**The Power of your *Favorite* Music**by cōpe guide Heather Johnson, MT-BC

There is a distinct feeling when we pop our headphones on and pull up our favorite songs, or when they are surrounding us in our home and car speakers. Many describe it as a fun, happy, or even euphoric feeling. It’s common to turn to our favorite music when completing those mundane or unfun tasks, like chores or studying, to make them more enjoyable. We also use music to add to the excitement of our celebrations or hanging out with friends.

**Why does it make us feel this way?** Neuroscience can help us.

Researchers have found listening to specifically our *favorite* music increases the brain’s production of dopamine (1). Dopamine is the neurotransmitter in our brain that induces pleasure, and in turn influences our experiences such as motivation, attention, or our emotional experience during various situations. When someone experiences a lack of dopamine production or an imbalance, this often leads to depression type symptoms. This is where medications like antidepressants come into play! To balance the dopamine or serotonin production. While there are certainly benefits for these types of medications, we can also use music *intentionally* to help us in our wellness journey.

Secondly, music is greatly tied to our emotional experience in many ways. Listening to music activates the sections of our brain called the hippocampus and amygdala, these two parts are tied to our emotions and emotional regulation. We can also associate music with memories that elicit feelings, our heart rate and breathing pattern can change (influencing our physical feeling), or the pre mentioned increase in dopamine can change how we feel emotionally.

In addition to these concepts, and most notably, researchers have also found listening to our preferred music alters the way we perceive pain. A monumental study completed in the music therapy field found participants who listened to recordings of their *preferred* music reported a higher pain tolerance and lower pain index score compared to groups who listened to “relaxing music” or white noise (2).

With all that said, how can I be *intentional* with my music listening?

**Set aside time to listen to your favorite music as a mental health practice or add music listening during your relaxation routine.**

There is one thing we need to clarify first. What do you think relaxing music is? Soft, slow, more “atmospheric” or “classical” type sounds? While there’s a time and place for what our culture has deemed as “relaxing” music, that might not truly have a relaxing effect on you. It’s also not going to have the same dopamine effects mentioned earlier as some of your favorite tunes. This means if you like country, rap, or electronic music, consider this as your relaxing music! Macklemore? Go for it. Slipknot? Blast it. The same Taylor Swift album on repeat? Sure thing. Setting aside the intentional time for music listening is a great natural way for our brain to recharge and release dopamine.

**Listen to your preferred music *before* completing a task, not just during.**

Especially during those times starting something is just too daunting, or your pain is too high. This can look like pressing play 15-20 minutes before starting chores, sitting or stretching before exercise, or even as you wake up to get prepared to get out of bed. Think of it as priming your brain to take on the task and activate that bump in motivation.

**Listen to your preferred music during times your pain is high**.

Everyone’s pain experience is different, of course. During those periods your pain is high, or your pain experience is tougher to handle, use music listening as a tool to ease some of that experience. You can also use music listening intentionally to facilitate breathing or other coping skills. For example, taking slow breaths during the versus, and stretching during the chorus. Insert whichever coping skill or routine works for you.

**Listen to your favorite music during your hard times**.

Similar to number one, however this suggestion is more when situational and emotional hardships come up, rather than a routine of maintenance. Turn to your music during those hard times. Create a playlist that includes some of your favorites that can be easily found and played and focus on the sounds or lyrics you enjoy so much. Some considerations for your playlist could also include starting with louder or faster favorites, followed by increasingly calmer favorites to ideally match where you’d like your physical feeling to be. Matching where your mood is at musically and changing along with the music is a concept in music therapy called the Iso Principle! If you are using a streaming device, also consider downloading this created playlist to be easily accessible anywhere.

**Music is a wonderful and complex part of our life.** It can bring so much fun and enjoyment to us, and it can also be an emotionally raw experience. Music is also one of the few stimuli in life that activates a wide part of the brain at the same time, engaging and eliciting experiences ranging from emotions to physical movements. This list was hopefully a reminder to consider music listening in your coping skills toolbox and break down what you consider to be relaxing music.

**References**

1 Ferreri, Mas-Herrero, Zatorre, Rodriguez-Fornells (2018)

2 Mitchell and MacDonald (2006)