A Young Woman's Narrative on the Role of Mobile Music in Coping with Everyday Life

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The use of MP3 players has expanded rapidly during the last decade.[1] In 2010, nearly 70 percent of the young Norwegian population (age sixteen to twenty-four years) listened to MP3 players daily (Vaage, 2011). While the MP3 player has always been small and easily fits into a pocket, its storage capacity keeps escalating—it is now possible to store up to forty thousand songs on an iPod, for example. Additionally, listeners now have the capability to stream music online using their smart phones via services such as Spotify or Wimp. The unprecedented availability of music offered by the MP3 player, and the high degree to which young people use these players as a result, compels us to explore this device's impact upon it's users.

This text is based on a research project which took a positive, resource-oriented approach to the study of MP3-player use (Skånland, 2012). This use has already evoked relatively negative approaches, including scholarly interest in (and concern about) the potential for hearing damage when one listens to music on headsets or earbuds (Park, 2009; Vogel, Brug, Ploeg, & Raat, 2011; Vogel, Verschuure, Ploeg, Brug, & Raat, 2009; Vries, 2005); about traffic safety when pedestrians bring music into the streets (Myers, 2010; Neider, McCarley, Crowell, Kaczmarski, & Kramer, 2010); and about the consequences of this individualised music listening for social interaction (see, for example, Brabazon, 2008). The present study took a contrasting perspective and sought to explore whether and how the use of MP3 players might function as a medium of musical self-care, subjective wellbeing, and positive health maintenance.

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[1]   For the sake of simplicity, I choose to use 'MP3 player' as a collective term for digital, portable and personal music players, including smart phones that offer music listening capabilities. This does not imply, however, that I focus only on digital audio players that are compatible with the MP3 format (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_audio_player). For example, Apple's iPod, the bestselling digital audio player on the market, is compatible with several audio formats, including MP3, MP3 VBR, AAC/M4A, Protected AAC, AIFF, Audible, Apple Lossless, and WAV (see http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/IPod, http://www.apple.com/ipodclassic/specs. html).

In the interests of examining the possible role of MP3 players in individuals' self-care, the study focused on self-regulation and coping mechanisms. I carried out the research via a qualitative, empirical study using interviews with twelve adult urban users of MP3 players that covered, in particular, their experiences with this device. In this article, I will focus on the story of the youngest informant, an eighteen-year-old young woman, and her use of her MP3 player as a coping and self-regulating resource, in order to explore the general healthful potential of everyday music listening.

I will present the young woman's narrative in parts while introducing theories on self-regulation, coping, wellbeing, and positive health to shed light on her experiences. Before doing so, however, I will outline the methods I have employed.

Methods

This narrative is taken from my PhD research, which was carried out between 2008 and 2011 (Skånland, 2012) and encompassed semi-structured interviews with six men and six women between the ages of eighteen and forty-four years who lived in Oslo or the surrounding areas. The only requirement for participation was that the potential informant used his or her MP3 player regularly. I posted information about the study at different locations in Oslo and distributed it via email to acquaintances, to be circulated by them in turn. Those who were interested in participating in the study then contacted me directly.

In the ensuing interviews, I investigated how the informants used music on their MP3 players in relation to a range of cognitive, emotional and bodily aspects of music use, as well as their experience of their environments, boundaries and social and private spaces as they listened to their mobile music. I then categorised the interviews, which lasted about one hour each, according to thematic types. The main themes that surfaced were 'use of the MP3 player', which included subcategories such as choice of music, listening outside versus indoors, and the importance of the MP3 player; 'self-regulation', including affect regulation, cognitive regulation and bodily regulation; and 'coping', including boundaries, sense of control, and negotiating the urban environment.

As mentioned, the present article introduces the experiences of the youngest informant, an eighteen-year-old girl whom I will refer to as 'Lisa'. At the time of the interview, Lisa was still in high school and appeared healthy, and I explored whether her use of the MP3 player was helping her to sustain or otherwise promote her subjective wellbeing and positive mental health. Though my PhD study was positioned within the field of music and health, I chose to focus on how apparently well-functioning

people might be using the manifestly available music of the MP3 player nevertheless as a strategy for coping with daily life. This means, among other things, that my findings may prove relevant to a group that encompasses *both* ill and healthy people.

