

Does a song conjure painful memories? Try to rehabilitate it, say scientists

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What are the songs that you most remember from your teenage years or early adulthood?
2. Which of those songs are connected to happy memories and which ones to painful memories?
3. What do you do when you hear a song that is connected to a painful memory?

2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

rewires
arousing
engage

humming along
enhance
associated

evicted
induced
joyful

overpowers
pair with
recollection

skip
rehabilitate
stirring up

1. causing a strong feeling, like excitement, interest or anger _____
2. extremely happy _____
3. the ability to remember something _____
4. caused something to happen _____
5. causing strong feelings or trouble _____
6. connected one thing with another in your mind _____
7. controls or defeats someone or something using great strength _____
8. to help someone return to a normal, healthy or useful life _____
9. to join two things or people together _____
10. making a low sound with your voice while music is playing _____
11. forced someone to leave their home _____
12. to make something better or stronger _____

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13. to move lightly with small jumps; not do something _____
14. puts in new wires; changes the way something works inside _____
15. to take part in something or get involved _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. Their wedding song made everyone feel _____.
2. The singer tried to _____ the audience by asking them to clap.
3. The owner can _____ them from their house if they don't pay rent on time.
4. The emotion of the moment _____ her, and she had to stop.
5. The concert was _____ strong feelings of excitement in the crowd.
6. The calm music helped to _____ a feeling of peace in the room.
7. That old tune can _____ memories of my past relationships.
8. She likes to _____ when her boyfriend plays the guitar.
9. Playing piano can _____ the brain because the left hand moves separately from the right hand.
10. People say you shouldn't _____ ice cream _____ hot sauce, but I think it works!
11. My _____ of our first date is listening to that song together.
12. I always _____ this song with dancing with my best friend.
13. He needed help to _____ after such a long illness.
14. They hate the song and _____ it every time it came on.
15. Decoration and music can _____ a romantic dinner.

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The urge to avoid music that brings up trauma from the past is powerful, but it may be better to 'actively engage'

Nicola Davis

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- 1 When Bonnie hears the opening bars of the Verve's Bitter Sweet Symphony, she is transported back to 1997. But it isn't a joyful memory that comes to mind; it is the painful recollection of driving home from school and seeing the sheriff changing a lock on her house.
- 2 Then a teenager, Bonnie and her family were about to be evicted. And the Verve's song was everywhere. "It was a big hit at the time, and it just seemed to be playing all the time. I just couldn't get away from this song," she says.
- 3 To this day, the 46-year-old who lives in Canberra, Australia, says she will change the radio or leave the location where the song is playing to avoid hearing it.
- 4 For Matt, 52, an engineer in the north of England, the music of Neil Diamond is to be avoided after a partner with a love of the singer confessed to having lied about the nature of a relationship with a colleague.
- 5 "We used to like Friday night kitchen discos. We used to listen to all kinds, and usually Neil Diamond would be on," Matt says, adding his former partner had been to several Neil Diamond concerts, including one with her boss before she met Matt.
- 6 But after three years in a relationship with Matt, she confessed she had had an affair with her boss while she was married to her former husband.
- 7 Now, says Matt, when a Neil Diamond song comes on the radio, he has to skip the track. "If I go into my local pub and it's on the jukebox, I'll go outside," he says.
- 8 According to Ilja Salakka, a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, the relationship between music and memories is linked to emotions.
- 9 "Emotions play a key role in long-lasting memories generally, and since music can evoke strong emotions, it is likely that music can enhance the memory related to an event," he said.
- 10 Dr Stephanie Leal, an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), said that when emotionally arousing music occurs, or is paired with, an emotional experience, it can be difficult to pin down which is causing the emotions that help instil the memory.
- 11 In one study, Leal and colleagues found when people listened to music that induced either very strong or very weak emotions, they were better able to remember the gist of an event, whereas they were better able to remember details when they had a more moderate emotional response.
- 12 Salakka added that typically it is music from a listener's teenage years or early adulthood that evokes most memories.
- 13 "Positive music-related memories are often more general in nature, whereas negative memories tend to be related to more specific events," he said.
- 14 As Matt's experience shows, however, the emotions attached to a song, and its associated memory, can change. "Now it's drawing up negative memories in that [it's] stirring up new emotions that weren't originally there," said Leal.
- 15 While that may seem like the perfect reason to avoid a song, they say it could be that listening to a painful song in new, happier contexts could rehabilitate it.
- 16 "If it's a very, very negative association with that song, maybe you'll never get over it," said Leal. "But the way to try is repeating it with new events that do make you happy and to hope that it overpowers and kind of reconnects your brain and rewires it to this new association."
- 17 Prof Renee Timmers of the University of Sheffield suggested another potential approach. "Rather than seeing the music as something that is there, you can't do anything with it, and you are the victim of it, you can actually actively engage," she said, adding that could involve humming along or even improvising on the music.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What memory does Bonnie associate with the song Bitter Sweet Symphony?
2. How does Bonnie react today when she hears that same song?
3. Why does Matt have a negative feeling towards music by Neil Diamond?
4. How does Matt react when he hears any song by Neil Diamond?
5. What does Ilja Salakka say about how music affects our memory of events?
6. What did Dr. Stephanie Leal's study reveal about how different emotional responses to music affect the way we remember events?
7. According to Ilja Salakka, which stage of life provides the music that most strongly causes memories?
8. What is the difference between positive and negative music-related memories?
9. What does Leal suggest we can do to rehabilitate a painful song?
10. What alternative approach did Prof Renee Timmers recommend for dealing with painful music associations?

