



MUSIC, COACHING AND THE BRAIN

Across cultures and centuries, music has been used to celebrate, grieve, heal, and connect. Only recently have we begun to understand how profoundly it engages the brain. Today, emerging neuroscience offers compelling insights into music's capacity to influence mood and wellbeing and recall memory.

Debbie Fisher shows us how it could be a catalyst for growth, creativity and deep change however this comes with caution due to its potency.

WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR BRAINS WHEN WE LISTEN TO MUSIC?

Music is one of the few human experiences that activates almost every part of the brain. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin writes that music 'engages the auditory, motor and limbic regions' and simultaneously recruits areas responsible for memory, attention, and executive function.¹ This holistic engagement is what gives music its uniquely integrative quality.

Among the most-cited findings is that music activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine—the same neurotransmitter involved in motivation and pleasure.² Simultaneously, music modulates stress responses. Listening to soothing or personally meaningful music can lower cortisol, reduce heart rate and support emotional regulation.³ However, the impact of listening to music on our brains is more complex.⁴

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The auditory circuitry in our brains has more varied and more direct connections to our emotion circuitry than does our visual circuitry. That is why we can pick up emotions and authenticity in intonations, choice of words and rhythm. Listening to music uses emotion-sensitive language circuitry which has evolved to let us communicate through language and to process melody, lyrics, rhythm and timbre. It activates our 'mind-wandering' network, which is activated whenever a person is not actively doing something e.g. daydreaming or reflecting on ourselves.

Listening to music can activate both our 'mind-wandering' network and our precuneus, the structure involved with self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-imagery and creativity. When it is music we like, the

activity between the two increases significantly. Music activates our 'mind-wandering' network and sense of self more easily and fully than any other art form. When we listen to music we don't like, they stop communicating and the precuneus connects with itself, suggesting that our brain rejects it, and takes action to prevent those styles entering the part of our brain connected with our self-image.

The hippocampus, part of our brain associated with memory, also communicates with the auditory networks although this reduces when we listen to our favourite songs. The suggestion is that when we listen to our favourite songs, we are retrieving rather than encoding memories. We play back memories of people, places and times. The most common form of mental visualisation while listeners listen to their favourite music is autobiographical memories.

With music having a strong connection to our emotions, a significant role in our self-image and the ability to help us recall memories, it can have a significant part to play in coaching - however this raises the need for caution in how it is used. The subjectivity on whether an individual likes music will also impact their response to it, so this also needs to be factored in when working with music.

RESEARCHING MUSIC'S IMPACT ON COACHING

Although creativity and use of the arts in coaching is growing in focus, research into using music in coaching is still limited. In 2023, due to my love of coaching and music, I completed research⁵ to understand the experience of a coach and client if they both listened to music just before a coaching session. There was no steer on the purpose of the music as I was curious about what the clients would choose and why. The choice about how much and how the coach worked with the music in the session was left to them. All coaching was online, the coaches were experienced, and the client relationships were already established over three or more sessions.

Some interesting themes emerged:

Song choice

Clients chose music for different purposes; to feel different e.g. energised and uplifted or calm and relaxed, joyful and at peace. Some chose it for the message e.g. 'You will get through this' and for others it was simply a reminder of a pleasant experience they had.

Half of the clients found music choice challenging as it would reveal something about them which was more personal than anything shared previously in coaching - which ties in with the link between music and our self-image.

Building connection

Most of the coaches and clients revealed that listening to the same music resulted in them feeling more connected through this shared experience, building the relationship, giving the coach more of an insight about the client. One client described it as an icebreaker for the coaching session and another thought the coach had a better understanding of his thoughts, behaviours and motivations.

Responses to music

In some cases the coach and client responses to the music were very similar but in others they were very different. In one case there was quite a variation with the client choosing the music which reminded him of how he got through a dark time in his life. The coach perceived it as harsh and felt that she was shrinking and uncomfortable listening to the music.

Switching focus

Participants were also surprised that stopping for a few minutes to listen to a piece of music provided a real distraction from the working day and a buffer between work and coaching, which led to greater focus in the session. Some coaches and clients said they would want to use music for themselves just to enhance their breaks.