Subsequent to the interviews, I asked the informants to write about one specific episode involving their MP3 player in response to the following questions: When did the episode take place? Where were they? Why did they choose to listen to music at that moment? What did they listen to? How were they affected by the music? Unfortunately, most of the responses were rather short and lacked the depth I had anticipated. However, Lisa's narrative was both well written and interesting, and it raises compelling possibilities for the use of the MP3 player in coping strategies.

In general, I analysed the findings according to a theoretical framework based on music sociology and music psychology (e.g. Clarke, 2003; DeNora, 2003; Juslin & Sloboda, 2010; North & Hargreaves, 2008), positive psychology (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2005), and the social model of health (e.g. Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Blaxter, 2004; Fugelli & Ingstad, 2009; Ruud, 2010). Briefly, positive psychology is, at the subjective level, concerned with "valued subjective experiences: wellbeing, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In the social model of health, health is seen as a positive state of wholeness and wellbeing. It is not unusual for people with disabilities to describe their health as 'excellent' (Blaxter, 2004; Fugelli & Ingstad, 2001). Therefore, health is something that can be experienced despite the presence or lasting impact of disease, and the social model of health derives from the experience of quality of life rather than the apparent absence of disease (the latter of which, of course, has always been the case with the biomedical model of health). Quality of life in turn relates to subjective wellbeing, which can be defined as "life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences of unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger" (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997, p. 25). Here, again, I will explore the role of the MP3 player and one's personal music listening in coping with everyday life and in turn maintaining or promoting subjective wellbeing, which is a vital aspect of positive health (Blaxter, 2004; Hjort, 1994; Mæland, 2005).

The Narrative

This was earlier this summer. I woke up with a hammering headache and in a lousy mood that day. The night before, I had an intense fight with my brother (who is a drug addict, so our fights really drain your energy). I had been drinking quite a bit later that evening, too. I woke up and was really devastated but knew I had to go to work in a few hours and run a few errands in the city first.

On the tram, I put on 'Say' by Cat Power, which is a very melancholy and sad tune that I have heard a lot together with my brother. In that way, I was permitted time to feel what I was feeling and be allowed to be sad even when I was on the tram. Two stops before I was to get off, I picked out 'Can't stand me now' by the Libertines. It's punk/rock from England, which I always put on when I'm actually grumpy or sad but need to be happy—music that has a little 'it's-allowed-to-hate-the-world-for-a-day' feeling. It's absolutely wonderful on such days to just shut the world out and not have to relate to the people around you. I don't remember everything I listened to when I was out shopping, but mostly music that pumps you up a little with the beat or the melody.

When I was on the bus to work, my mood was better, and I put on the Wombats, which always gets me into a good mood, [like] with 'Summerhit' or 'Lost in the post'. I was tired after work and sat listening to world music on the way home. It always makes me relax and my thoughts often wander off to nice places. It's nice to have a device that can nearly tune in your mood. Even if you know that a lot of lousy stuff has happened, and that you'll probably feel terrible when you arrive home, you can still drain yourself of all the emotions and place them elsewhere until you feel ready to deal with them. And if you have feelings that you want to work with right now, then you can simply pull out those feelings with a few keystrokes. But this is at least how I use it in my daily life. Sometimes as pure entertainment; but, by far the most often, the MP3 player functions to pull out or put away a mood that will fit the activities I'm on my way to. (Lisa, eighteen years old, my translation)

Music That Reflects Emotions

> *I was permitted time to feel what I was feeling and be allowed to be sad even when I was on the tram.*

Feeling 'devastated' from an agonising fight with her brother the previous night, Lisa must get on with her day regardless. To do so, she uses music on her MP3 player in various ways to regulate and manage her emotions, bodily energy, and thoughts

throughout her various activities. As she travels into the city centre on the tram, Lisa starts off by listening to music that mirrors her emotions. She feels sad, so she chooses a song that she describes as melancholy. She notes that this music 'allows her' to feel the way she does, even in a public environment. Thus, the MP3 player enables her to create a private space where she is able to focus on her own state of mind.

Listening to music, in general, seems to comfort people who are experiencing difficult emotions. Many people state that music 'makes them happy' (Juslin & Laukka, 2004; Sloboda & O'Neill, 2001), and Juslin and Laukka (2004) assume that because people are generally able to choose what music to listen to, they will tend to listen to music that makes them 'feel good' or 'feel better'. Yet this is not always the case—some people also agree with Lisa and prefer music that mirrors their mood, even when it is 'negative'. This is presumably because these listeners experience recognition in the music; by listening to someone else singing about their feelings, they realise that they are not alone in this regard and in turn find it easier to accept their feelings (and themselves). In her interview, Lisa described music almost as a friend:

> If something has happened—for example, if you experience something— then I feel in a way that I have to go there [to the music]. You feel that someone else understands you, that's one thing, through the music.