4 Key language

a. Categorise the examples of conditionals from the article according to the rules provided.

Zero Conditional: describes what definitely happens in a specific situation or condition.

First Conditional: describes what might happen in the future in a situation or condition.

- a. When Bonnie hears the opening bars of the Verve's Bitter Sweet Symphony, she is transported back to 1997.
- b. If I go into my local pub and it's on the jukebox, I'll go outside.
- c. When a Neil Diamond song comes on the radio, he skips the track.
- d. If it's a very, very negative association with that song, maybe you'll never get over it.

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Zero Conditional (when / if + present simple + present simple)	First Conditional (when / if + present simple + future simple)

b. Complete the sentences and then categorise them into zero or first conditional.

1. If we buy him a guitar, he _____ (learn) to play.
2. When she sings, everyone just _____ (stop) what they are doing.
3. When they release their new album, we _____ (be) the first to play it.
4. The radio has a camera, and if people walk past, loud music _____
(start) playing. It's hilarious!
5. There are musicians who, if they see the notes on paper, _____ (hear)
the music in their head.
6. I _____ (take) photos of the band if I get good seats at the concert.
7. My dad _____ (relax) when he listens to slow songs.
8. If we keep listening to this song again and again, we _____ (remember)
the lyrics.

c. Finish the sentences below.

When I hear _____, I remember _____.

I'll definitely see _____ play live if _____.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

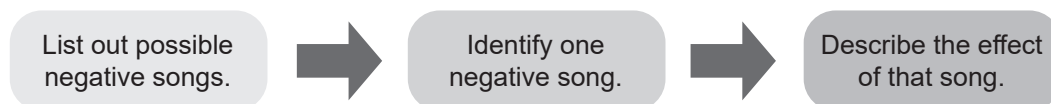
- All music has an effect on your emotions.
- Music from your past means more to you than current music.
- Some past events will always have an impact on your current and future life.

6 In your own words

a. Imagine you have a friend who gets upset every time they hear a particular song. Create a flow chart for them that describes step by step what they need to do to change the way they feel about the song. Use these questions to guide your ideas.

- How can you find out about the memory that they associate with the song?
- What effect does the song have on them at the moment?
- What effect do you want the song to have on them?
- What alternative happy situations could they start to associate with the song?
- What would be good ways to hear this song multiple times?
- Who would your friend be happy to spend time with, hearing the song?
- What are some different ways that someone could adapt a song?

b. Present your flowchart and describe the effect that each step will have on someone. Include zero and first conditionals in your description. Here is an example.



In order to help a friend identify a negative song that they want to change into a positive song, start by having them list out songs they associate with negative memories. Pick the song with the strongest negative associations. Ask them to describe what happens if they hear the song in public and they are not expecting to hear it.