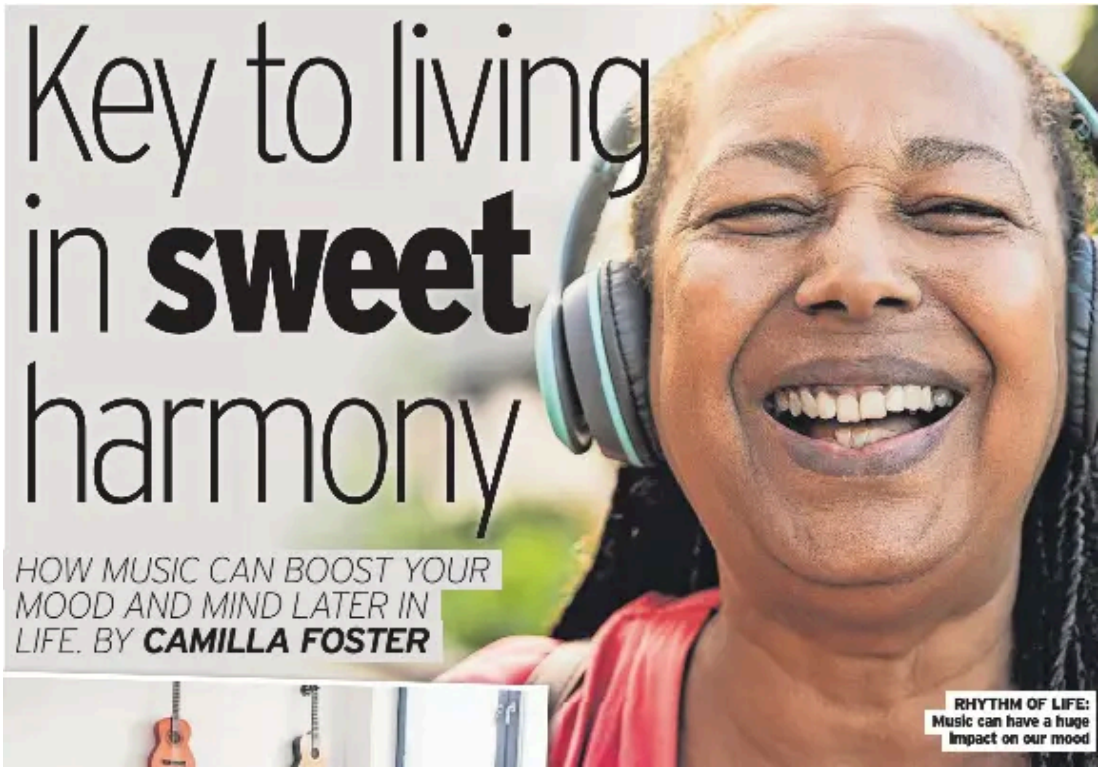
- Music

Key to living in sweet harmony

HOW MUSIC CAN BOOST YOUR MOOD AND MIND LATER IN LIFE. BY CAMILLA FOSTER

Bangor Mail · 13 Aug 2025 · 19

AS we grow older, it's easy to overlook the simple things that can bring us joy and keep our minds sharp.



One of the most powerful tools for boosting mood and mental wellbeing is something many of us have loved our whole lives: music.

Here, Clare Maddocks, a qualified neurologic music therapist and education and research officer at the British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT), explains the many ways music can benefit the mind and mood later in life.

ENHANCE MOOD

"Music can have a very transformational impact on mood and one of the reasons for this is because we have a very strong neurological, physiological, but also psychological reaction to music," says Clare.

"It's very individual, so one piece of music can elicit different emotions in different people."

Engaging with music can create a multi-modal response in the brain, she explains, involving different domains of the brain such as the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex.

"As part of that, we can really tap into the reward and the emotional centre of the brain," says Clare.

"So, if we use the kind of music that brings out a positive response in us, it can really help improve our mood."

IMPROVE COGNITIVE FUNCTION, SUCH AS MEMORY

“Engaging in music, whether that’s learning an instrument for the first time or participating in a community choir, has been shown to actually be very good for cognition in older people,” says Clare. “You’re never too old to learn an instrument.”

An abundance of research suggests that music can have a powerful impact on memory in particular.

“There are lots of ways that we can use music to help our memory, such as using things like musical mnemonics to help remember day-to-day tasks,” says Clare.

The more that we listen to a piece of music, the more that our brain remembers the predictable patterns of the music, she explains.

“It builds up a cognitive schema, which is essentially the fancy term for saying your brain remembers it, and remembers all the details of the music,” says Clare.

“Now, because we have this multi-modal response in the brain alongside the brain learning and becoming familiar with a piece of music, we’re also tapping into the autobiographical memory centres and the emotional centres of the brain.

“That’s why we can listen to a song on the radio that we’ve not heard say since our youth and it brings back so many memories.”

HELP PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

While dementia often affects shorttheir

term memory, music therapy can be a powerful tool for unlocking long-term memories, particularly those associated with significant life events and emotions.

“If we find familiar music from someone’s past, particularly from adolescence, we have found that we can, despite all the sort of degenerative aspects of the dementia, still tap into these autobiographical memories that have been built from a long time before,” says Clare.

“It can really help connect someone with the present, with themselves and their sense of identity.”

Some research also suggests that music therapy can be an effective tool for reducing agitation and distress in individuals with dementia, she adds.

REDUCE STRESS

Doing things like songwriting can also be a great way to boost confidence. If you can write four lines of a poem, you can write a song.

Clare Maddocks

“Listening to music that you enjoy and find relaxing can be a really helpful and quick way to manage stress in your everyday life,” says Clare.

INCREASE CONFIDENCE

“Identify what kind of music is going to leave you feeling good and boost your mood and self esteem,” recommends Clare.

“Doing things like songwriting can also be a great way to boost confidence. If you can write four lines of a poem, you can write a song.”

PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE FOR EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Music can be a phenomenal tool for self expression. “Music has the power to say everything you need to say without pressure to use verbal communication,” says the music therapist. “You can

do that just from simply listening to a piece of music or identifying with a song and saying, yeah, this is how I feel." It also provides a safe space and a useful tool to release emotions. "You can release anger, hate, despair and all those difficult emotions in music," says Clare.

FOSTER SOCIAL CONNECTION

Joining a music group can help alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness.

"The great thing about a lot of the community groups that exist now is that you don't need to have played an instrument before or be able to read music," says Clare.

"It's all about just being open to engaging in music and connecting with other people.

"Even just finding someone who enjoys the same kind of music as you do, and having a conversation about that, can be a real boost in terms of lessening those feelings of isolation and loneliness."