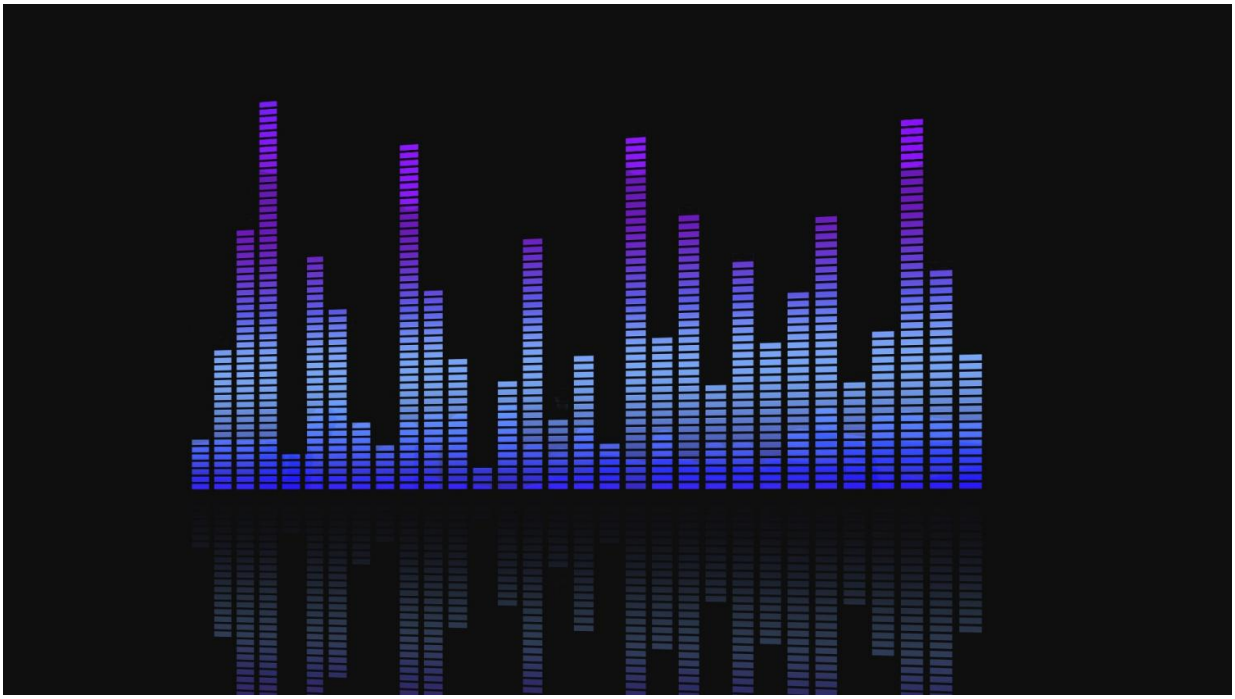
Medical Xpress

Breakup ballad or empowerment anthem? How to use music to improve mood

October 31 2017, by Cahli Samata, Particle



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Does listening to the same sad songs leave you feeling like a broken record? It could be time for a different beat.

I know it's a cliché, but I *love* music.

I express probably around 90% of my emotions through music. I'm that

annoying person who bursts into song whenever you inadvertently stumble upon one of my 'trigger' words. Tell me to "turn around" and I will musically respond "bright eyes!"

I've even been known to turn to my old pal Google to find the best song to match my mood, searching "best song for (insert emotionally tumultuous event here)".

But it turns out the best song to listen to when you're feeling down might not be the one that matches your feelings but the one that matches how you *want* to feel.

Music amplifies emotion

When you're feeling all loved up in a new relationship, you might find yourself swooning along to some Ed Sheeran. Then if that relationship happens to meet a fiery demise, you may lick the wounds with a Taylor Swift breakup ballad.

These music choices can be made unconsciously. We feel naturally drawn to songs that reflect our current mood. But when we're in a bad place and listening to sad songs, we can be unknowingly making ourselves feel worse.

Music therapist Professor Katrina McFerran has seen this firsthand through her research with young people. She wanted to find a way to make young people more conscious of the ways they used music in the hope they wouldn't fall into these traps.

"Based on previous studies … we've noticed that some young people who already had inclination towards ruminating in particular use music to kind of reinforce ruminative tendencies," she says.

"So we decided to design a brief intervention that could provide young people information and inspire them to think about the ways that they're using their music."

Listen to your heart

Kat recruited 13 young Australians who were on the waiting list at headspace. She and two other qualified music therapists took the young people through her intervention over approximately two sessions each.

