

This Fact Sheet summarises the NEA report “Music and Health: A Review of Research and Practice” for BBC Music Day 2019

Please refer to the report for full details and research references.

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- 1.** Every known human society has music. Researchers suggest that music emerged in our early human ancestors as a survival mechanism which went on to play a crucial role in human evolution. Unlike some other survival mechanisms, which have largely become redundant in modern society (such as the ability to track animals), music continues to play an important part in our lives.
- 2.** Research has linked music to: effective attachment in infants; the development of empathy in childhood; the regulation of our moods; and strategies for coping with stress. Beyond these factors, music can have a role in addressing or ameliorating specific health issues – for example in post-natal depression, in dementia, in lung health, and in Parkinson’s disease.
- 3.** Australian researcher Dr Christina Davies has found a dose-response relationship between arts engagement and mental wellbeing in the general population. In her study people taking part in recreational creative activity, including music, for at least two hours a week reported a significant increase in their wellbeing. The positive effect increased as the level of engagement rose above the two hour a week threshold. The Government of Western Australia’s Healthways Arts Program draws on this research to increase the participation of priority population groups in arts activities as a means of improving public health.
- 4.** An increased role for music and wider arts engagement in UK health policy is emerging through the Government’s current investment in “social prescribing” – where GPs direct patients to positive activities rather than giving them medicine. This initiative puts primary prevention and support for healthy lifestyles at the heart of health planning and encourages more holistic, person-centred and community-focused approaches to looking after our health and wellbeing.
- 5.** The mechanisms that underpin the relationship between music and human wellbeing are complex and multi-faceted, and the experiences of participating in or consuming music are by their nature subjective ones, influenced by a combination of personal preferences and social and cultural factors. These complications mean that the evidence for music’s impact on our health and wellbeing can be harder to analyse and interpret than the effects of, for example, prescription medicine. However, the processes at work are increasingly studied, analysed and understood, and the evidence of positive impact is unambiguous.
- 6.** In parallel to its effect on the health of individuals, music also acts as a kind of “social glue”, encouraging bonding within groups. Whilst this is often a positive process, forging common understanding and mutual support, bonding can at times have the effect of excluding outsiders and reducing overall social cohesion. However, music can also act as a bridge between groups: a medium of exchange that extends cultural understanding and improves relations between diverse communities.
- 7.** Musical modes matter. Research shows that active engagement in music-making tends to have a more positive impact on wellbeing levels than passive consumption of musical product. This finding supports the thinking behind BBC partnership projects such as Up for Arts and the Get Creative Festival, both of which aim to encourage people in becoming more creative. But although music for consumption is ubiquitous and cheap to access, research shows that participating in active creative music-making tends to be correlated with educational advantage and economic privilege. There are multiple barriers to access to music-making and other creative activities for people from less privileged socio-economic groups – and it is these groups that tend to be more exposed to health inequalities.
- 8.** In order to increase individual wellbeing and social benefit, engagement for everyone, regardless of background, demographic or social group, in music and other creative activities for at least two hours a week should be promoted by public agencies, alongside regular exercise and a healthy diet, as part of a healthy lifestyle.