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Is Christmas music good or bad for your mental health?

It's the time of year when every shop and café pumps out an endless stream of Christmas music. Some people love it, others hate it – but either way, it's impossible to escape Mariah Carey, Wham and Slade. While Christmas songs can be festive however, they can also have a negative effect on our mental health, particularly if they're played on repeat.

Why can Christmas music affect our mental health?

Counselling Directory Member Dee Johnson says: "Christmas songs are designed to be emotive and promote the festive season, so they can have a real impact on our emotional responses and behaviour."

However, songs can have a negative effect on our well-being if we already struggle with the Christmas period. Often, the holiday season can mean over-scheduling ourselves, spending more money and working longer hours, which can make it a tricky time. The Christmas music can be a reminder of all the things that need to be done before the big day arrives too.

"When there is so much pressure, the tunes can be a reminder of all the financial and family stresses," Johnson says. "The [anxiety](#) over making it as wonderful as possible – and the guilt when you don't feel festive – can mean the Christmas music starts to have a negative effect."

The mere-exposure effect

To begin with, hearing Christmas music can make us feel happy. This can be down to the 'mere-exposure effect' – this is when we like things simply because they are familiar to us.

So when we hear Christmas songs at the end of November and in December, it can be a pleasant reminder of the festive times to come. This is why shops often play music on repeat, to give shoppers that 'festive feeling' and tempt them into spending more money.

However, Christmas music can quickly become annoying as we hear the same Christmas songs over and over again. Even if we enjoy Bing Crosby's crooning, there is a point of over-saturation that causes us to start disliking what we are listening to.

Music and grief

For those of us who have lost loved ones, Christmas can be a particularly difficult time. Being around celebrations, joy and watching people spend time with friends and family can make feelings of [loss and pain](#) worse. Music has long been associated with emotional expression and it can be a significant trigger for people who are grieving.

"Some tunes may remind us of the season, but also a specific person or time we had with someone" says Johnson. "[Grief](#) is normal and should not be stifled - yet people are often worried that they will upset others if they let it out and do not want to ruin anyone else's festivities by being sad. As a result, there can be immense pressure to pretend to be OK."

It's also important to remember that people living in abusive situations can also be negatively affected by festive cheer. "The happy tunes can trigger feelings of fear, emptiness and [low self-esteem](#), while making people wonder why their lives are so hard," says Johnson.

Can Christmas music boost well-being?

Not everyone finds Christmas songs a burden, however. When we enjoy music, it can release dopamine. This chemical plays an important role in our thinking, our emotions and our behaviour - it's rewarding ourselves and feeling pleasure.

"Music is also a great way to bond and connect with people, something that is good for our moods and positivity," says Johnson. "Listening to your favourite Christmas tunes may inspire you to sing out loud and dance around, leading to the release of mood-boosting chemicals such as [serotonin](#), dopamine and endorphins.

"The feeling of nostalgia and traditions can be a real mood enhancer and a comfort," she adds. "Music can evoke good memories too."

What to do if you hate Christmas music

It can be difficult to get a break from Christmas songs at this time of year – but there are ways to give yourself a break if you are struggling.

Shop with headphones in

Sometimes, the only way to escape festive cheer is by putting your own music on and drowning out the outside world. If you're shopping and being bombarded with festive songs, try putting on a podcast as a distraction.

Employers should be inclusive

It's also important for employers to be mindful of the fact that the holidays can be a difficult time for some people. "Having worked in retail for several years myself, I can tell you repetitive Christmas music becomes extremely irritating, and tiresome, and can negate the positive effects of the music," says Johnson.

"The tedious exposure for those who are stuck with it for several hours a day can impact a person's energy, motivation and engagement. Perhaps Christmas tunes could be mixed with other non-festive sounds, which will also be more suitable for those who do not celebrate Christmas."

Seek professional help for grief or a mental health problem

If you are struggling with your mental health, it's important to speak to your doctor who can advise on the best course of action for you. It's also possible to [refer yourself for talking therapy](#) on the NHS.

Grief can be extremely hard to deal with and you don't need to try to cope alone. There are many organisations, support services and helplines available across the UK, such as [At A Loss](#), which provides a free, professional counselling webchat.

The charity [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) provides bereavement support, either face-to-face or over the phone, from trained volunteers. Calls to this helpline are free.

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