



How music grows your brain



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Studies also show music therapy can encourage repair of brain cells in diseases such as Alzheimer's and dementia. Photo / Greg Bowker

Take one Eagles song at night and half a Queen album in the morning - music as medicine. It's not as crazy as it sounds.

The benefits are vast, from increased dopamine levels to improved memory and weight loss. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, one of those chemicals responsible for transferring signals between the nerve cells of the brain. Dopamine is also a feel-good chemical and music gives it a lively boost, proving something you and your mates already knew: Led Zeppelin loud is good for you!

Music also enhances intelligence, learning and IQ. You might have heard about the 'Mozart Effect,' whereby listening to compositions by the famous composer can produce short-term improvement in certain kinds of mental tasks. If you're a Mozart fan, great, but recent findings also show any album you desire has a positive effect on cognition.

Studies also show music therapy can encourage repair of brain cells in diseases such as Alzheimer's and dementia. In the moving documentary *Alive Inside*, seniors who hadn't been able to communicate for decades became animated when played songs from happier years. In other words, their brain woke.

As well as dancing and singing, which protects our brains against cognitive decline, music also benefits exercise. Aren't those running shoes easier to put on when *Escape* (The Pina Colada song) is blasting through your headphones? The scientific reason: listening to music can help override those signals of fatigue. In other words, Katy Perry and Aerosmith help you push through the pain.

Against the odds our brain can also grow at work, providing of course it's you, not Barry from IT in control of the playlist. It'll come as no surprise you're a happier and more productive employee as a

result (tell the boss).

An added bonus - if the music is upbeat, your mood will improve further.

Let's push the boat out even more. What happens if you listen to a new song every day? It's common for older music fans to know every word to *Psycho Killer* or *Dancing Queen*, songs from their formative years - but many stop there. Music discovery stalls.

This, however, might change your mind: several studies have shown your brain grows if you listen to one new tune a day, due to increased patterns of brain synchronisation.

Other bizarre health benefits? Music can save your life - in your car at least. Research has proven unfamiliar, even uninteresting music is best for safe driving. A good tune will also decrease levels of stress hormone cortisolin which counteracts the effects of chronic stress.

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If that isn't enough to have you reaching for the volume dial, the team at Georgia Tech University showed dimming the lights and listening to soft music while people ate, led them to consume fewer calories and enjoy their meals more. Lose weight with Lionel Richie...!

It's never too late to try out new tunes and, with digital music streaming service Spotify, there has never been a better time to try. Remember the \$33 CD that only had three (of 11) tracks you liked? Spotify, usually \$12.99 a month but free with many eligible Spark plans, has changed the rules. You can stream music through your device, save favourite albums and give new stuff a go just because you can.

What song to choose? Leave that to Spotify. Go to 'Genres and Moods' and you'll find playlists created specifically to enhance mood and focus. You'll see sub-genres like Happy, Psyched and Melancholy. In the 'Focus' category, you'll discover Acoustic Concentration, Zen Focus, Intense Study, even meditation playlists. If you're going through a creative spurt, listen to ambient noise.

Even regular Spotify users may be unaware of the 'Word' category under Browse. Here you'll find a vast selection of audiobooks, including Shakespeare sonnets, poems from Dylan Thomas and Grimm Brothers fairy tales. You can also learn a language. Can't you just feel that grey matter growing?

Music can make you feel more hopeful, powerful and in control of your life - and it's never too late to start. Those tracks you crank up on your daily commute can make you smarter. But you already knew that.

Billy Joel said: "Music in itself is healing" while Bob Marley told us: "The good thing about music is, when it hits, you feel no pain."

The doctors have spoken.

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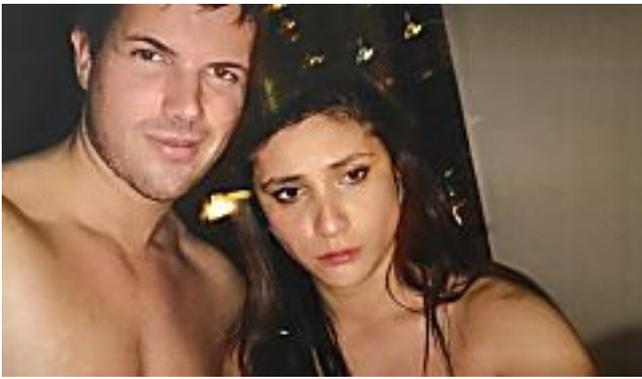
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