


WHY 

SOUND

IS MAKING

WAVES

IN WELLNESS

With screen fatigue no longer something you can turn a blind eye to, digital orality – audio-based tech that completely bypasses your eyes – is making a noise in the wellness world. But can you really listen yourself calmer, fitter and healthier? *WH* reports on the aural health revolution

WORDS GEMMA ASKHAM



BEATS SOLO 3 WIRELESS HEADPHONES IN ROSE GOLD, COURTESY OF BEATS; BELLE ACCENT ARMCHAIR IN BLUSH PINK VELVET, COURTESY OF MADE; LEX POT ROUND TWIST CANDLE, COURTESY OF LA GENT; REISYAN COTTON CUSHION, COURTESY OF WAYFAIR

Can't be beat

W

hen Steff Preyer wants to fall asleep quickly, she increases her water intake. Only, not in the way you might think. Tucked up in bed with her eyes closed, she tunes into the sound of the ocean. The rhythmic whoosh quiets almost to silence before crashing into a crescendo, a sound so hypnotic that it distracts her from the neighbours pacing upstairs and her ruminations about work tomorrow. Entranced by the repetitive chorus of her in-room shoreline, the next sound she hears is her morning alarm.

Sounds don't just fill Steff's night, but her working day, too. As business director at Rabbit & Pork – a creative agency operating in the burgeoning field of 'voice experience' – she helps brands prepare a strategy for the next frontier of engagement: audio. After a year when 300 million people used Zoom every day, wellness is now soothing exhausted eyes by tapping into newly opened ears. Audiobooks – which promise the productivity win of powering through the latest Booker Prize winner on your run – now outsell e-books, while 27% of those aged between 25 and 34 listen to podcasts every week. Spotify has shifted its focus (in order to improve yours) by launching Daily Wellness – a personalised playlist of motivational podcasts and mindfulness tracks to help drive your daily wellbeing goals – while over on the meditation app Calm, Harry Styles will read you a bedtime story. Even journalling has found its voice; dictate your thoughts to Journify or Day One for all the mental health benefits of putting pen to paper without the faff of finding a pen. Tune into new workout app WithU, which guides you through a sweat session with straight-talking narration, while a new generation of



Pleased to hear it

GOOGLE NEST IN CORAL COURTESY OF GOOGLE; LAMP, JEWELLERY AND JEWELLERY BOXES COURTESY OF URBAN OUTFITTERS; SAINTE-GO-SHAL; WHITE GODDESS CANDLE; COURTESY OF LA GENT

LISTEN UP

AI-powered apps that use data to create personalised soundscapes that allow you to self-medicate with sounds, whether you want to concentrate more deeply or reduce anxiety. Beyond wellness, listen out for audio tweeting, whereby you can post 140-second soundbites (hitting Android in 2021 after last year's iOS trials) and voice-note dating apps such as String. Going verbal has officially gone viral.

LOUD AND PROUD

So, why is sound making waves? Steff has seen the industry gather pace since Amazon launched Alexa in 2014. 'Vast improvements in voice recognition, natural language processing and the digitisation of huge sound files have all made the rise in voice technology possible,' she says. While tech facilitated the move ear-wards (take headphones: now waterproof, wireless and noise-cancelling compared to the Discman days, when it felt like feeding a stale Wotsit into your ear canal), money, of course, also attracts interest. And audio has the potential for serious ROI, considering that podcast adverts net around £20 to £30 per 1,000 listeners, meaning an aural smash with an audience of one million could scoop £20,000 from just one ad; for all the investment of a £50 microphone and a quiet room.

But experts agree that where audio really delivers is the promise of productivity. Which other medium lets you dictate a supermarket order to Alexa while doing the dishes, listen to longform articles from *The New Yorker* while you clean the loo, or instantly voice memo a life update to a friend in Australia instead of the back and forth of negotiating a time-zone-bearable call? 'Orality fits today's lifestyle like a glove,' agrees Emma Rodero, director of the Media Psychology Lab at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, who researches the impact of audio and speech on attention and memory. 'Speech is our primary mode of communication, and listening is very easy for us – unlike reading, you were born with this ability and don't have to put much effort in or use your eyes. We're moving towards a system where all activities involve speaking, because it's able to keep pace with our lives – even in darkness, even while we're doing other activities.'