Laiho (2004, p. 52) agrees that music can function as a substitute for relationships: "It is often felt to be an understanding and valued friend rather than a sounding object." Also in Sloboda's (2005) study on emotional responses to music, the comments included "one feels understood and comforted in pain, sorrow, and bewilderment" and "through hearing emotions in someone else's music it is possible to feel that emotions are shared and not your burden alone" (Sloboda, 2005, p. 204). In such statements, Sloboda sees examples of music offering an alternative perspective on a situation, allowing the listener to see things differently. In general, people experience music as 'support' for difficult emotions that comforts and allows listeners to feel the way they do, which further helps them process and work through their emotions. For Lisa, her music allows her both time and space to reflect on her emotions, a starting point in dealing with and regulating her affects.

Lisa also chooses music that she has shared with her brother, recalling a related observation by DeNora (2003, p. 61): "one's very perception and experience of other(s) take shape through and with reference to music". Through this particular choice, Lisa focuses her music's healing capacity upon the particular situation with her brother. She could have chosen music that helped her escape from this event but prefers instead to use music to confront it 'in the moment'. She has this option thanks

to the omnipresence of music afforded by the MP3 player. If Lisa did not have her music right there with her on her trip into the city, she would have had to find different strategies to deal with her emotions. The constant availability of a vast amount of self-chosen music enables listeners to take charge over their experiences in novel and comprehensive ways.

Music That Regulates Emotions

> *It's punk/rock from England, which I always put on when I'm actually grumpy or sad but need to be happy—music that has a little 'it's-allowed-to-hate-the-world-for-a-day' feeling.*

Though Lisa starts her day by listening to music that mirrors or reflects her felt emotions, she is in fact employing a strategy to regulate and alter her emotions—that is, to either maintain or change the intensity or duration of the affect in question (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). When she changes the music from melancholy to angry, she nuances the acceptance and validation she derives from it: the music now says 'it's-allowed-to-hate-the-world-for-a-day', she writes. Starting off by mirroring her sadness and then moving on to alter this sadness into anger indicates a stepwise approach in her affect regulation, which is recognised to be the most successful means of regulating strong affects with music; van Goethem (2010) found that those who aimed to change their intense emotions all at once with music were less successful than those who regulated their affects in stages.

Through music that mirrors her emotions, Lisa most likely achieves a clearer picture of what she actually feels and why she feels that way; other informants who participated in my research also chose to mirror negative emotions with music (Skånland, 2012). Beyond comfort and acceptance, the music seems to offer clarification and insight into one's affects. The music allows the informants to reflect on and understand their experiences. Only when they have felt their emotions thoroughly, and perhaps also understood why they feel that way, the informants seem to successfully begin to change their mood into a more positive one, in a stepwise approach as suggested by van Goethem (2010).

When Lisa, in turn, picked out music by The Libertines—music that 'allows her to hate the world'—she used the music to vent her negative emotions. This has potential adverse effects, at least in the short term: Tice and Bratslavsky (2000) argue that venting is a form of misregulation of emotional control, and claim that venting can prolong

the negative affect rather than reduce it: "Venting directs attention to precisely the wrong place, namely to one's distress and to what is causing it" (2000, p. 155). Larsen and Prizmic (2004, 2008) agree that venting is an ineffective strategy for reducing emotions and can even make people angrier, more aggressive, or sadder: "Venting, at least in the short term, would work to amplify subjective feelings" (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008, p. 276). Saarikallio and Erkillä's (2007) study on music in adolescents' mood regulation supports these claims, demonstrating that when respondents used music to reflect on or vent negative affects, those affects were in turn temporarily intensified by the music, which sometimes left the respondents feeling worse.

In the long term, however, Saarikallio and Erkillä found that venting did help respondents to rid themselves of their negative affects, and that they felt better later on. They thus conclude that music may help to let anger out and consequently be salutary.

