

Sad music study tests the direct effect hypothesis of 'pleasurable negative emotion'

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A new study proposes a novel theory of why listening to sad music can make us feel good.

Many people report that the music they love can also make them feel sad. It's something that has puzzled music researchers, who have long wondered how an activity that produces a negative emotion can be so eagerly sought out.

Now, a new study suggests that for some of us, it could be that we might actually enjoy the sadness. The research, published in the journal [*PLOS ONE*](#), suggests [negative emotions](#) felt when listening to music can produce pleasure.

"It's paradoxical to think you could enjoy something that makes you feel a negative emotion," says Professor Emery Schubert, the author of the study from the Empirical Musicology Laboratory in the School of the Arts & Media, UNSW Arts, Design & Architecture. "But this research shows the first empirical evidence that sadness can positively affect the enjoyment of music, directly."

Adding to music enjoyment

For the study, 50 participants—consisting primarily of undergraduate music students—self-selected a piece of sadness-evoking music that they loved, which included classics from Ludwig van Beethoven to the modern hits of Taylor Swift. They were not explicitly instructed to choose music where they enjoyed the sadness.

Participants were then asked to imagine if their sadness could be "removed" when listening to the music—which the majority self-reported they could do.

"We know that many people are quite apt when it comes to thought experiments, so it's a reasonable approach to use and, at worst, it should produce no results," Prof. Schubert says.

After the imagined removal of sadness, participants were asked if they liked the piece of music any differently: 82% said that removing the sadness reduced their enjoyment of the music.

"The findings suggest that sadness felt when listening to music might actually be liked and can enhance the pleasure of listening to it," Prof. Schubert says.

Prof. Schubert says there could be many reasons why people enjoy music that makes them sad.

"One explanation relates to play," Prof. Schubert says. "Experiencing a wide range of emotions in a more or less [safe environment](#) could help us learn how to deal with what we encounter in the world."

Sadness and 'being moved'

The research also discusses the implications for findings of previous studies that suggest sadness cannot be enjoyed when listening to music but is instead mediated by a complex feeling with positive aspects called "being moved."

"Previous studies refer to an 'indirect effect hypothesis,' which means that people may experience sadness, but it is something else they enjoy—being moved," Prof. Schubert says. "Because being moved is a mixed feeling with positive and negative aspects."

A further 53 participants in a control group were asked to report music they loved that they deemed "moving." The [control group](#) participants reported feeling sadness in addition to being moved.

"It was previously thought that when people felt sadness in response to music they enjoyed, they were really experiencing being moved," Prof.

Schubert says. "But the findings of this study suggest that being moved and feeling sadness have overlapping meanings.

"In other words, being moved triggers sadness, and sadness triggers being moved."

Limitations of the research

Some limitations of the study are associated with allowing the participants to self-select pieces of music.

"It's always risky to ask a participant to choose music that they both love and makes them feel sad, as it may give them a cue about the aim of the study," Prof. Schubert says. "But we did take steps to minimize this in our method, including not mentioning the concerns of the study during recruitment, screening the self-selected pieces and having a control condition."

Approaches where experimenters select music (which previous studies have mainly been based upon) also have limitations, which future research can address.

"The main limitation of previous studies is that the experimenters select the 'sad' music rather than the participants, which means participants might not necessarily 'love' the pieces," Prof. Schubert says. "Therefore, future research should have more participants to ensure enough happen to love the pieces."

More information: Emery Schubert et al, Liking music with and without sadness: Testing the direct effect hypothesis of pleasurable negative emotion, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI:](#)

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