

Top Ten Tips for setting up a Dementia Friendly Shanty Choir

By **Jan Bee Brown** – Choir leader and founder of the **Shalder Shanty Singers**



A storyteller, a sailor and a shanty-woman, Jan Bee Brown is passionate about enabling people to live their best lives. A fervent admirer of feisty female pirates throughout history, Jan has walked several planks and weathered many storms in her portfolio career in the arts. Jan now lives in Shetland where she works part time as Dementia Advisor for Alzheimer Scotland, swims in the sea, shares stories and sings sea shanties.

1 Keep things ship-shape

To entice a diverse crew to come aboard, your venue needs good parking with access for anyone with a disability, a disabled toilet and good ventilation. Stable and comfy chairs are essential. Having a safe breakout space can be handy if anyone needs a moment of quiet or privacy.

2 Setting your sails

You could make contact with your local Alzheimer Scotland, Age Scotland team, or any other local provision supporting people living with dementia, as they can help to advertise your choir with their clients, their families and their carers. Alzheimer Scotland's Dementia Advisor can offer a free Dementia Friends training session to your volunteers and their Community Activity Organiser can advise you on your choice of venue. Age Scotland also run Dementia Awareness training, which you can access online and in person. Share the love and contact care homes and over 60s groups in your area and arrange a sing-along session. You could visit your local Men's Shed, community groups and Living Well Hubs, and Voluntary Action befriending agencies, to advertise to press gang new recruits.

3 Every Captain needs a First Mate

To enable the shanty-man/woman to chat to the crew as they assemble, you need a cheery volunteer (First Mate!) to welcome folk on board, take contact details and remind them about any housekeeping and where the toilets are. If a participant starts to feel ill or anxious during the session your First Mate can help if a participant or Carer needs back up.

4

Clear orders

Be consistent, print out your song sheets with the same large font (we use Arial size 16). Number the verses and put the chorus in bold type to help the crew navigate the lyrics. Plan ahead and only introduce one new shanty every few weeks. Learn it one week and then return to it the next until it is embedded in your repertoire. Adding some nautical hand movements to a shanty can be fun too.

5

Crew going AWOL

You will have latecomers so start your session with the same two shanties/songs, so when the crew come in they can still join in. Ask the First Mate to assist latecomers to their seats and keep watch for wandering crew. As the captain you might find that a comedy duck call is good for maintaining focus if crew-members are chatting or decide to walk the plank. It works well for us!

6

Weathering storms

Expect the unexpected as it won't always be plain sailing. I find that communication is key: keep things simple, smile, slow down and speak clearly. If someone seems to be struggling ask a volunteer or your first mate to sit with any crew-member who may be feeling anxious. Keep things light-hearted and always take responsibility for any confusion, even if it is not your fault...if it keeps the crew happy your ship will sail itself! Remember that worse things happen at sea so have some fun!

7

All for me grog?

Sing for 30-40 minutes and then break out the grog (tea!) and some biscuits. Refreshments after your shanty session are a great way to get to know your crew and for your crew to socialise. To keep folk stimulated add a story or some nautical facts/quiz questions to the mix at this point. You could contact your local supermarket's Community Fund to boost your stores in kind. We've found that a foil-wrapped Tunnocks teacake goes down a treat and avoids cross-contamination and a fresh fruit option helps to keep scurvy at bay.

**8**

The Band Played On

Musical accompaniment isn't essential but is handy for covert crew recruitment. We have recruited folk who said they 'did not sing' but would like to come and play along, so we now have a house band with a ukulele, a concertina and a banjo! Learning an instrument is good for brain health, however having one confident musician (professional or student) is to be recommended, because sometimes we don't all play the same notes at the same time or necessarily in the right order!

Our musician plays the tune solo as an intro before we all start singing a shanty and then the rest of the band play along.



Swab the decks

During times of Covid outbreaks it might be useful to laminate your songs sheets (back to back) and keep hand sanitiser and disinfectant wipes at the ready: at the end of the session the song sheets can be swabbed down. If possible check to see if there is a CO2 monitor in the venue – these turn from green to orange if there is a lack of oxygen and are a great visual reminder to open a window.



Beyond the Seas

Consistency – perhaps this should have been number 1! A change of port, course or sailing time can cause anxiety and confusion for people living with dementia so try and find a venue and a time slot that is sustainable. We are all creatures of habit and the carers and families of people who are living with dementia need to plan ahead for activities outwith their daily routine. Promote inclusivity and intergenerational interaction: we all have good days and bad days and some days it can be a struggle for folk to get out of the house. Perhaps you could contact local volunteer agencies and interfaith communities to encourage befriending. Carers have had a particularly difficult time during the pandemic, so if we can support a person living with dementia to live well, we are in-turn helping their carer and their family too.



If you think you'd like to have a go at setting up your own Dementia Inclusive Shanty choir or simply try out some Shanty songs with your existing group, we have three, non-copyright Shanty songs for you to download and try. You can find these on our webpage here:

<https://singing.luminatescotland.org/guide/top-10-tips-dementia-inclusive-shanty-choir/>



Thanks to Jan and the Shanty crew for their top tips on setting up a Dementia Inclusive Shanty Choir! Further resources about making your singing group Dementia Inclusive and as accessible as possible can be found on the Dementia Inclusive Singing Network website: <https://singing.luminatescotland.org>