

How music can help dementia sufferers

Becca Smith looks at an inspirational retirement home that is using the power of nature and music to improve the quality of life for people with dementia

WE ALL know how music can positively impact our physical and mental well-being – helping stimulate memory function, easing pain, and reducing fatigue. Music is an essential part of many of our lives, and from our very early years we are introduced to beats and rhythm.

But how important is music for supporting our physical and mental health as we age?

As memory deteriorates, music can help support memory loss. But it is the act of creating music, rather than just listening, that can also help improve the lives of people with dementia. A recent study of people with dementia found enriched gardens, which included outdoor musical instruments, can help in terms of stimulating memory, helping regulation of the emotions, and managing anxiety levels.

Enriched gardens provide interactions with nature and are designed to address dementia-related troubles such as balance and independence.

The study, which was undertaken last year across four nursing homes in France, showed enriched gardens can bring about emotional healing for residents with dementia. The enriched gardens included a number of musical instruments, including chimes and drums, from Percussion Play, a manufacturer of outdoor musical instruments.

It's perhaps not surprising that senior living communities are introducing stimulating music gardens and the UK can look to Denmark, a well-known innovator in senior care, for inspiration. The retirement home Friplejehjemmet Hesselvang, located in Hvalpsund, northern Denmark, has recently transformed its grounds to create a very special destination that aims to entice

residents and staff outside into the fresh air for some outdoor musical fun.

Hesselvang residents are encouraged to spend time outside and undertake physical activities. They can collect fresh eggs daily from their own hen house and visit the dwarf goats who graze on the adjacent slope. The appealing outside space features a beautiful garden full of scented flowers in the summer, which is now filled with the sound of music following the creation of the country's most extensive music garden.

Recognising the many benefits of both time spent outdoors as well as active music-making, the Hesselvang Friends association – made up of residents, relatives, and staff – applied to the Danish Health and Medicines Authority's relief grant for people with dementia for the funds to create an outdoor music garden in the grounds.

A spokesperson for Hesselvang's Friends, Dorthe Bredtoft, says, "Finally, the big day came when all the musical instruments arrived. We now have Denmark's largest music garden attached to our nursing home! We are really looking forward to the warmer

spring where we can get out and make use of all the instruments."

One of the most important functions of music is to create a feeling of cohesion or social connectedness, and an essential part of musical gardens is the ability to bring young and old together to play.

Outdoor musical instruments are intergenerational, meaning friends and family visiting senior communities can enjoy them too. At Hesselvang they are very keen that they remain part of the wider local community, with their doors open for visitors and social events.

There are plans to hold musical performances and sing-alongs outdoors in the 'music space', that will not only help to increase awareness of the facility but also expand social connections for the residents and encourage multigenerational get-togethers.

Instruments the residents are enjoying include harmony bells, congas, drums and the tubular bells. The instruments are designed for challenging outdoor environments and can tolerate the harsh Danish winters.

Jody Ashfield, managing director and founder of Percussion Play, is delighted senior living communities are embracing outdoor musical instruments.

Jody says: "Here at Percussion Play, we enjoy seeing our instruments being used to help improve the lives of people living with dementia and bring fun and enjoyment to people living in retirement homes.

"We hope leaders in the sector and decision-makers in the field of dementia take notice of the importance music-making can bring to communities and that we see more music gardens being created here in the UK."

For more information on the benefits of music for mood and memory, take a look at Percussion Play's White Paper on the subject at: (www.percussionplay.com).

About Percussion Play

Percussion Play is a leading manufacturer of outdoor musical instruments for all ages and abilities, bringing the joy of playing percussion to the great outdoors.

Specifically designed for challenging outdoor environments including playgrounds, parks, schools, hospitals and care homes, the instruments are fully inclusive and accessible.

■ **For more information about Percussion Play's products and services, tel: 01730 235180, e-mail: (info@percussionplay.com) or visit (www.percussionplay.com).**