While striking through your to-do list like Tim Ferriss in *The 4-Hour Work*

Week feels good in the getting-shit-done sense, sound waves can trigger some pretty satisfying reactions inside your head, too – as anyone who's ever had 'a moment' with music can attest to. A 2018 study into music-evoked emotions, published in the journal *Music Perception*, found that music can trigger psychological processes that reflect emotion: happy music triggers the zygomaticus muscles in the face, which are used for smiling, while sad music activates the corrugator muscles in the eyebrows, responsible for frowning. Neuroimaging scans also show that music influences brain areas involved in emotion, such as the amygdala, as well as having an endocrine response, via the hippocampus, whereby listening to classical, folk or meditative music significantly reduced cortisol levels.

Another emotional function of the hippocampus? The formation and maintenance of social attachments; listen to sounds you like (this part is important, because music taste is about as personal as your choice of sandwich filling at Subway) and you can actually fulfil your human need for contact. Last year, a Finnish study in *Music & Science* put this to the test. Participants visualised two sad situations – their father dying and losing their eyesight – then listened to music that they found comforting or

'Audio accompanies you during your day, like a flatmate or partner would'

distracting. They were then asked questions about how they felt. Psychometric measures showed a significant drop in loneliness and a boost in mood after listening to their chosen music, in line with what researchers would expect had they been in the company of a good friend, thus proving the merit of music as a sonic surrogate for a real person. Interestingly, these social effects may include voices, too. 'Voices are your first music,' says Sophie Scott, professor of cognitive neuroscience and leader of speech communication research at UCL. 'Because you can hear before you're born, a mother's singing is one of the few things that will calm a newborn, probably because there is aural continuity with what the baby heard before they were born.' She thinks the popularity of podcasts is due to a similar search for comfort in adult life, particularly as research shows that the demographic most affected by the loneliness of limited social interaction during last year's lockdown was younger women who live alone. Indeed, when Rodero researched the role of radio as a therapeutic device during the pandemic, she found it to be the medium that best alleviated loneliness (better than TV, newspapers and the internet).

LISTEN UP



This engagement is happening in your body, too. Dr Joseph Devlin, head of experimental psychology at UCL, and Audible, the audiobook platform, set out to discover whether audio could ever engage us like visuals do. Participants listened to and then watched scenes from eight books that had audio and video adaptations, and were asked to rate their experience of the scene while biometric sensors measured heart rate (changes in heart rate are linked to greater focus and alertness), skin changes, such as sweating, plus body temperature, which is associated with emotional arousal. While participants said they found the videos more engaging than the audiobooks, their bodies told a completely different story. Physiologically, listening to a story proved more stimulating than viewing it: by imagining the narrative, you activate brain areas associated with visuospatial processing, language, action and emotion.

HEAR TO HELP

Combine this convincing physiological response to audio with the intimate connection you get with the person in your ear and it's perhaps unsurprising that audio has its sights – and ears – set on hacking your fitness goals. Couch To 5K, the audio app that offers running tips and motivational cheerleading from coaches including Jo Whiley and Olympic sprinter Michael Johnson, saw a 92% increase in downloads in 2020 compared with 2019. Now, audio is voicing the exercise classes that you cricked your neck trying to do while keeping one eyeball on a YouTube video. The aforementioned app WithU, which launched last May, pairs bespoke tracks from SoulCycle's music team with top-level instructors from Barry's Bootcamp and 1Rebel. To ensure voice-exercise synchronicity, each workout was recorded at Pinewood Studios, while a model wearing a motion-capture suit did the moves. Co-founder, former 400m runner Tim Benjamin, believes audio taps into the emotional core of exercising. 'You go through a range of emotions while working out, whether it's the motivation to get going or getting through it, and the timing and feeling of the trainer [exercising] with you is so important,' he says. 'It's very much about your connection with the trainer.' For best results, Benjamin recommends exercising



