

Tune into the Emotional Benefits of Music

The connection between music and the brain was the subject of a recent symposium at the 2012 conference of the Association for Psychological Science in Chicago. The findings included:



- **Music and pleasure:** One brain structure in particular – the striatum – releases a chemical called dopamine in response to music that one really likes. Dr. Robert Zattore of the Montreal Neurological Institute described experiments that show the dopamine release actually occurs 10 to 15 seconds *before* the part of a favorite song that we really enjoy. Why does this occur? According to Dr. Zattore, it's because the brain likes to “investigate” its environment and anticipate what's coming next.
- **Rocking to the beat:** It appears that humans are the only primates who can move to the beat of music according to Aniruddh Patel of the Neurosciences Institute in San Diego. His research also indicates that when people move to a beat, they're more likely to cooperate with one another – that's why armies train by marching to a beat and why many workplaces now provide background music.
- **Combating Alzheimer's disease:** Dr. Patel also observes that music with a beat seems to help people with motor disorders, such as Parkinson's syndrome, to walk better than in the absence of music. These patients actually synchronize their movements to a beat. There is also new evidence that music can help Alzheimer's patients remember things better and that learning to play an instrument might even stave off dementia.
- **Music – language of emotions:** It has always been difficult to describe or communicate **feelings** because they are personal, subjective and invisible. But through the ages, music has served as a most effective conveyor of emotions. Songs become popular because of the beat and rhythm – which stimulate dopamine – and because of music's magical ability to articulate very specific emotions. Certain songs may resonate with you because they “capture” a complex emotion you are trying to explore and better understand
- **Music as stress insulator:** There are predictable parts of one's day that are especially stressful. Wellness coach Elizabeth Scott advises her clients to use music as an important backdrop to insulate them from the stress accruing from these daily events. For example, listening to your favorite songs during the commute to work greatly minimizes the likelihood that you will be drawn into a “road rage” reaction. Listening to up-tempo music while cleaning will actually give you added energy and act as a buffer from the drudgery. Paying bills can be an understandably stressful event but listening to music while writing checks or paying online will provide a measure of enjoyment and distraction guaranteed to “ease the pain.”