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The Musical Walkabout: providing access to individualised, live music for care home residents

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The Musical Walkabout: providing access to individualised, live music for care home residents

The power of music and song to improve wellbeing is well known. But how can this power be harnessed to cater for individualised taste in care homes? The Musical Walkabout aims to do this.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the value of music and singing in the lives of older people and particularly those living with dementia. The Alzheimers Society's Singing for the Brain™ initiative which has been running since 2004 (Montgomery-Smith, 2006) has shown benefits in terms of social inclusiveness, improved relationships, memory and mood for those participating (Osman et al, 2016).

Care homes are often involved in incorporating musical activities for residents to positive effect (Clare, 2014) particularly in reducing agitation and increasing general wellbeing. However, many activities are delivered in a group format where, as Pickles (2004) has noted, it is difficult to cater for differing tastes in a context where an individualised approach is needed. One way this can be provided for is through a Playlist for Life (<https://www.playlistforlife.org.uk/>), where an individual can listen to their choice of music with headphones on a recording device. Others have argued for the benefit of music enjoyed within a relationship, such as Music Mirrors (Edwards, 2015) where life stories are saved to a musical background and can be used by carers to enhance care.

Most one-to-one musical activities appear to rely on recorded music. Although this is undoubtedly beneficial, research suggests that live music confers particular benefits for audiences (Shoda et al., 2016), including an ability to enrich the lives of individuals with Alzheimer's Disease (Cox et al., 2014). We wanted to see whether a musical activity combining the individualized approach with live music in care homes worked to the benefit of all involved.

The Musical Walkabout model

The Musical Walkabout is a Community Interest Company run by Nina Clark, a music practitioner based in Kent. Nina has for a few years been visiting care homes to lead participatory singing sessions in communal areas. More recently, after becoming aware that a number of individuals are restricted to their rooms, she devised a way of including them in the singing experience. Following successful bids to the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts, funding was provided to run 80 sessions over a number of homes between March 2016 and January 2017. The Musical Walkabout was born.

During each care home visit Nina is guided, like a minstrel, by staff to appropriate residents with whom she spends time finding out about their musical tastes and then enjoys time together with them in favourite songs, accompanied on her guitar (Figure 1). Over the time of the project Nina has reached nearly 400 residents with around 60 family members and care staff. This has been extended through various showings of the film on her website (<https://www.musicalwalkabout.com/>) and at various events. Demand has been high and informal feedback universally favourable.

Evaluation methods

Towards the end of the project, Arts Council asked for an evaluation of the project to see if it had achieved its aims of increasing social inclusion, wellbeing and self-expression through music. Together with Ann Skingley, a researcher in arts and health at Canterbury Christ Church University, it was decided to focus on a small number of case study individuals in one care home at one visit,

around Christmas, by observing sessions and having informal conversations where possible with residents. A 'trigger song' (previously selected by the individual resident) was used to engage each resident in conversation about the song, singing and music, past and present interests and their thoughts on Nina's visits (see table 1). Observations were recorded using a semi-structured template which captured any behavioural and verbal responses. Interviews were also held with care staff and relatives to gauge any effect for them. Written, informed and ongoing consent was obtained from all involved, including relatives where necessary, so that information could be shared anonymously with others.

Residents' responses

All individuals visited had some degree of cognitive or sensory impairment which carried the potential for feelings of isolation despite being in a setting which was known for promoting person-centred care. Each responded uniquely to a favourite song and most were able to comment verbally (Table 1).

Staff and relative responses

Staff commented generally on the power of music to positively affect their residents. Terry (manager) noted that a number in the home are living with dementia and made the point that life for them can be very frightening, especially if they are feeling alone. Here music can be very beneficial:

'Music is hugely beneficial to our residents, and we know so much more now about dementia, and how therapeutic interventions and the creative side of things really helps to bring the residents out of that dementia ...Nina has made a huge difference to the quality of the service we're delivering, particularly for those residents isolated in their rooms,'

Care staff supported this impact on those in their rooms:

'We do singsongs, yes but not like Nina but we get the CDs on and we all sing along and we've got musical instruments they play as well (Becky).

But we don't get to the ones in the rooms, the ones that can get isolated and we can't bring them out, so it's nice to have someone to go in and bring the activity to them because they wouldn't want to hear us sing [laughter] (Alison).

