

Music can ease the January blues—but the types of songs that work depend on your age and mindset

January 16 2024, by Glenn Fosbraey



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Music can significantly boost your mental health—delivering benefits [similar to](#) those provided by exercise or weight loss. It can also reduce

feelings of anxiety and physiological measures of stress and, as neuropsychologist Daniel Levitin [argues](#), even create the same "neurochemical cocktail" as other pleasurable activities, like orgasms or eating chocolate.

So what type of [music](#) should you turn to in order to boost your mood? [Researchers have found](#) that music with a fast tempo, written in the major mode (such as Led Zeppelin's Rock and Roll) evokes a sense of happiness, whereas music with a slow tempo in the minor mode (like Johnny Cash's somber cover of Hurt) evokes a sense of sadness. But, as illogical as it may seem, that sensation of sadness may actually help lead to [positive emotions](#).

A [2013 research paper](#) says that mood-congruent experiences of art—like listening to sad music when feeling sad—offers a sense of emotional sharing, akin to interacting with an empathic friend. And [research from 2018](#) on music's effect on mood confirms that "sad" music can have a positive effect, with the researchers arguing that "when experiencing sadness, focusing on sad music can be a positive and even a strengthening experience."

This links with philosopher Aristotle's theory of catharsis, [which suggests that](#) we experience the emotion of sadness through music in order to purge the emotion from ourselves in real life.

Professor of musicology Kim Cunio agrees that lifting your mood with music probably isn't as simple as listening to up-tempo music in a major key. She suggests that to reap the mood-boosting benefits of music, listeners need to ["follow the heart"](#) and choose the music that most resonates with them.

But what about the lyrics? It may be the case that sad sounding songs have a positive effect on mood, but can the same be said about sad

words?

A 2020 study on [trauma processing](#) noted that lyrics that were relatable helped patients feel supported when processing their emotions and struggles.

This is supported by a [research paper](#) by psychologists [Kazuma Mori and Makoto Iwanaga](#) who reported that when listening to a sad song, listeners could identify with the lyrics and felt as if the singer knew their own sad experiences. This made them feel understood, bringing about an experience of pleasure.

Research has already suggested that our musical tastes change as we get older. For example, our preference for [classical music](#) increases as we age while our preference for rock [decreases](#). But further findings have shown that [a listener's age](#) can also affect the types of music that improve their low mood.

Young adults report a preference for listening to [sad music](#) to lift their [mood](#), compared with adults over the age of 25, who tend to report more positive feelings being evoked by [happy music](#).

So, if you're suffering from the January blues, and you are over the age of 25, it might be a better idea to listen to Abba's Dancing Queen or Justin Timberlake's Can't Stop The Feeling instead of The Cure or Billie Eilish. In my case, though, as a devotee of what my family categorize as "misery music," this may just make things worse.

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