

# Why do people seek and appreciate sadness in music?

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This study deals with the supposed paradox of why people engage with sad music if sadness is inherently a negative emotion usually avoided in everyday life. Using an online survey, we obtained comprehensive responses from a large multi-ethnic sample of participants (N = 772). The survey investigates the rewarding aspects of music-evoked sadness, as well as the relative contribution of listener characteristics and situational factors to the appreciation of sad music. The survey also examines the different principles through which sadness is evoked by music, and their interaction with personality traits. Four reward dimensions resulting from listening to sad music were identified: reward of imagination (i.e., pleasure derived from engaging imaginative processes), emotion regulation (i.e., pleasure derived from the achievement of different self-regulatory goals), empathy (i.e., pleasure associated with sharing the sadness portrayed by the music as an expression of another's emotion), and no "real-life" implications (i.e., pleasure that lacks any extra-musical or contextual implications). Moreover, appreciation of sad music increases in a sad mood compared to a positive mood and is greater among individuals with high empathy and low emotional stability. Surprisingly, nostalgia rather than sadness is the emotion listeners most frequently experience in response to sad music. Moreover, memory-related processes appear to be highly important in eliciting sadness. Finally, the trait empathy contributes to the evocation of sadness via contagion, appraisal, and by engaging social functions. The present findings indicate that emotional responses to sad music are multifaceted, are modulated by empathy, and are linked with a multidimensional experience of pleasure. These results were corroborated by a follow-up survey on happy music, which further showed that beneficial emotional effects such as regulation of negative emotion and mood as well as consolation are likely to be unique features of sad music compared to happy music. Such beneficial emotional effects constitute the prime motivations for engaging with sad music and may have important implications for the field of music therapy. Potential implications include the development of music interventions designed to improve health and well-being in healthy subjects as well as in the treatment of psychiatric disorders.

Keywords: music-evoked sadness, appreciation of sad music, reward, pleasure, empathy