Coaching approach

Left to their own choice, coaches' approaches varied. They included checking the client listened to the music, acknowledging the shared experience. Another asked about the reason for selecting that piece of music and explored the emotional response, which they felt helped to build connection. Another added to the above by asking about the relationship between the music and the coaching subject, exploring imagery and metaphor in the lyrics and soundscape. They found the sessions to be more impactful and focussed.

IDEAS FOR USING MUSIC IN COACHING

Taking the neuroscience into account and the findings from my research, how might coaches approach using music with clients? Below are some options for integration. When working one-to-one with clients, since the music we like has such an identification with self, I recommend letting clients select their own music.

1. Shifting state through sound

Music can be used intentionally to support co-regulation and prepare the nervous system for dialogue. For instance, a coach working with overwhelmed leaders may invite clients to start sessions with a two-minute listening practice, choosing music to support calm, focus or energy, depending on the desired outcome. In addition to changing state, this could also provide a buffer between work and coaching for clients being coached in their working day and indeed for coaches between sessions.

2. Music as anchor

NLP practitioners have long explored anchoring, where stimuli such as a sound or gesture become linked to a resourceful state. Coaches can experiment with music as an anchor: a client who reaches a breakthrough during a session might select a song to represent that state.

This practice requires care, nuance and the client's consent. But when used appropriately, music can become a powerful 'mnemonic' device in coaching.

3. Evoking memory and meaning

Music invites metaphor. For example, one coach working with an executive at a career crossroads asked: 'If your current situation were a piece of music, what would it sound like?' The client responded with a piece of discordant jazz. 'What would you like it to sound like?' The client then chose a minimalist piano track—simple, calm, purposeful. This metaphor became the basis for new decisions.

4. Supporting creative thinking

Music fosters divergent thinking. In one experiment, participants who listened to 'happy music' scored significantly higher on creativity tasks⁶. Coaches working with individuals or teams might consider how music in the coaching environment can support ideation.

PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with any approach in coaching, music should never be imposed on the client. It is deeply personal and can evoke painful memories as well as positive ones. It is good practice to seek permission and allow the client to guide the level of engagement. Music can also reflect social, religious or cultural identity; it's vital that coaches approach this work with sensitivity and curiosity.

Clients with auditory sensitivities or neurodivergence may find certain types of music overstimulating. Equally, clients with hearing loss or neurological differences may not process music in the expected ways.

The neuroscience of music reveals that our brains are wired not just to enjoy music, but to be shaped by it. For coaches, music offers a deeply human way to connect, regulate, remember, imagine and transform. Whether through metaphor, mood, or memory, music can help clients attune more fully to themselves and the systems they navigate.

In a global, networked world, music may also be one of the most universal languages we have. As coaches, our role is to help clients hear themselves—and perhaps, in doing so, hear the world anew.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Debbie Fisher is a leadership coach and facilitator with extensive experience supporting senior leaders across sectors including consulting, technology, media, finance and the public sector. Drawing on postgraduate qualifications in business and coaching psychology, Debbie brings both academic rigour and practical insight to her work.

Her coaching focuses on enabling leaders to thrive in complexity — developing emotional intelligence, building effective teams, and leading change with impact. A creative and research-informed practitioner, she recently explored how music can be used as a tool for transformation in coaching. Debbie has held leadership roles in the BBC, Ofcom, the Civil Service and the House of Commons, and is an EMCC Senior Coach Practitioner. She runs her own coaching practice and works internationally with individuals and organisations committed to purposeful, human-centred leadership.

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- 2 Salimpoor, V. N. et al. 2011. 'Anatomically distinct dopamine release during anticipation and experience of peak emotion to music.' *Nature Neuroscience*, 14(2), 257–262.
- 3 Thoma, M. V. et al. 2013. 'The effect of music on the human stress response.' *PLOS ONE*, 8(8), e70156.
- 4 Rogers, Susan. 2022. *This Is What It Sounds Like: What the Music You Love Says About You*. London: The Bodley Head.
- 5 Ritter, S. M. & Ferguson, S. 2017. 'Happy creativity: Listening to happy music facilitates divergent thinking.' *PLOS ONE*, 12(9), e0182210.