

Everyday music listening:
The importance of individual and situational factors for
musical emotions and stress reduction

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Abstract

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Music listening primarily evokes positive emotions in listeners. Research has shown that positive emotions may be fundamental for improving both psychological and physical aspects of well-being. Besides from the music itself it is essential to consider individual and situational factors when studying emotional experiences to music. Everyone does not respond in the same way to a piece of music and one individual may respond differently to a piece of music at different times. The main aim with the four papers in this thesis was to explore the effects of everyday music listening on emotions, stress and health. By using the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), a new approach was taken to study the prevalence of musical emotions in everyday life. In the DRM the previous day is divided into episodes, in terms of activity, experienced emotions, and time of day. The results from study I showed that music occurred in 30 % of the episodes and that positive emotions were more often and more intensively experienced in musical episodes than in non-musical episodes. Music was also related to lower stress levels and higher health scores. The results from study II showed that if music occurred in the episode after a particularly stressful episode, the stress level was lower in both that episode and in the next one compared to if music did not occur. A mediation analysis suggested that the positive emotions induced by the music were mediating the effect of music on stress. The results did also show that liking of the music affected the level of stress. In study III, an experiment group who listened to their self-chosen music on mp3-players when arriving home from work every day for 30 minutes for two weeks' time was compared to a control group who relaxed without music and with a baseline week when the experiment group relaxed without music. The results showed that although no significant differences were found between the groups, the experiment group showed an increase in intensity of positive emotions and decrease in perceived stress level and cortisol levels over time. No such changes were found within the control group. In study IV, data from study I and III was reanalysed with the purpose of exploring the associations between personality and emotional responses to music. The results showed that the associations between personality and intensity of positive emotions, perceived stress, and use of emotion regulation strategies differed in the two datasets and these inconsistencies indicate that personality is not the main contributor to emotional responses to music. Overall, the results from this thesis indicate that everyday music listening is an easy and effective way of improving well-being and health by its ability to evoke positive emotions and thereby reduce stress. But not just any music will do since the responses to music are influenced by individual and situational factors.

Keywords: emotion, everyday life, health, music listening, personality, stress.

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Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning på svenska

Forskning har visat att musiklyssning främst leder till positiva känslor. Positiva känslor är grundläggande för att förbättra både psykiska och fysiska aspekter av välbefinnandet. När man studerar känslomässiga reaktioner till musik är det viktigt att ta hänsyn till individuella och situationella faktorer och inte bara själva musiken, eftersom alla människor inte reagerar exakt likadant när de lyssnar på ett musikstycke och en och samma person kan reagera olika på ett musikstycke vid olika tillfällen. Det huvudsakliga syftet med de fyra artiklarna i denna avhandling var att studera hur vardagligt musiklyssnande påverkar känslor, stress och hälsa. Genom att använda en metod som kallas 'Day Reconstruction Method' (DRM) kunde förekomsten av känslor som framkallats av vardagligt musiklyssnande studeras på ett helt nytt sätt. I DRM delas föregående dag in i episoder i form av aktivitet, upplevda känslor och tidpunkt. Därefter ställs frågor om varje episod. Resultaten från studie I visade att musik förekom i en tredjedel av de 2297 rapporterade episoderna från 207 deltagare och att positiva känslor upplevdes både oftare och mer intensivt när musik förekom i en episod än när musik inte förekom. Musiklyssnande kunde också kopplas till mindre stress och bättre hälsa. Resultaten från studie II visade att när man lyssnade på musik i episoden efter en särskilt stressig episod blev man mindre stressad både i episoden då man lyssnade på musik och i episoden efter jämfört med om man inte hade lyssnat på musik. Det visade sig också att de positiva känslor som upplevdes till musik medierade effekten av musiklyssnande på stress, vilket innebär att man kan säga att det inte var musiken som direkt ledde till mindre stress utan att det var de positiva känslor som upplevdes till musiken som i sin tur ledde till mindre stress. Man kunde även se att ju mer man gillade musiken desto lägre stress upplevde man. I studie III jämfördes en experimentgrupp som lyssnade på sin egenvalda musik på mp3-spelare när de kom hem från jobbet varje dag i två veckors tid med en kontrollgrupp som slappnade av utan musik. Experimentgruppen jämfördes också med en vecka då de också slappnade av utan musik. Resultaten visade att trots att man inte kunde se några skillnader mellan grupperna så kunde man se en förändring hos experimentgruppen över tid där upplevelsen av positiva känslor ökade i intensitet och den självrapporterade stressnivån sjönk. Dessutom kunde man se en minskning i kortisol. Dessa förändringar kunde man inte se hos kontrollgruppen. I studie IV analyserades data från studie I och III ytterligare en gång för att undersöka kopplingen mellan personlighet och känslomässiga reaktioner till musik. Kopplingarna mellan personlighet och positiva känslor, upplevd stress och användningen av känsloregleringar var olika i de två studierna och det kan tolkas som att det finns andra faktorer som påverkar hur man reagerar till musik mer än vad ens personlighet gör. Den huvudsakliga slutsatsen man kan dra från denna avhandling är att vardagligt musiklyssnande är ett enkelt och effektivt sätt att öka välbefinnandet och förbättra hälsan genom musikens förmåga att väcka positiva känslor och i sin tur sänka stressnivån. Men det viktiga är att det inte fungerar med vilken musik som helst utan att man måste ta hänsyn till de individuella och situationella faktorerna som påverkar hur man reagerar på musik, exempelvis gillande av musiken.

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Marie Helsing
Gothenburg, January 2012

Preface

This thesis consists of a summary and the following four research papers, which will be referred to in roman numerals:

I. Helsing, M., Västfjäll, D., Juslin, P. N., & Hartig, T. (2011). A day reconstruction method study of musical emotion in everyday life. Manuscript submitted for publication.

II. Helsing, M., Västfjäll, D., Juslin, P. N., & Hartig, T. (2011). Associations between everyday music listening and self-reported stress. Manuscript submitted for publication.

III. Helsing, M., Västfjäll, D., Juslin, P. N., Hartig, T., & Bjälkebring, P. (2011). A quasi-experimental study of the effects of listening to self-chosen music on emotions, stress and cortisol levels compared to relaxation without music. Manuscript submitted for publication.

IV. Helsing, M., Västfjäll, D., Juslin, P. N., & Hartig, T. (2011). Associations between personality and emotional responses to music. Manuscript submitted for publication.

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