The intervention used the Healthy-Unhealthy Music Scale (HUMS)—a series of 13 questions—to work out how young people were using their music.

Questions like "Do you ever try to use music to feel better but end up feeling worse?" helped Kat determine whether the young people were unknowingly using music in unhealthy ways.

"Part of that is we need to listen to them, listen to their music, listen to their opinions about music that they love and talk to them and share that experience of music with them," Kat explains, "then just gently prompt conversations that might increase their consciousness."

As most young people will tell you, music is something close to their heart. So it's not always easy to admit some of their favourite songs have been keeping them stuck in a negative loop.

But once they start reflecting on their choices, it can be a bit of a light bulb moment.

"They just went like, 'Ahh! I can see now how I've been using music to intensify my feelings and how that has actually been taking me into a darker place and I can change that'," says Kat.

So how do you make changes without compromising your music tastes?

Changing your tune

If death metal's your jam, you're not suddenly going to be able to bop along to *Walking on Sunshine*, no matter how much good it may do.

Luckily, it's not the types of songs that matter. And headspace cares about young people's input, so they wouldn't want them to change their tastes for treatment.

"There's no point saying to someone who's really angry 'Oh stop being angry, listen to this really happy perky-lerky song, you'll be fine'," says Debra Rickwood, Chief Scientific Advisor to headspace.

It's not about the specific songs, it's how you use them. So rather than switching off your favourite screamo, you can listen to it first, then move on to something that makes you feel a bit brighter.

"It's really cool, it's called the ISO principle," says Kat.

"If you meet people where they are and match their mood initially and gradually step them away from that to a place where they'd rather be, that can work really successfully. So playlists are a perfect structure for that."

Playlists are a great way of working through bad feelings. Let's say you're going through a bad breakup. Rather than keeping heartbreak songs on repeat all day, you can make a playlist that starts sombre and gradually becomes more empowering.

The best part is, it's easy to do and they can all be songs of your choice.

"[Young people have] got a resource there at their fingertips to help them when they're stuck in some of the feelings that are not conducive to their mental health and wellbeing," says Deb.

Playing by ear

Playlists are one way to use music to feel better. But an amazing thing that's come out of Kat's project is the ways young people began solving their own problems.

"One beautiful story of this young man, he decided that he was going to—because he wanted to keep listening to the same music—so he decided he would reprogramme his associations with the music that he wanted to listen to," says Kat.

Kat tells me this young man would play the songs that were associated with trauma during good times to rewire his brain into having positive associations with them.

He'd play his songs when he was feeling pumped up about a night out, and if he had a good time, he'd come home and play them again!

"He overrode the previous associations with music and was able to continue listening to his old music in a way that actually made him feel better, rather than worse," says Kat.

Another 15-year-old in the study found that their 'angry music' was making them feel worse and leading them to do things they shouldn't. As a heavy metal fan, they couldn't stomach pop songs. So instead they used retro songs that made them feel happier. They now rock out to retro tunes with their mum!

Turning down distress

Though it was a small sample size, Kat was pleased to find her cohort reporting lower distress levels after the intervention.

"We got some pretty significant changes in their levels of distress from pre to post," she says.

Kat used the K10 scale to measure distress levels before and after the intervention. All participants reported some reduction in distress after the intervention.

But some of the most enlightening results came out of the qualitative data.

"The main themes that emerged were [that young people] had a greater sense of agency, so … they went away feeling that they could use music to influence how they're feeling in a positive way," says Deb.

"One of them said music is their top favourite thing to do. It's a really engaging way to work with young people."

Both Deb and Kat believe this intervention could be useful for young people seeking help for mental health issues. It's proved to be engaging with young people, and it gives them the power and tools to go away and make positive changes in their lives.

One of the main hurdles to rolling out the intervention is the time it takes to do.

The current mental health care plan in Australia covers 10 sessions per year. This music intervention takes two sessions to do, so at the moment it would take a big chunk of the overall plan.

But that doesn't mean hope is lost. Kat is continuing to research and

work to find a way to get this out to young people in need of help.

In the meantime, you can start to think about the ways you're using music in your own life and experiment with making some uplifting playlists of your own. They can even double as an epic karaoke list! Because, in my opinion, there's no better way to deal with emotions than to sing them straight from your soul.

There's nothing I can say, a total eclipse of the heart!

This article first appeared on Particle, a science news website based at Scitech, Perth, Australia. Read the original article.

Provided by Particle

Citation: Breakup ballad or empowerment anthem? How to use music to improve mood (2017, October 31) retrieved 2 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-10-breakup-ballad-empowerment-anthem-music.html