This sets the stage for Vist (2009), who revisits the notion that *distraction* from one's emotions is a superior strategy to venting them. From her interviews with adult participants, she found that people often *sought* painful or negative emotions such as sorrow or grief in music, and that they did not experience those emotions as negative in that context. This may be because music offers an alternative, symbolic reality of sorts, where listeners can *feel* the negativity without *acting* upon it through, for example, violent or inappropriately uninhibited actions (see DeNora, 2000). Laiho (2004) also points out that music offers an acceptable means of expressing other-wise difficult, violent or unaccepted thoughts and emotions. With music, individuals direct their anger into harmless activity instead of engaging in behaviours such as verbal or physical aggression, yelling, and blaming. Saarikallio and Erkillä note that, as a symbolic object, music offers an "acceptable and non-destructive expression of violent thoughts and feelings" (2007, p. 103).

It certainly seems in Lisa's case that the venting of her emotions through music listening was successful, because she felt better later that day: 'When I was on the bus to work, my mood was better, and I put on the Wombats, which always gets me into a good mood'. Though the music may have intensified her difficult emotions in the short term, she benefited from it in the end, and she then chose to buttress her recovery with music she knew would sustain her good mood. In his theory of mood regulation, Larsen notes, rather unsurprisingly, that people tend to do things that will make them feel good:

> In ongoing daily life, much of what we do is geared toward avoiding those things that make us feel bad and approaching those things which make us feel good. If we think of the activities of daily life, much of what we do can be thought of in terms of the subjective hedonic or energetic consequences

we are trying to achieve. We may have a coffee, take a brisk walk, or chat with some friends in an effort to boost energy. Or we may try to distract ourselves, relax, or even help someone less fortunate in an effort to get over some bad feeling. (Larsen, 2000, p. 131)

According to Erber and Erber (2000), however, this is at best an oversimplification. They challenge the 'widely accepted' hedonistic idea that "humans, by and large, seek pleasure and avoid pain" (Erber & Erber, 2000, p. 142) and claim instead that context determines our interest in escaping or indulging in both bad and good moods. They explain that we can choose to indulge in a negative mood when we are alone, whereas we are otherwise forced to regulate our moods according to the demands of the situation. "Just as singing show tunes off key is perfectly alright in one's shower but not in a crowded subway car, the experience and display of moods may be similarly inappropriate in a public context", they write (Erber & Erber, 2000, p. 145).

Also in Lisa's case, Erber and Erber's theory rings true. As long as she is permitted to be by herself and not interact with others (while running her errands), Lisa chooses to listen to music that indulges her negative emotions. But by the time she is on her way to work, she seeks deliverance from her bad mood and uses music to 'tune' her mood to one better suited to the public setting toward which she is headed.

Music That Regulates Bodily and Mental Energy

I was tired after work and sat listening to world music on the way home. It always makes me relax and my thoughts often wander off to nice places.

Moods are closely related to bodily energy and tension (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994), so if music is able to relieve the latter, one's mood will likely improve. In Lisa's case, the music on her MP3 player allowed her to relax and let her thoughts wander off to 'nice places', demonstrating the interrelationships among bodily, emotional, and cognitive aspects of self-regulation and coping. Likewise, in Saarikallio and Erkillä's study, the physiological elements of musical experiences were found to be closely related to mood regulation. Lisa chooses music on her way home that affords relaxation, and it is also probable that listening to music on headphones also insulates her from her surroundings and makes her feel safe. By listening to music in exactly this way, then, Lisa softens the impact of her environment, excluding outside noise or stressors that are beyond her control and creating a private space for her thoughts.
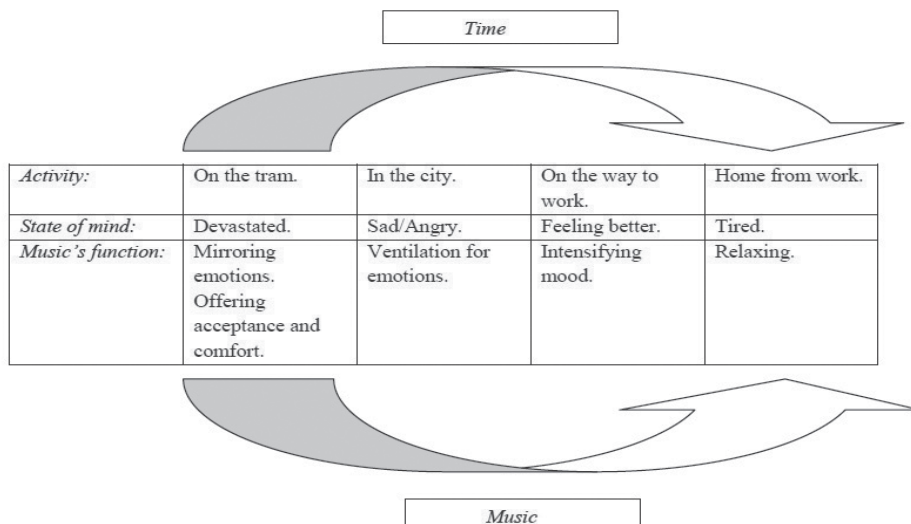
By inviting Lisa's thoughts to drift, the music could be understood to have a meditative effect, which Shapiro defines as follows: "Meditation refers to a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought" (Shapiro 1980, p. 14, in Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2005, p. 632). On her way home (as opposed to on her way into the city), Lisa uses music in exactly this way, as an escape from rumination. Though she herself does not link her listening to meditation, it leads to some of the same positive outcomes, among which, the study by Shapiro et al. (2005) concludes, is the strengthening of physiological, psychological and transpersonal wellbeing, including physiological rest, enhanced happiness, acceptance, sense of coherence, and stress hardiness.

