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Your Health

Music soothes Alzheimer's

Readers reveal how songs can be 'a wonderful balm'

By Kim Painter
USA TODAY

My column on music and medicine (Your Health, July 10) prompted readers to share stories about the power of music in the lives of people with dementia.

Allen Pfenninger of Brooklyn Heights, Ohio, wrote: "Music is a wonderful balm for Alzheimer's patients. My mother-in-law (who just passed away) ... didn't remember my wife or myself, but she could recognize music from her past. We took an iPod into the nursing home, split it with three sets of earphones and listened to songs we knew she liked. She would hum along. She would laugh at the funny ones (Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah by Allan Sherman, Tiptoe Through the Tulips by Tiny Tim). She would cry at the sad ones, and we learned to try to keep those to a minimum. I would throw her a curve every once in a while just to see what she might know: When she hummed along to the Notre Dame Victory March, I was amazed. When she stopped humming along about a month ago, we knew the end might be near."

Amy Losak of Teaneck, N.J., remembered her late father, Sam Rosenberg, a lifelong music lover who spent his last days in a nursing home struggling with dementia, anxiety and depression. She wrote: "A volunteer would come to Dad's nursing home, attired in a straw hat and suspenders, with a banjo, to engage the



Illustration by Web Bryant, USA TODAY

residents in a sing-along session. My dad always sang the loudest, with great gusto, and despite his memory deficits, he knew the lyrics almost perfectly to the old-time popular songs of the '30s and '40s. ... My

dad was happy then. ... It was as if this music brought him back to a realm of cognitive lucidity and anchored him in a firm time and place. It was a bittersweet pleasure to see — and hear."

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