We're all ears

'Your voice assistant could become your personal performance coach'

wearing headphones, rather than using speakers, as he believes it improves your connection with the trainer. Meanwhile, at Loughborough University, Olympic 100m sprinter Harry Aikines-Aryeetey is involved in tests on audio's influence on elite performance. A second study, at Oxford University, will compare user motivation and the effects on the adrenal and hormonal systems between participants doing audio workouts with a PT in their

PUSH ULTRA TRUE WIRELESS EARBUDS IN ENERGIZED YELLOW COURTESY OF SKULL CANDY; BALA BANGLES IN DEEP BLUE COURTESY OF BAL.A; BKR IN PEPPER (250M), COURTESY OF BKR

ear, screen-based workouts and exercising aid-free.

With audio's potential to boost your physiological and psychological health, where does the trend go from here? From a tech perspective, Preyer believes audio will become more reciprocal, like an actual conversation. 'I think we'll see the voice assistant take a more proactive approach, suggesting a workout meal based on your previous behaviours, your current state of health, the contents of your fridge and your work schedule,' she says, acknowledging that this would rely on better integration between voice technology and smart home appliances, as well as motion sensors built into headphones or wearable tech. 'But an understanding of your velocity, rate of perceived exertion, hydration and blood sugar levels could turn your voice assistant into a personal performance coach,' she adds. In turn, voice-activated devices could become part of your everyday life: imagine telling your oven to turn itself on as you walk in the door, or, as you run home, asking the fridge app on your smartwatch if there's any wine in there.

Audio could also be prescribed as a way to boost your social health. Rodero believes we'll start to see more instances of audio applied as a tool to protect against feeling alone, be that in medical scenarios, such as podcast streaming being made available to hospital patients, or in your personal life for comfort after a break-up. And with so much data confirming its power to mimic the soothing effects of human companionship, this could inform medical advice in the future. The British Academy of Sound Therapy is currently researching music 'dosages' – essentially, trying to quantify how much sound exposure is needed to see a noticeable effect on mood. Such data could be used to create a body-enriching 'audio supplement' that would detail the exact sounds (frequencies, beats, tones) that work best for each mood outcome (helping sadness, loneliness, stress), plus how long you'd need to listen for, to potentially create results similar to popping a vitamin pill or drinking a juice.

Audio isn't for everything, mind. The phrase 'in one ear and out the other' is a thing. 'It's more difficult to retain information when you listen to it because communication is ephemeral [short-lived] and your short-term memory is very limited,' adds Rodero, who suggests swerving audio when you need to commit something difficult to memory. For deep study, she recommends reading text and writing notes. 'Audio is for accompanying you in your daily life so you don't feel alone. It's for encouragement when running or in the gym; it's for making time fun when you need your eyes for another activity, like commuting, cooking or taking a shower; it's for soundscapes at bedtime.' It's music to our ears. **WH**

THE GOOD AURAL GUIDE



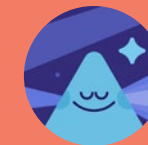
Best for concentration
ENDEL

Its AI algorithm uses data from your phone (weather, time of day, location) to create unique soundscapes to accompany what you're doing. Can improve concentration by 6.3 times.



Best for positive thinking
THINKUP

Record affirmations, or listen to the favourites of authors and psychologists, set them to music and listen at least once a day to let the words sink in.



Best for sleep
SLEEPCASTS
by Headspace

An under-duvet wind-down podcast featuring meditation exercises, breathing techniques and narrators with the most soothing voices. Good luck staying awake past minute five.



Best for keeping current
AUDM

Spoken versions of all the longform, conversation-starting journalism from titles such as *The Atlantic* and *Vanity Fair* that you promise yourself you'll sit down to read, but never do.