

Remaining Abilities in Older Persons with Alzheimer's Disease

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Preserved Emotional Capacity ¹

The ability to experience and express the full range of emotions and feelings

The capacity to perceive emotion in others (“They are sensing our core emotions”)

The ability to communicate emotionally with others (e.g. facial expressions; gestures; tone of voice)

The capacity to respond to emotions (e.g. “mirroring”; increased sensitivity to emotions of others)

The capacity to learn and remember emotionally significant events and experiences
(Especially early, well-established, personally emotional memories)

The ability to sense who has real concern for them, who is honest, and who can be trusted

* At mid-to-late stages of Alzheimer's, the person may be less able to regulate her/his emotions

Other Relatively Preserved Capacities ^{2 3}

Long-term memory/Remote memory (e.g. childhood and young adulthood)

Procedural memory: Overlearned/habitual skills (e.g. swinging a golf club; playing the piano/violin)

Primary sensory functions (e.g. touch; massage; soothing aromas/essential oils such as lavender)

Primary motor functions (e.g. walking; exercising; movement; dancing)

The tendency to persevere (i.e. doing a repetitive task e.g. folding linens and raking leaves)

Sociability and social skills (e.g. enjoying the company of others; ability to be polite)

The ability to reach out to someone in need (e.g. resident-to-resident compassionate acts)

Aesthetic experience and appreciation (e.g. enjoying artwork, beautiful garden, lake, river)

Sense of humor (Resident: “*The only prescription that never fails*”) and the ability to smile and laugh!

The ability to be present (“In the moment”). *Not 5 minutes ago but in this very second!*

Preserved Musical Ability ⁴

“Musical ability is preserved well into the course of progressive dementia”

Rhythmic abilities are maintained in many in the latest stages of Alzheimer’s

Sung material may be recalled more than spoken material

Ability to respond to and enjoy personally preferred old music & songs (from young adulthood)

The ability to maintain a steady drum beat after most other functional skills are lost (e.g. “vibrotactile” drumming; many in later stages can feel & respond to the drum’s vibrations)

Musical perception

Musical memory

Musical improvisation

Ability to dance to personally enjoyable music

Ability to whistle may remain after the ability to speak is lost

- **“Therapeutic music activities do not require complex cognitive functioning. Skills that have been lost will not be demanded in music therapy sessions.”**
- **The type of music should be selected carefully based on the individual’s taste, preferences, interests, and current abilities**
- **“Previous musical experience is not required.”**

References

¹ Raia, P. (2006, May). *If you do it well there is no resident to resident violence: Standards of Alzheimer’s care in nursing homes*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Massachusetts Alzheimer’s Association Annual Conference – Map Through The Maze, Marlborough, MA.

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³ Zgola, J.M. (1999). *Care that works: A relationship approach to persons with dementia*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴ Hanser, S.B. (1999). Music therapy with individuals with advanced dementia. In L. Volicer & L. Bloom-Charette (Eds.), *Enhancing the quality of life in advanced dementia*. Ann Arbor, MI: Brunner/Mazel.