

# SOUND EFFECTS

From adult colouring books to Instagram, our pursuit of wellness has been visual. But this is set to change, as we understand how sound impacts our mental state

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If you're looking to discover the next big thing in the wellness world, look to the Californians: from avocado-on-everything to 'athleisure' sports fashion, their influence is unmissable. But now, the trend getting 'well-thy' Los Angelinos excited is not what we can see: it's all about the audio.

Sound baths such as The Temple of Intuition and The Sound Space are two of the hottest spots in town – actress Charlize Theron is one of the well-known names reported to be a fan. Once found only in New Age enclaves of the nearby Mojave desert, sessions aim to help 'bathers' relax, move through emotional blockages, and give relief for conditions from stress and depression to post traumatic stress disorder.

But healing via sound is nothing new. From Hindi mantras to the 'medicine melodies' of indigenous peoples in Central and South America, techniques

formed around sound, tone and rhythm have long sought to help people get centred.

## Good vibrations

Louise Shiels – who runs sound baths at Sound Awakening in London – talks us through how today's 'sound healing' sessions work. 'Everyone enters to dim lighting and gentle music. They lie down, shut their eyes and become aware of their breath. Then I play gongs, crystal singing bowls, and instruments such as rain sticks, a shaker, chimes and a thumb piano,' says Shiels. 'I also walk around to make it more immersive. I help ground people back into the "real world" afterwards by getting them to jiggle their bodies,' she says – the deep relaxation can make bathers feel heavy.

'The harmonics and tones from the gongs sound otherworldly – the effect is a bit dream-like. The vibrations are thought to unclog blocks of emotional energy or "prana"; Shiels explains. The theory is sound helps facilitate shifts in our brainwave state via a process called entrainment, providing a stable ▶



Surround  
sound: reset  
your brainwaves



Open your ears  
– and your mind

frequency that we can attune to. Usually, we operate in beta waves (13–40 Hertz), but by using sound, we can make our brains operate in gentler patterns.

‘Alpha brainwaves (8–13Hz) are the kind you have when drifting off,’ says Shiels. ‘Theta waves (4–8Hz) are present in deep meditation, and delta (0.5–4Hz) when in REM sleep. In deep relaxation, healing can occur at a cellular level,’ she explains. At this point you may be feeling cynical, but it’s worth remembering that by activating our ‘rest and digest’ parasympathetic nervous system, relaxation practices have physiological benefits – even lowering the need for blood pressure medication, according to reports in the *Journal Of Alternative And Complementary Medicine*.

### Meditation for the lazy

However, if you find mindfulness difficult to practise, you’ll know that following these techniques to where you just ‘be’, can prove elusive. That – states Murray Hidary, who uses abstract music and lights to create the ‘musical journey experience’ Mind Travel – is where music comes in. ‘It can act like training wheels to help keep you in the game,’ he says.

Of Mind Travel, he adds: ‘There’s no technique for the listener to “do”. They can just sit and experience it.’ The same is true of a sound bath, agrees Shiels. ‘In yoga and meditation, you have to work for a payoff, but in a sound bath, the instruments do the work. You can truly relax,’ she explains. All the brain and body benefits of mindfulness, minus the effort, sounds quite compelling, doesn’t it?

### The neuroscience verdict

But do these techniques stand up in the cold light of clinical analysis? Sort of. ‘Behind the mumbo jumbo, what you’re trying to do is banish thoughts by focusing on a sensory stimulus,’ says Dr Alan Watson, professor in anatomy and neuroscience at Cardiff University. The gains from listening closely to our

environment are undeniable; Harvard research found eight weeks of daily mindfulness increased grey matter in brain regions involved in learning and memory, emotion regulation, and perspective taking.

Pianist James Rhodes credits classical music for seeing him through the psychological fallout he had after being sexually abused as a child. In his 2015 bestseller *Instrumental* (Canongate Books, £8.99) Rhodes described it as ‘one of the most profound ways through trauma.’ Bach’s *Chaconne For Solo Violin In D Minor*, he says, ‘became my safe place. When I felt anxious, I dove inside it.’

So can music help heal a brain marred by trauma? Again, it’s about how we relate to it. ‘Music may help break the pattern of negative or frightening thoughts involved in post traumatic stress disorder and chronic stress,’ Watson says adding: ‘As a distractor, music’s structure may make it easier to concentrate on.’

## “ MUSIC CAN STOP NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND HELP US TUNE IN TO OURSELVES ”

### Time for you

Essentially, it’s about assigning yourself time to wander in sound, and its psychological benefits.

‘If nothing else, at the end of a sound bath you’ll feel relaxed. It’s about taking time for yourself, which isn’t a luxury – it’s what we need to survive,’ Shiels says. ‘It’s essential maintenance, really.’ Behind the metaphysical beginnings and burgeoning hype, what’s emerging is an understanding that by opening our ears – and minds – we can live a bit more balanced, and better in tune with ourselves. And who can argue with that?

## HEAR HEAR

Want to lift your aural wellness? Plug into these ideas:

- 1 **FIND NEW SOUNDS** We love *Elaenia* by Floating Points\*. With seven suites, there are so many elements to listen for (strings, synths, voices), it’s a great place to practise being aurally aware.
- 2 **OR KEEP IT CLASSICAL** Listening to Mozart can give your brain a boost, according to a study in *Consciousness And Cognition*. Those who heard his music showed an increase in brainwave activity linked to memory, understanding and problem-solving.
- 3 **TAKE A BATH** ‘If I’m in a good gong bath, I feel the vibrations to my core. There’s a sense of feeling the body slip away. No two baths are ever the same,’ says Louise Shiels. Find out how to take part in one of Shiels’ gong baths at [soundawakening.co.uk](http://soundawakening.co.uk).
- 4 **LET YOUR MIND WANDER** ‘The Mind Travel website\*\* has free audio and video performances. Listen with a good pair of headphones in a comfortable setting,’ says Murray Hidary.
- 5 **UPGRADE YOUR HOME PRACTICE** ‘Buy a Tibetan singing bowl to use in your meditation. They have a divine range of frequency and tones; hold a bowl, and run a stick around it or tap. The tones instantly slow your mind down,’ says Shiels. **1**

\*floatingpoints.co.uk \*\*murrayhidary.com/mindtravel. Photographs Plain Picture