



Whistle While You Work

By Jessica Gluck

What do you do to combat the “noisy neighbor” while you’re working? Whether you’re in the office and someone around you is talking or you’re at home and your kids are playing in the background or (as in my case) your spouse is watching TV, you’ve probably had to deal with trying to block out distractions and focus on your work. If you’re anything like me, you may turn to music to drown out the disruptions. So, let’s explore . . . Is music a real solution to focusing on your work or is it just another distraction?

The short answer: *“It depends!” Just like your musical tastes and preferences are personal, so is your reaction to music.*

The idea of using music as an energizing force during work has been around for decades. In the 1960s there was a theory circulated, the “activation theory”, that to be productive in a monotonous job, like working on an assembly line at a factory, you needed some amount of mental stimulus.(1) However, it was quickly discovered that overstimulation would also make an individual’s performance go down. The key here was that the observed benefit to listening to music while working

was only for simple, repetitive, tedious tasks. So, if you’re rolling over workpapers, scanning paperwork, or packaging deliverables, why not turn on some light music to help pass the time?

Could listening to music actually just make you smarter? In 1993, a paper was published claiming that people who listened to Mozart for 10 minutes and then performed a spatial task, performed better than those who heard silence or monotone speech immediately before the same task.(2) This became known as the “Mozart effect” and led to all sorts of gimmicks to make you a genius like Mozart (like head phones for your baby in the womb). Unfortunately, listening to any type of music, Mozart or Motown, at any age, probably isn’t going to make you an accounting genius.

When it’s time to knuckle down and concentrate on a complex tax problem, read through law, or analyze research, it may not be

the best time to listen to music. Studies show that things that really require focus like reading comprehension and math (in college students) are negatively impacted when listening to music.(3) [This specific case is actually in comparison to silence though, rather than competing noise.] There is additional support for this notion that your performance is hindered if you are actively trying to ignore a background sound, an irrelevant sound, called the irrelevant sound effect. (4) But, what if there’s already noise you have to block out?

There is no definitive answer but what we do know is that there are definite benefits to music. Music can absolutely put you in a good mood and it can help you reduce stress and anxiety.(5) So when you’re trying to focus and there’s extraneous noise annoying you, maybe music can bring you some peace (as well as mask the aggravating sound). Here are some things to consider when you reach for your earbuds:

