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Science Meets Society

# Effects on the Mind: Music & Mental Health

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**TW:** Article discusses mental health and related topics (suicide, anxiety, and body dysmorphia). Please do not read this article if it triggers you.

Roughly one in two American adolescents have had a mental illness at some point in their life (HHS Office of Population Affairs). Mental states, moods, emotions, and feelings are fragile and malleable: they switch at a moment's notice. However, it is not normal for a person's emotions to start controlling their daily life—hindering their schoolwork, friendships, etc. This defines a mental health disorder. Surveys point out that teenage mental health issues are at an all-time high (NAMI). Despite the decrease in the stigma surrounding the topic of mental health, many teenagers struggle to address and treat their mental illnesses. As an art form, pop music has always been about teenagers who believe that artists “talk” to them in their songs. Music floods the ears and surrounds the mind. It can energize someone as they do sports or help them unwind after a long day. It can be a love potion. It can be a hug. It can be a language. Musicians use their work as a means to an end to talk about a variety of topics, from equality and social justice to love. The work of musicians can aid in the relief of illness symptoms. Modern pop music provides a platform for teenagers to learn about mental health issues, helping to reduce the stigma associated with mental health disorders. Historically, people who suffer from these “mental disorders” have been mocked and ridiculed.

Today, self-harm, specifically suicide, is a common cause of death for adolescent girls and boys aged 15–19 (Adolescent Mental Health Statistics). Despite an increase in mental health awareness, “the average delay between [the] onset of mental illness symptoms and [its] treatment is 11 years” (NAMI). People are hesitant to seek professional help because of the stigma and fear of being judged (Never Be Ashamed of Seeking Help). Ninety percent of people who commit suicide have shown symptoms of a mental health condition, “further indicating the seriousness of the issue” (NAMI). Psychologist and mental health counselor Dr. Samantha Dawson notes that although “people say that you’re always supposed to be happy, you’re supposed to feel a range of emotions. Feeling sad is normal. Feeling stressed is normal. It’s when it crosses into

depression that it becomes problematic. And this only happens when it impairs daily functioning" (Dawson). The stereotype is that people are typically vulnerable, powerless, and depressed when they commit suicide. For example, the NCBI revealed that suicides are commonly traced back to psychiatric diseases, namely depression, substance abuse, or psychosis (Brådvik). Thus, there is an aspect of mental health that is not shown to the public eye.

Pharmaceutical drugs are frequently used as the first line of treatment for mental illnesses. Doctors frequently offer talk therapy as a supplement to a patient's overall wellness plan. Dawson went on to say that talking therapy has helped many heal. When cognitive-behavioral therapy, CBT, is used, emotions can be brought back to a level where they don't interfere with daily life (Dawson). CBT aims to improve one's thinking style by removing "negative" and "unhelpful" ideas that contribute to mental illness (What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?). It also allows one to unwind and relax, which helps with the healing process. As a result, combining the two therapies can provide a two-pronged approach to rehabilitation for children.

Music therapy can become a subset of CBT, Dawson notes, which allows people to relate to and overcome trauma (Dawson). Specifically, four types of therapy—improvisation, lyric analysis, active music listening, and songwriting—are used in various combinations to aid in the healing process (Warren). Using lyric analysis, the role-playing and talk therapy aspect of cognitive-behavioral therapy can be used to treat body dysmorphia (Schiffman). It forces patients to think about their triggers, which would put them into the scenario in their head. Slowly, as if they were talking to a therapist, the patients can start to come to terms with their bodies, and start accepting them for who they are, effectively implementing the core principles of CBT. The song not only comforts the listener, but also serves as a learning platform. Pop music therapy has been used to treat disorders ranging from schizophrenia to trauma to addiction (Schiffman). Therapies are an impactful way to overcome one's fear and allow the uniqueness and individuality of mental health illnesses to be treated. Where the environment might be playing a role in the patient's case, music and other therapies can help address the disorder.

A doctor commented on a patient's growth after partaking in music therapy: "Daily music therapy helped her to process the trauma and her huge fear of claustrophobia and successfully complete the treatment" (Schiffman). Pop music specifically can be used as a form of music therapy. Dr. Skeleton tells CBS that "[pop] artists' [music] do help to affirmatively point the way" to "replace insecurity with confidence, optimism instead of negativity, and self-acceptance rather than personal condemnation" (Pagliarini). Scientific research has shown that pop music, under certain conditions, can relieve anxiety, trauma, and more (Huang & Duell, Schiffman). Author Zhixing Huang further notes a variety of "conditions" in ten different categories that the piece should ideally meet to be used for pop music therapy. Furthermore, engaging with music by truly listening and looking at the lyrics is a way of using pop music therapy as well (Weinbender, Warren).

