin and Kim Campbell speak Tuesday, April 16 during the 2019 Argentum Senior Living Executive Conference April 15-17, 2019 in San Antonio. Visit conference.argentum.org for more information and to register. ■