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Take Note(s): Living Well Through Music

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

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Music is everywhere. People everywhere can be seen donning headphones whether they're reading, exercising, traveling, or shopping. What is it about songs that captivate mass audiences? All in all, why is music such a big deal? The answers to these questions are important—especially in regard to cultivating your health and well-being.

MUSIC'S INFLUENCE ON THE HUMAN MIND

Aside from the frequent head-bobs and toe-taps that result from enjoying a good song, music touches people on a much deeper level. A very interesting and applicable effect of music is how listening to songs can shift your mood. One of the most influential factors in the process of physiological change through music is your brain's limbic system.

Located in the middle of the brain, the limbic system controls instinct, mood/emotions, and sensations. How exactly is music associated with this region? When you listen to a tune, the vibrations of the song travel into your brain via nerves, and when these vibrations reach the limbic system, it becomes activated. In turn, this activation stimulates specific body systems that result increased heart rate and endorphin levels. In addition, tunes also touch the right hemisphere of your brain, the side of the brain associated with creativity and imagination. It is this portion of your brain that governs the ability to be wrapped up in a good song. With all of these physiological changes occurring in your brain, you can see how music is capable of greatly affecting a person.

In addition, there are two levels of processing involved in listening to music: *unconscious and conscious*. The *conscious*, and more obvious, processing level involves comprehending melody. You are fully aware of your appreciation of a song's melody—you may often sing, hum, or whistle along. The melody is the most recognized part of any song, and it works to activate your intelligence and imagination. Processing the melody of a song is *very conscious*—it allows you to knowingly acknowledge what songs or genres you do or do not like. In contrast, on an *unconscious* level, people identify with music through rhythm. The vibrations from the bass line, back beat, or percussion excite your autonomic nervous system and therefore initiate the above-mentioned domino effect of physiological systems.

The combination of these physical changes and the conscious and unconscious levels of processing make music fully capable of shifting your mood. The technical term for this is the *iso principle*. The iso principle describes when a mood is matched with a style of music and how it changes as the style of music changes. For example, if you feel relaxed or tired, you can play a slow, soothing song; if the song changes to a fast, upbeat song, you'll feel more energized and aroused as a result. People frequently use the iso principle perhaps without knowing it; oftentimes motivating, fast-paced songs pump up athletes for sporting events, or people might play relaxing melodies to unwind after a stressful day. You can see clearly just how powerful the iso principle is and how easily you can incorporate this practice into daily life.

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MUSIC THERAPY

Music therapy is a form of alternative medicine that is becoming increasingly popular even though it has been around for quite a long time. In fact, in Old English the word “heal” means “to make a sound,” and the word “sound” means “health and wholeness.” In the 1700s, doctors used music to treat depression with music and Florence Nightingale used it to ease soldiers’ pain during the Crimean War.

Music therapy for pain management has been proven highly effective in many studies, and interestingly enough, just listening to music—any style of music—on a daily basis results in a drastic decrease in pain reported by patients. This form of therapy is effective for all age ranges, but it has been proven most successful for the older adult population.

Music therapy can also ease depression. Research has indicated that when incorporating music into a patient’s treatment and usual routine, uplifting songs can have an elevating effect on mood. In numerous studies, patients consistently reported feeling less depressed and experienced fewer symptoms of depression overall.

A third and very interesting type of music therapy is called *Rhythmic Auditory Stimulation (RAS)*, a technique designed to improve the movement and walking abilities of older adults, especially stroke victims or those suffering from Parkinson’s. For these individuals, walking and other forms of movement are often very difficult. RAS works by having such individuals listen to music with very steady, distinct beats as they participate in physical therapy exercises. Therapists encourage the individuals to make their movements to the beat, and this actually helps them to work longer, have smoother movements, move more quickly, and walk longer distances. Simply listening to music helps to further all of these great steps toward recovery and improvement for people who could otherwise be suffering.

In all cases, music therapy is an inexpensive, non-invasive, and safe form of therapy that can benefit people of all ages.

MUSIC MEMORY

You may notice that you easily remember song lyrics from a tune you heard decades ago. This type of recollection is known as *music memory*, which begins to form most fully between the ages of 15 to 25. At this time, a person’s ability to associate music or a specific song with memories of time, place, emotional state, and even a sense of identity fully develop; all the elements of where, when, and with whom an individual learned a song can potentially stay with him/her forever. Music memory is so powerful in fact that some physicians have started to use it to treat Alzheimer’s disease. While it is not a cure, tapping into music memory can help alleviate some of the most devastating symptoms, including memory loss. Playing a favorite or familiar song

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INTEGRATING MUSIC ON A DAILY BASIS

There are multiple ways music can be positively implemented into one's daily life and routine. Even with a busy schedule, people can easily incorporate music into their hectic lifestyles and reap the many benefits. The first way is to utilize its relaxing qualities. Listening to soothing, calming melodies can ease stress, relieving physical and mental tensions and anxiety. Also, soft music is great when used as part of a cool down after exercising or as a way to drift off to sleep.

A second way to use music daily is while exercising. Making music a part of any sweat routine is a great idea as this simple act can improve any workout. Studies comparing a control (no music) group with an experimental (music) group show that those in the experimental group were more diligent in their workouts, more persistent, returned to the gym more often, worked out for longer periods of time, and in the long run (literally!), remained more committed to their exercise plans. With all of these factors combined, those who incorporated music into their workouts saw more long-term benefits than the control group, allowing for their health and wellness to be greatly impacted.

Third, individuals can further enjoy music by listening to it while at work. Numerous studies conducted in a wide spectrum of workplaces—from factories to offices—conclude that listening to music while working is very beneficial for employees, and resolutely, for companies. Employees who get some grooves going are more productive, efficient, diligent, and even report enjoying their job more than those who do not listen to music.

From its therapeutic aspects and ability to boost physical activity, to helping with relaxation and stress management, music is one major and easy path to living well!

***Mather LifeWays** is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

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