There was also evidence that the Musical Walkabout had benefits for staff and relatives of residents. For staff this engendered a feeling of happiness (Figure 2):

'I really love it. She just makes me feel happy too because she's always smiling. It's like she brings in that little bit of magic with her and then everything's good, everything's nice again' (Alison).

Helen and Becky both felt that the residents' happiness had an impact on the staff:

'Yes, and if it puts the residents in a good mood it makes us in a good mood. Aside from that, yes, Nina's got such a bubbling personality, you can't help but smile and sing along. She's contagious' (Helen)

'with Edna yesterday, we got her up dancing and she was so happy and then you come down for your break all happy and singing and dancing'.(Becky)

Finally, both staff and a relative made comments about the benefits to those visiting the home:

'quite a few times when she [Joe's daughter] comes he's up dancing or singing or tapping his feet and she definitely she notices,. It's reassuring because they worry that he's happy' (Becky)

'The reassurance of Dad's continuing happiness is significant for me as Dad's primary family contact and the happiness Dad himself has is testimony of the benefit' (Joe's daughter).

Discussion

Much has been written about the importance of music in the lives of older people. Hays & Minichiello (2005) found that music promoted self-identity, provided a means to connect with others, enhanced spirituality and was used for entertainment as well as conveying meaning. Music preference is thus highly personal, and there is evidence of this in the residents we visited. Nina had taken trouble to establish each individual's preferences and to adapt her style accordingly across genres and times (so avoiding the temptation to assume taste according to age).

Observations made by both the manager and the care staff in interviews noted that much activity in the home takes place in communal areas, unintentionally precluding those confined to their rooms for whatever reason. Nina's one-to-one 'minstreling' is perhaps what marks it out as unique in the arts and health field. The Musical Walkabout therefore potentially fills a gap for this particular group of people.

One of the interesting, and also very obvious, consequences of the Musical Walkabout is that Nina is learning new material to add to her repertoire, which emerges from the individuals she sings to and with. At the visits she often expressed appreciation at having learned a new song (for example 'Farewell to Tarwathie') or sung a song she already knew but arranged for the first time ('Pretty Woman'). This indicates more than a one-way relationship, but rather a state of mutual dependence, with both parties giving and receiving, and Nina advancing her professional development.

Finally, it is clear from comments that the benefits extend beyond Nina and residents, as both the staff and resident's daughter commented on the value to themselves. The comments made by Helen and Becky about residents' wellbeing affecting their own mood are interesting since evidence from recent research also suggests the interplay between carers and cared-for, albeit in a health care setting and with the direction of influence reversed (Maben et al, 2012).

Conclusions

This was a limited project and evaluation in terms of time, context and numbers involved, therefore no generalisations can be drawn from the findings. However it is clear that a variety of benefits have resulted from the Musical Walkabout initiative to this particular care home, benefits that were not limited to the individual residents visited, nor to the immediate temporal context of Nina's visits. The observations made are supported largely by existing literature in the field which serves to enhance the validity of the findings. We suggest that future research should involve a larger, more robust evaluation, while the practice model should be tested in other settings, such as hospitals, where older individuals are at risk of isolation

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Table 1. Residents visited

Resident pseudonym	Trigger Song(s)	Responses	Comments
Peter, visually impaired	Farewell to Tarwathie	Joining in singing, clapping, expressed thanks	Of Nina: 'We've got to know each other'.
Enid, confined to bed, memory problems	White Christmas/Jingle Bells	Chatting, alert, focused attention on Nina, joining in singing, smiling at end	Commented singing 'brought it [memories of visiting theatres] all back.
Marion, in bed, hearing impaired	Rocking around the Christmas Tree	Toe and finger tapping to beat, mouthing then voicing words, focus on Nina	Commented the music makes her 'less miserable than I was'.
Doris, Parkinsons	Pretty Woman	Looking at Nina, finger tapping, head nodding	Commented 'you remembered' and [Roy Orbison] 'was one of my favourites'.
Ingrid, wheelchair bound, recently unwell.	'Bear' Necessities	Eyes on Nina, smiling, joining in second part	The song 'made me laugh'
Joe, dementia	Twelve days of Christmas	Fully engaged, tapping feet, smiling singing along	'Music is a soother'
Stephane, dementia, German speaking, ex-music producer	Let it snow	Eye contact, conducting with newspaper, joining in with 'ooh' and 'aaah', smiling	Speech incoherent. Staff commented that singing 'is bringing him alive again'



Figure 1 The Musical Walkabout provides individualised music activities for residents



Figure 2 Music also has benefits for staff