Listening to pop music can alleviate the emotional pain of patients. For example, Billie Eilish's "idontwannabeyouanymore" discusses body dysmorphia, one of the multiple mental health illnesses she suffers from. Body dysmorphia, also known as body dysmorphic disorder, is a mental illness in which people are unhappy with their appearance, which harms their daily functioning (Body Dysmorphic Disorder). Continual exercise, constant staring in the mirror, and not believing others when they complement one's beauty are all symptoms (Watson). Eilish's unique experiences with multiple illnesses shaped who she is, and she reports she "genuinely didn't think that she would make it to 17" and wondered "what can I do to make this [my body shape] go away?" (Nast). She told Vogue, "I just hated my body. I would have done anything to be in a different one. I wanted to be a model badly, and I was chubby and short" (Nast). In an interview with Rolling Stone, Eilish talked about the idea of using music as a part of the healing process. She commented, "Kids use my songs as a hug... songs about being depressed or suicidal or completely just against-yourself—some adults think that's bad, but I feel that seeing that someone else feels just as horrible as you do is a comfort. It's a good feeling," (Nast). As she continues to express these feelings in her music, she can use the tempo, beat, etc. to create a piece that is tranquil enough to be used for pop music therapy — which she hopes. Using lyric analysis and articulation, Eilish's emotions can be used by the younger generations to allow them to connect, empathize, and heal.

Eilish shows the insecure, broken side of her by saying "if teardrops could be bottled/there'd be swimming pools filled with models" and "if "I love you" was a promise/would you break it, if you're honest?" (Billie Eilish – Idontwannabeyouanymore). Eilish's cry for help showcases the struggles she goes through, and she mentions her childhood wish of becoming a model, though, in her eyes, she had a subpar body. She uses the phrase "if teardrops could be bottled" to try to quantify her despair, going on to say that the bottles, if collected, would equal several swimming pools (Billie Eilish – Idontwannabeyouanymore). She sings about the lack of love she feels toward herself, further fueling her hatred of her body and who she is. Eilish ends her conversation with the mirror, with the words, "I don't want to be you/I don't want to be you/anymore." Additionally, these lyrics also serve as the chorus, so it is repeated throughout the piece, an ode to the constant, running thoughts in one's head. Dysmorphia is mainly characterized by this behavior—checking oneself out in the mirror, only to find what they fear the worst: a terrible body with which they plead to be dissociated with. One may even go to the extent of hating oneself for who they are. As engaging with the song helps one in pop music therapy, Eilish uses this to depict the struggles of one with body dysmorphia (Weinbender). Additionally, the song, although in a minor key, uses cadences and progressions that are pleasing to the ear in conjunction with the slow tempo, giving it a tranquil sound (Idontwannabeyouanymore - Billie Eilish (Piano)). She also uses piano and other instrumentals as a part of the backing track. This, with the rich dynamics and articulation, brings power into the piece. The qualities meet multiple conditions of a song used for pop music therapy (Huang & Duell).

Modern music utilizes lyrics, and the stories backing them allow teenagers to learn about mental health, reduce the stigma they have about it, and find peace within the realm of music. Artists that have suffered from similar disorders describe the unrefined truths of depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphia, and the hardships and realities that come with it. Halsey, Chester Bennington, Jake Segura, Billie Eilish, and Ariana Grande are examples of people who advocate for the destigmatization of mental health illnesses, make their voices heard, and tell their stories; through this, they let the voices of their fellow patients be heard. A.R. Rahman, an Indian musician, once said: “Music is language itself. It should not have any barriers of caste, creed, language, or anything. Music is one, only cultures are different. Music is the language of languages. It is the ultimate mother of languages” (Music Is the Universal Language). American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and late Korean musician Jonghyun Kim are examples of other artists and notable people who have spoken about music being an universal language in which everyone can use to communicate (Longfellow, Kidadl). American artists hope that through this music, hurting teenagers can find hope and solace. Artists hope everyone understands that it is simply okay to not be okay.

#### Appendix 1: Lyrics of Billie Eilish’s “*idontwannabeyouanymore*”

[Verse 1]

Don't be that way

Fall apart twice a day

I just wish you could feel what you say

Show, never tell

But I know you too well

Kind of mood that you wish you could sell

[Chorus]

If teardrops could be bottled

There'd be swimming pools filled by models

Told, "A tight dress is what makes you a whore"

If "I love you" was a promise

Would you break it, if you're honest?

Tell the mirror what you know she's heard before

I don't wanna be you

Anymore

[Verse 2]

Hands, hands getting cold

Losing feeling is getting old

Was I made from a broken mold?

Hurt, I can't shake

We've made every mistake

Only you know the way that I break

[Chorus]

If teardrops could be bottled

There'd be swimming pools filled by models

Told, "A tight dress is what makes you a whore"

If "I love you" was a promise

Would you break it, if you're honest?

Tell the mirror what you know she's heard before

I don't wanna be you

I don't wanna be you

I don't wanna be you

Anymore

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