The idea that the attempt to transcend rumination may lead to a heightened wellbeing relates to metacognitive therapy, which is a relatively new way of thinking about depression within psychology (Hjemdal & Hagen, 2012). Metacognitive therapy focuses upon specifically dysfunctional rumination, which includes heightened self-attention, continued and repetitive thinking such as worrying and pondering, and the use of 'unfortunate' coping strategies that prolong mental problems. In Lisa's case—by the end of the day, at least—listening to music as a diversion from her troubles or as a restful respite may represent a successful coping strategy that in turn sustains her positive mental health.

Music, Control, and Empowerment

It's absolutely wonderful on such days to just shut the world out and not have to relate to the people around you. [...] It's nice to have a device that can nearly tune in your mood.

To simplify, we could illustrate Lisa's experiences throughout the day in this way:

Time				

Activity:	On the tram.	In the city.	On the way to work.	Home from work.
State of mind:	Devastated.	Sad/Angry.	Feeling better.	Tired.
Music's function:	Mirroring emotions. Offering acceptance and comfort.	Ventilation for emotions.	Intensifying mood.	Relaxing.

Music

Lisa's story is a good example of how mobile, personal music comprises a coping strategy in daily life. Her music-driven progression through the day is quite clear, as she moves from her 'devastation' and sadness through anger to relative contentment by venting her emotions through music at the proper time of the day and ultimately relaxing and letting her mind wander off. Music via the MP3 player is always available, and Lisa takes full advantage of this fact. After all, she is not at home for any of the situations described above but instead on the tram, in the city, and on the way to and from work. Nevertheless, she is able to listen to music in every situation, relying upon her MP3 player as a ubiquitous technology of self-regulation and coping.

Another important feature of the MP3 player is that it enables Lisa to create a private space. She expresses that it is *wonderful* not to have to relate to others, drawing attention to the MP3 player's role as a protective device against unwanted stimuli from or interaction with the environment. Bull (2007, p. 47) agrees: "iPods are non-interactive in the sense that users construct fantasies and maintain feelings of security precisely by not interacting with others or the environment." Lisa purposefully uses the MP3 player to establish her personal boundaries and signal to people that she is otherwise engaged and thus not available for interaction. In this, she creates a sonic 'bubble' where the MP3 player functions nearly as a sonic 'safety blanket'. Lisa uses the personal music to create a private, sonic room, which could be described nearly as closing the door to a personal room. This room becomes a valued space where

Lisa can withdraw into herself and focus on her own state of mind without being distracted by her surroundings.

The MP3 player becomes an empowering device that offers Lisa a unique sense of personal control over her experiences, which has positive consequences for emotional wellbeing in almost every life arena, according to Thompson (2005), who defines 'perceived control' as "the judgement that one has the means to obtain desired outcomes and to avoid undesirable ones" (2005, p. 203). A sense of control has also been related to positive emotions and positive reactions to stressors, and it can protect against negative psychological and physiological responses (Maddux, 2005; Nelson, 1993; Thompson, 2005; Thompson, Sobolew-Shubin, Galbraith, Schwankovsky, & Cruzen, 1993). It has also been linked to positive health behaviour (Zimmerman, 2000). When the environment seems predictable and our internal state seems to be controllable, we are more capable of meeting the challenges of life, and we are better fit mentally and socially (Maddux, 2005). A sense of control has also been related to empowerment more generally (Rolvsjord 2004), and Simun (2009) describes how users of MP3 players are empowered in this way:

