

# SINGALONG HELPS SENIORS UNCOVER LOST MEMORIES

August 08, 2019 at 5:00 am | By DEVIN WEEKS Staff Writer



Courtesy photo Music instructor and founder of the Dementia Singalong Therapy program Cheryl Hodge leads a memory choir in Bellingham, Wash., last October. Hodge will present the "Alzheimer's, Dementia and the Healing Power of Music" workshop at Unity Spiritual Center in Coeur d'Alene from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday.

Music and memory share a delicate dance in the ballroom of the mind.

For people with Alzheimer's disease, dementia, brain injuries and other conditions that debilitate recall, music is one way to get the mind moving as the tunes help make connections that can help recover memories.

A song from long ago — "Danny Boy," "You're a Grand Old Flag," "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" — can make a memory patient's toe start tapping like it did decades earlier. As that toe taps, the patient often catches a glimpse of memories that have been obscured.

"They're able to pull up past memories," said Cheryl Hodge, founder of the Dementia Singalong Therapy program. "It goes way beyond us, way beyond what we're talking about."

Hodge, of Bellingham, Wash., leads six "memory choirs" at memory-care units. She uses special warm-up exercises and other tricks that jolt the memory. These include singing familiar songs, cueing lyrics in advance, singing songs with repeated hooks, rhyming schemes, song sign language, laughter and storytelling.

"One of the ways you'll know this is working is that oftentimes, between songs, the person you are working with will remember a story they've associated with the song," reads Hodge's "Alzheimer's, Dementia and the Healing Power of Music" workbook. "Kick back and enjoy the ride while you listen to them regale about their parents, their wedding, wartime, the Depression and adventures in life."

Hodge is an award-winning jazz musician who graduated from the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where she taught for eight years until she moved to Nelson, British Columbia, and led the vocal department at Selkirk College for 21 years. She also taught songwriting, composition, ear training, sight reading and other music classes.

Although she's not a certified therapist or neurologist, she began playing piano by ear at age 3, and she has seen the wonders music can do through her work in retirement centers and leading the memory choirs.

"I've seen improvements, and the big thing for me is, I'm able to teach them new stuff, which they say can't happen," she said.

Hodge leads her classes through stretches that oxygenate the blood and loosen muscles in the neck and throat.

"Warm up is seven minutes, then I have them sing songs from when they were really young, like 'Take Me out to the Ballgame,'" she said. "Their memories from that time of life will begin to come up, so we'll have story time."

Hodge said that two schools of thought try to explain how music affects memory patients: it either repairs old pathways in the brain, or it builds new ones.

"I think it's creating new pathways because they're able to learn new songs," she said. "Their brains just come alive."

Hodge discovered the correlation between music and memory by accident. A professor from the University of Washington in Bellingham heard about her concerts for the elderly and asked if she would work with his wife, who loved music and suffered from Stage 6 Alzheimer's disease. Hodge realized that with each session, the wife's mind was "reactivating; that there were some parts of the brain that were somehow able to connect again, which were seemingly unreachable."

Dementia Singalong Therapy is for caregivers as much as it is for the patients. Hodge said although she works with many in this community who are depressed, their spirits lift when she works with them.

"Every week, someone comes to me and tells me, 'You changed my life,'" she said.

Hodge will be on tour in North Idaho and will present the Alzheimer's, Dementia and the Healing Power of Music free workshop at from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday at Unity Spiritual Center of North Idaho, 4465 N. 15th St., Coeur d'Alene, on Tuesday. All are welcome.

At a separate, non-memory choir event, her band, the Cheryl Hodge Trio, will perform from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Jacklin Arts and Cultural Center, 405 N. William St., Post Falls.

Info: [www.dementiasingalongtherapy.com](http://www.dementiasingalongtherapy.com)



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