Effectiveness of MP3 Players to Support Carers of People Living with Dementia at Home

Research Team

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The Issue

Despite the often strong desire to care for the person who is living with dementia within the family home, caring for someone with dementia can be emotionally and physically tiring. The difficulties with caring often lead to the decision to place the person into residential care. Family carers need strategies and support to help them cope with their caregiver role.

While music is often used in formal care settings, and there have been inspirational examples of the impact of music on the listener, no systematic consideration has been given to how music can be used by family caregivers in the community setting as a strategy to help them cope with the stress of their caregiver role.

A Strategy

Southern Cross Care (Vic) (SCC (Vic)) provides support services to people with dementia living in their homes and is always looking for new ways to help carers cope in their role. SCC (Vic) began using MP3 technology in community and residential care settings in late 2010. SCC (Vic) was interested to know whether the benefits they observed would be confirmed through a rigorous academic study of the program.

SCC (Vic) approached the Australian Centre for Evidence Based Aged Care (ACEBAC), a specialised research centre of the Australian Institute for Primary Care & Ageing (AIPCA) at La Trobe University, to partner with them on a research project looking at the impact of using MP3 players, with personalised content, on the quality of life and wellbeing of the carers of people with dementia living in the community.

The Study

This study involved fifty family caregivers of people living with dementia. The SCC (Vic) Dementia Care Team identified and invited people to participate. The Dementia Consultant loaded a small personal MP3 player with music preferred by the person living with dementia — the music selected ranged from classical to André Rieu to Vera Lynn to the Beatles — and showed the family carer how to use the equipment.
Carers completed a survey before they commenced using the MP3 player, and again after using the MP3 player for four weeks. The survey included validated measures to assess the level of stress and coping among the carers. Carers also kept a diary on the way they used the MP3 player. Twenty-five (half) of the carers were interviewed by telephone about their experiences after they had used the MP3 player for four weeks.

The Main Findings

How the MP3 players were used

The MP3 players were used at different times of the day and night (with peaks in the middle of the day and afternoon). They were used most frequently within the home. Some carers encouraged the person living with dementia to use the player when waiting for appointments or other outside activities. The average time spent listening was approximately one hour, ranging from ten minutes to several hours a day.

Carers were asked “what were you able to achieve?” in the time during which the person living with dementia was listening to the MP3 player. The comments related predominantly to household chores, cooking, shopping, and outdoor activities (46%); relaxation, socialising and personal time accounted for approximately 29% of responses; studying or computer work accounted for 6% of responses; and 3% of responses were about eating and sleeping.

Impacts reflected in survey measures

The MP3 players were used for a four-week study period. The surveys looked for changes in health and wellbeing, as well as coping measures, over this time. The study found:

- A significant decrease in Psychological Distress (a measure of anxiety and depression) over the period using the MP3 player
- A significant increase in Symptom Management Self-Efficacy (a measure of how confident the carer is that they will be able to handle problems that come up, and deal with the frustrations of caring)

Impacts reflected in interviews with carers

Almost all carers perceived that having the person living with dementia use the MP3 player with personalised content was a very positive strategy that led to some respite from the stress of caring, while also being pleasurable for the person living with dementia. Carers reported that:

“Just the silence in the house, no TV, and knowing that [my husband] is happy listening to the music. Now and then I’d hear him singing along, and so I knew he was very happy with it, which made me feel good.”

“I was getting to the stage where the stress levels were becoming somewhat overwhelming...but the music from the MP3 player broke that pattern of being totally followed because she would sit down and listen to it.”

“To see how music so dramatically affected her, just left me gobsmacked.”

“It opened up my eyes to what I hadn’t been taking seriously (music) but I do now!”

“It’s given me more hope...It’s another string to our bow that helps life to be a lot easier.”
Conclusion

The use of MP3 players by family carers of people living with dementia was confirmed as a positive strategy; not only did it provide some relief from the everyday stress of caring, it was perceived in most cases to be an enjoyable activity for the person living with dementia. Family carers as well as people living with dementia can benefit from using portable music technologies to play personalised content.

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