

Creating playlists

What it is

Thanks to the way that the brain processes sound, music and mood are inextricably linked¹. This connection can be used deliberately to support wellbeing – and the effect seems to be independent of genre or context. For example, some people swear by the blues², while others prefer choirs³; in some cases music is just an excuse to socialise and bond⁴, while in others it offers an opportunity to experience the joys of dancing⁵. Whichever you prefer, creating playlists can be a quick and easy way to settle a distracted mind and lift your spirits.

Testimonials

Several contributors shared that music is an important part of their self-care routines. Some generate playlists in advance of certain activities or situations so this acoustic treatment can be deployed strategically as needed; others used the activity as a fun way to distract themselves during busy or unpleasant days – and said that they benefitted from the anticipation of being able to listen to their creation later (for example, while commuting home or taking a relaxing bath that evening). Music was also mentioned as a great way to separate ‘personal’ and ‘professional’: Listening to music on the way to and from work can help separate the two realms, and having a brief private concert during tea or lunch breaks offers people a chance to reset and reconnect with themselves.

Materials needed

The tools you use will depend on how you prefer to listen to music. Options include:

- Hosting a playlist on an app like Spotify (which would also allow you to share your creation with others)
- Generating a playlist locally using a programme on a personal device (e.g., in Apple Music or Windows Media Player)
- Going old-school and burning a CD – or even creating a mixed tape

Suggestions

Depending on how vast your music library is, or which service you subscribe to, you could easily spend hours creating playlists. If you don’t have that long, consider giving yourself a set amount of time (e.g., 5-10 minutes), choosing a specific number of tracks (e.g., the first 10 that seem suitable), or generating a playlist of a certain length (e.g., one hour, or perhaps the length of your commute home).

1

<https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/why-and-how-music-moves-us#:~:text=Music%20and%20Mood&text=The%20limbic%20system%2C%20which%20is,when%20our%20ears%20perceive%20music.&text=The%20chills%20you%20feel%20when,of%20pleasure%20and%20well%2Dbeing.>

2 <https://www.seangrover.com/blues-feel-good/#:~:text=Blues%20songs%20teach%20us%20three,as%20you%20think%20they%20are.>

3 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/choir-singing-improves-health-happiness-%E2%80%93-and-perfect-icebreaker>

4 <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01096/full>

5 <https://www.tapa.net.au/2020/06/01/science-confirms-that-dancing-makes-you-happy/>

What music should your playlist contain? That depends on what you want the activity to achieve. Options include:

- To capture how you are feeling in a given moment, select tracks that acoustically convey that emotion (through the tempo, for example) or which use related words in their titles or lyrics. Later on, you might reflect on the music you chose – and if you amass a collection of playlists over time, you could potentially track your mindset or explore patterns. With this method, your playlist is effectively a sonic journal entry.
- To help you achieve a different mindset, pick tracks that will nudge you in that direction. If you're feeling sad or un-energetic, you might select dance music; if you're over-stimulated, you could locate lower tempo songs or perhaps some calming ambient sounds. Ideally, you'll have enough time to listen to what you've selected – but if you don't, you'll at least have been able to reflect on your current and desired frames of mind, and this awareness can help you take the steps you need to turn things around. You'll also have the list ready for the next time you're feeling the same way.
- To feel more connected to others, look for songs that remind you of friends, family, or your culture more generally⁶. You might feature a band you heard with your friend at a live concert, or a song that was playing during a significant family occasion, or maybe just the sorts of music you heard at neighbourhood socials when you were growing up. Perhaps you'll be inspired to say hello to someone for the first time in a while, or just feel grateful for the good memories⁷.
- To reap the many physical and mental rewards of singing⁸, select some tracks that you can add vocals to – whether soloing as the lead singer or as a back-up performer adding harmonies. You could even challenge yourself to a bit of improv by selecting instrumental tracks so you can make up melodies and/or lyrics on the fly. If any of the tracks are 'ear worms'⁹, you might find that simply seeing the song titles will leave you humming under your breath all day even if you didn't have a chance to listen to the playlist immediately.
- To inspire yourself to get moving, create a playlist of music that gets your toes tapping. It's not just music alone that is great for your mood; dancing along has many benefits of its own¹⁰, and studies show that listening to higher-tempo music while

⁶ [https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/5-ways-singing-helps-humanity#:~:text=Singin%20increases%20oxytocin%20levels%20\(aiding,long%20and%20short%2Dterm%20memory](https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/5-ways-singing-helps-humanity#:~:text=Singin%20increases%20oxytocin%20levels%20(aiding,long%20and%20short%2Dterm%20memory).

⁷ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

⁸ <https://www.singupfoundation.org/singing-health#:~:text=Emotional%2FPsychological&text=Studies%20have%20shown%20that%20when,lowers%20stres%20and%20anxiety%20levels>.

⁹ <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/your-brain-on-music/your-brain-on-music/your-brain-on-music-earworms/#:~:text=The%20Science,of%20researchers%20at%20Dartmouth%20College>.

¹⁰ <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-dancing-helps-your-mental-health-5206963>

you work out can increase your exercise performance¹¹. Exercise playlists are not just for those who go to the gym: they can also jazz up seated fitness routines¹².

- To help make an unappealing task more palatable, create a playlist that provides a motivational soundtrack for your work. This might involve something relatively unintrusive, such as classical music or movie scores, or perhaps some metal or techno to power you through. Just the act of selecting the right sounds will help you focus your mind and find something to anticipate – even if it is what you’ll be hearing rather than what you’ll be doing.

¹¹ <https://www.center4research.org/can-listening-music-improve-workout/#:~:text=Studies%20show%20that%20faster%20paced,%2C%20pace%2C%20or%20repetitions%20completed.>

¹² <https://emduk.org/the-benefits-of-seated-exercise/>