

How singing unlocks the brain

By Jane Elliott
BBC News Health reporter

As Bill Bundock's Alzheimer's progressed he became more and more locked into his own world.

He withdrew into himself and stopped communicating with his wife, Jean.

Jean said Bill lost his motivation, and his desire and ability to hold conversations, but all this changed when the couple started attending a local sing-song group, aimed especially for people with dementia.

Jean said Singing for the Brain had unlocked Bill's communication block.

Personality change

"The first time we went to Singing for the Brain he did not join in. On the second session he was starting to join in and by the third he was thoroughly taking part.

"It was wonderful for us. The singing had started to change something. It really did make a tremendous difference. He started to come out of himself.

"His personality started to change and he became much as he was before, and he was able to hold a conversation.

"He is 82 and likes all the old-time songs, but he also started singing some Beatles songs and songs from the Broadway shows and even some modern stuff as well.

"He seemed to be able to slowly learn things again. I would take the song sheets home after the sessions and we would sing them at home. It enlivened him and he really enjoyed doing it."

Bill, from west Berkshire, has been in hospital recently after having a stroke, but Jean kept up the singing and said it has given them both a focus, even helping his slurred speech recover following the stroke.

"I don't know what it is that changes in the brain when people with Alzheimer's sing, but obviously something does change and there is something very beneficial about it. It seems to kick-start something in the brain and has made such a difference to Bill."

Emotional resonance

Chreanne Montgomery-Smith, who founded Singing for the Brain, three years ago, said the weekly sessions had proved so popular they were hoping to expand the project and get more weekly groups.

"We do have quite an avid following in the group that we have. Families believe it has enhanced their lives and in some ways it has kept people well longer.

"People who have constant memory problems are so undermined by this, but somehow the memory for singing is preserved for ever in the brain and it gives people a lift when they can remember things".

Chreanne started singing with groups when she was working in a residential home and was so amazed by the positive effect on people with dementia that she decided to include this when she went to work for the Alzheimer's Society West Berkshire branch.

"We choose things to sing for people that have an emotional resonance, things that allow them to express their emotions such as feeling cross or sad as well as happy.

Singing tutor Liz McNaughton, a freelance voice coach with Singing for the Brain, explained the concept had been so popular and successful that she had been asked to run workshops for people with Parkinson's Disease, those who had strokes and head injuries and for people with special needs.

"It would seem, and there is a lot of research about this, that the music has the ability to access words. It is so powerful that people who have lost their ability to speak can access songs and words from the melody."

She said the singing sessions appeared to have positive effects on participants' cognitive powers, their physical ability and their emotions.

Rhythm 'beneficial'

Clive Evers, of the Alzheimer's Society said Singing for the Brain was proving so popular and beneficial that he hoped more groups would soon be established.

"What Chreanne Montgomery-Smith is tapping into is very important. It is not the stream of consciousness, but a level of consciousness, a level of awareness people have with the real world.

"The music allows them to engage. Her project is very important and shows what can be done."

Clive Ballard, director of research at the Alzheimer's Society and Professor of Age Related Diseases at King's College, London, said singing as an activity did seem to help people with dementia.

"People seem to enjoy doing something jointly with other people and there is a lot of evidence that being socially engaged is good for people with dementia."

He said the part of the brain that worked with speech was different to the part that processed music, allowing those who had lost their speech to still enjoy their music.

Mr Ballard said rhythm had also been shown to be beneficial, particularly for those with diseases like Parkinson's where movement was a problem. He said listening to rhythms, even just a metronome, could help.