

Why You'll Live Longer if You Take Music Lessons

Studies show all kinds of mental and physical perks when you pick up an instrument

By [Matthew Solan](#) | July 18, 2012

My first instrument was a used bass guitar I bought in high school for \$70 at Florida Discount Music in Melbourne, where I grew up. I never took any lessons. Instead, I spent hours next to my turntable and tried to mimic the riffs from U2, The Who and Cream. (My attempt at “Sunshine of Your Love” lasted about 10 minutes).

The bass proved an entertaining hobby, yet by the time I got to college it was demoted to garage sale status, and ever since my music-making ability has consisted of downloading from iTunes.

But now is the best time to find that beat again.

As we age, our cognitive skills weaken. It's the adage: Use it or lose it. Learning a musical instrument can be one of the best workouts for your mind, and as research has revealed, it also can soothe an aging body and even rekindle the soul.

Just look at what making music can do:

(More: [The Healing Power of Music](#))

Better Memory and Hearing

[A 2011 study from Northwestern University](#) looked at musicians age 45 to 65 and found that their auditory memory and ability to hear speech in noisy environments were better than those of non-musicians of the same age.

The reason, says [Nina Kraus, director of the Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory at Northwestern](#), is that music training “fine tunes” the nervous system. She equates the effect to how painters are attuned to the visual aspects of their craft. They are laser-focused on the slightest differences in paint texture, the lines of a subject's face, and how light affects a setting. This same reaction can occur when music is the main point of reference.

“When the material you work with is sound then it makes sense that your ability to take it in, remember it, and relate to it should be sharpened,” Kraus says.

Better Physical Health

Research from the [Music Making and Wellness project](#) — a five-year study that involved music experts from universities and colleges across the country — shows that the level of human growth hormone, or HGH, increased 90 percent in seniors who were given keyboard lessons. HGH is an essential chemical that helps slow many aging conditions, like osteoporosis, loss of muscle mass, and aches and pains. HGH decreases with age. After 40, as much as 50 percent.

Better Mental Health

It has been well documented that listening to music relaxes the mind, reduces anxiety and depression. And it doesn't matter if those soothing and inspiring tunes come from an iPod or live from a Steinway. This effect can even be more satisfying and powerful if the music emanates from you. "Hearing music by pushing a piano key or strumming a guitar creates an instant gratification," says Jennifer Diedrich, a piano and violin instructor with Suzuki Strings in St. Petersburg, Fla. "There is that rush where you say to yourself, 'Hey, I made those sounds!'"

[Research led by Dr. Barry Bittman](#), of the Mind-Body Wellness Center in Meadville, Pa., found that playing a musical instrument reduces stress more than other traditional relaxing activities, like reading a newspaper or magazine.

Getting Started on an Instrument

Even when adults have the required dedication to learn an instrument, it is important to also tap into their child-mind, Diedrich says. "Many adults are analytical — they want the music to be perfect and they miss the joy of just making music," she says. "If kids mess up they just plow through it. They act first and think later, and adults should follow that lead and always remember that making music should be enjoyable."

You can't learn without a good teacher. When choosing an instructor, Diedrich says, make sure he or she complements your goals and interest. One obvious example: If you want to play jazz piano, don't hire someone who specializes in classical. If possible ask to observe a teacher to get a feel for chemistry and his or her approach to teaching.

Finding the Ideal Instrument

What's the best instrument to play? The one you are excited to learn. After all, it will take practice and persistence to improve and perhaps master, so you don't want to embrace something you might regret after a few months. (So maybe think twice about the five-piece drum set.)

Diedrich says the piano and acoustic guitar both are ideal as they often require minimal movements to produce pleasing sounds. More complex instruments like, say,

the violin have so many specific physical requirements — how to handle the bow and where to place your fingers — that you may end up focusing too much on technique rather than the music.

But once you decide you want to learn, locating the instrument that will be your musical soul mate should come easily.

I have already found mine. It hangs in the window of a St. Petersburg guitar shop, which is run by two guys who I am sure were roadies for Lynyrd Skynyrd. It's a bitchin' Fender Precision Bass. On sale. All black and shiny and majestic.

I think it's time I give "Sunshine" another try.

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