



Sailing through dementia's neuropsychiatric storms: active elements of music therapy as compass beyond Poseidon's reach

Koert van Essen

Throughout history, sea journeys have symbolized humanity's confrontation with forces larger than ourselves. In Greek mythology, Poseidon ruled the oceans with great power and unpredictability, summoning storms that tested the courage and resilience of every voyager.

For many people living with dementia, daily life can feel like navigating such an unpredictable sea — marked by inner storms of agitation, anxiety, confusion, and emotional turmoil. In this context, music therapy can be seen as both compass and vessel: it does not calm the ocean itself but supports the traveler in navigating its unpredictable waters. The therapeutic process is not a straight path to a fixed destination but a cyclical journey of departure, return, and transformation.

This metaphor provides a framework for interpreting the results of our study on how active elements of music therapy can support people with dementia in coping with these inner storms. Previous research has shown that music therapy can reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms such as depression, agitation, and anxiety. However, less is known about which active elements contribute to these effects and how music therapists experience these processes.

We conducted a mixed-methods study in which music therapists from the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium reflected on which elements they considered most relevant. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches within a Group Concept Mapping design, we identified the most important active elements and underlying mechanisms in music therapy for neuropsychiatric symptoms in people with dementia.

This paper presentation offers insights into how elements such as attunement, validation, and musical responsiveness can help reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms in people with



dementia — supporting calmness, emotional safety, and connection amid Poseidon's unpredictable sea.

Biography

Koert van Essen is a PhD candidate at the Open University in Heerlen (the Netherlands) at the department of psychology under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Susan van Hooren and Dr. Wim Waterink. His research focuses on the active elements of music therapy and underlying mechanisms for reducing neuropsychiatric symptoms in people with dementia. In addition, he is a lecturer on the bachelor and master Music Therapy program at HAN University of Applied Sciences in Nijmegen (the Netherlands). Over the past twenty years, Koert has worked as a music therapist, in both the Netherlands and Germany.

Recent Publications

Van Essen, K., Akse, M., Pelgrim, T., Prick, A.-E., & Aalbers, S. (2025). **Therapeutic factors and mechanisms of change in music therapy for people with late-life depression: A scoping review.** *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 93, Article 102289.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2025.102289>

Van Essen, K.A., van Hooren, S.A.H., & Waterink, W. (2024, June 26–29). *Music therapy to reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms in people with dementia: Active elements and working mechanisms: A research proposal* [Poster presentation]. **11th Nordic Music Therapy Conference**, Aalborg, Denmark. <https://www.communication.aau.dk/research/music-therapy-research/nmtc-24>