> In some ways, users do succumb to the status quo, for they disengage rather than challenge, cope rather than instigate change. But in this very disengagement—and users' ability to choose when, where, to what degree, and in which fashion to do so—users are empowered as actors. (Simun, 2009, p. 937)

Because Lisa chooses the terms of her disengagement from others and her engagement with herself via her MP3 player, she experiences an increase rather than a decrease in her sense of internal control. She decides when and how to use music according to her emotions and states of being:

> You can intensify the feelings in a way and be finished with them properly [...] Then you can go and do something else later, instead of it being the other way round that you try to push it away. In any case you have to go back and process it later.

Here, Lisa describes how the availability of music allows her to process her difficult emotions in the present, or whenever she wants: "You can drain yourself of all the emotions and place them elsewhere until you feel ready to deal with them. And if you have feelings that you want to work with just now, then you can simply pull out those feelings with a few keystrokes." In exerting this control over her experiences, Lisa is empowered as an active agent in her own self-care.

Discussion: Music, Subjective Well-Being, and Mental Health

But this is at least how I use it in my daily life. Sometimes as pure entertainment; but, by far the most often, the MP3 player functions to pull out or put away a mood that will fit the activities I'm on my way to.

In Lisa's narrative, we see that music seems to represent a successful mood-regulation strategy, which echoes the conclusion of van Goethem's (2010) study as well. Van Goethem finds six reasons for why music is so commonly applied to the regulation of affect:

1. Music is viewed as a quick and easily accessible 'fix'.
2. Listening to music does not require any brainpower.
3. Music listening is easy to combine with other activities (and tactics).
4. Music listening allows a temporary break without leaving everything behind.
5. Music listening is healthier than other tactics, such as eating or smoking.
6. Prior experience leads to knowledge of possible outcomes.

(van Goethem, 2010, p. 273)

These findings are reflected in Lisa's narrative. She obviously knows how the music affects her and operates on those assumptions (6): '[Music that] I always put on when I'm actually grumpy or sad but need to be happy / I put on the Wombats, which always gets me into a good mood / It always makes me relax'. In this sense, Lisa's familiarity with her music allows her to act as a 'disc jockey' for herself (c.f. DeNora, 2000) in accordance with her present needs. Thanks to the MP3 player, she can also combine music listening with other activities while 'on the go' (3, 4). Although I believe music listening indeed requires brainpower (2), it can also be used for relaxing and unwinding, as Lisa describes with regard to world music at the end of the day. She also sees her MP3 player as an obvious, easily available and efficient tactic for self-regulation (1).

As introduced above, the ability to regulate affect is vital to subjective well-being and mental health, because mood and emotions often contain important information for the individual who experiences them. It is therefore necessary to feel both joy and sorrow in order for one to learn and evolve, and affective states are a vital source of feedback here. However, these states can sometimes last long after they have served their 'function' (that is, the feedback has been perceived), and consequently they become dysfunctional: "The ability to self-regulate affective states—the ability to hang up after getting the message—is thus a crucial part of effective and adaptive psychological functioning", writes Larsen (2000, p. 129). Among others, Gross and Muños (1995) have likewise argued that the ability to regulate affect is a vital aspect of mental health, while Larsen

and Prizmic (2004) claimed that the ineffective regulation of negative affective states is most likely a significant factor in depression and mood disorders. This view is supported by Grewal and Salovey (2006), who posit a relationship between overall mental health and the ability to manage one's emotions (that is, one's emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions). It appears that Lisa's music listening offers clarity and understanding about what she is feeling, and this insight into her affective life likely contributes to her overall emotional intelligence. Gross and Muños (1995) make the further point that emotion regulation is vital to adult functioning in all situations, solitary or collective, public or private, and that it must not be taken for granted.

Lisa's narrative indicates that she can control her affective states through music, and this sense of control engenders positive emotions and leads to increased subjective wellbeing, a vital aspect of positive mental health according to the social model of health (Blaxter, 2004; Hjort, 1994; Mæland, 2005). We have found that, via her MP3 player, Lisa becomes an active agent who consciously and purposefully utilises music in the interests of her general mental health.

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