



Bang It Out

Jamming to your favorite tunes is just what the doctor ordered to fight the ill effects of chronic stress

When she needs relief from the grind of delivering major proposals, Dana Marlowe, 33, of Washington, D.C., makes some noise. "I cruise right into my toddler's playroom, and I just jam out with his toys—the xylophone, the baby piano. I almost have 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' down," says Marlowe, a technology accessibility consultant.

Researchers now know that playing a musical instrument can switch off the stress response, improving physical and emotional health. When our senses detect a possible threat in the environment, the body undergoes a chain reaction in which genes within each cell switch on, directing the cells to produce chemicals associated with the stress response. Playing music sets off an opposite chain reaction that switches these genes off again.

And you don't have to be as proficient as violinist Joshua Bell to get the benefits; quite the opposite, in fact. The more seriously you approach musicianship, the less relaxing it may be. "Typical music-making is based on practice, performance, and mastery. In recreational music-making, our intention is to feel comfortable and nurtured in a creative experience with absolutely no pressure," says Barry Bittman, MD, CEO and medical director of Meadville Medical Center's Mind-Body Wellness Center, in Meadville, Pa.

Studies showing the de-stressing benefits of music-making are piling up:

It reduced the prevalence of burnout in nursing students and long-term care workers, and improved the school performance and behavior of a group of inner-city, at-risk youth. Remember, Bittman says, that you should think of making music not as an end product, but as a tool for health and well-being.

That sounds good to Marlowe. "It's a fun release from the daily grind," she says. "After five or 10 minutes, I can go back and finish my work—after straightening up the playroom."—Susan Kuchinskas

This kind of casual music-making can short-circuit the stress response, research shows, and keep it from becoming chronic. Stress starts in the brain and then kicks off a chain reaction that switches on the stress response in every cell of our bodies. Over time, these cellular switches can get stuck in the "on" position, leading to feelings of burnout, anger, or depression as well as a host of physical ailments.

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READY TO ROCK

What's the best way for the not-so-musically-inclined to get in the swing? Barry Bittman, MD, has some pointers:

Don't pick up a guitar.

Mastering basic finger technique takes too long, Bittman says. Your goal is to enjoy the experience here and now. It's important to choose an instrument that doesn't require tons of technique to sound good. He suggests digital keyboards that let you make pleasant sounds just by pressing keys. Or just bang on a can.

Play by ear. Don't worry about learning songs or reading music. Instead, take a tip from Dana Marlowe and simply jam away for the fun of it. "I'm not going to be releasing a record any time soon," she says. "It's just a loud cacophony of sound."

Enjoy often. It does take time for the benefits of music-making to create lasting changes in your cells. Studies have found that playing an hour a week for six weeks can lower the stress response. Making music is like any other wellness activity; you should make it a permanent lifestyle change.



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