DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

How Music Brings Us Together
by Jill Suttie

At GGSC's recent awe conference, Melanie DeMore led the audience in a group sing as part of the day's activities. Judging from participant responses, it was clear that something magical happened: We all felt closer and more connected because of that experience of singing together.

Why is singing such a powerful social glue? Most of us hear music from the moment we are born, often via lullabies, and through many of the most important occasions in our lives, from graduations to weddings to funerals. There is something about music that seems to bring us closer to each other and help us come together as a community.

There's little question that humans are wired for music. Researchers recently discovered that we have a dedicated part of our brain for processing music, supporting the theory that it has a special, important function in our lives.

Listening to music and singing together has been shown in several studies to directly impact neuro-chemicals in the brain, many of which play a role in closeness and connection.

Now new research suggests that playing music or singing together may be particularly potent in bringing about social closeness through the release of endorphins.

In one study, researchers found that performing music—through singing, drumming, and dancing—all resulted in participants having higher pain thresholds (a proxy measure for increased endorphin release in the brain) in comparison to listening to music alone. In addition, the performance of music resulted in greater positive emotion, suggesting one pathway through which people feel closer to one another when playing music together is through endorphin release.

In another study, researchers compared the effects of singing together in a small choir (20-80 people) versus a larger choir (232 people) on measures of closeness and on pain thresholds. The researchers found that both choir groups increased their pain threshold levels after singing; however, the larger group experienced bigger changes in social closeness after singing than the smaller group. This suggested to the researchers that endorphins produced in singing can act to draw large groups together quickly.

Music has also been linked to dopamine release, involved in regulating mood and craving behavior, which seems to predict music's ability to bring us pleasure. Coupled with the effects on endorphins, music seems to make us feel good and connect with others, perhaps particularly when we make music ourselves.

But music is more than just a common pleasure. New studies reveal how it can work to create a sense of group identity.

In a series of ingenious studies, researchers Chris Loerch and Nathan Arbuckle studied how musical reactivity—how much one is affected by listening to music—is tied to group processes, such as one's sense of belonging to a group, positive associations with ingroup members, bias toward outgroup members, and responses to group threat in various populations.

The researchers found that "musical reactivity is causally related to…basic social motivations" and that "reactivity to music is related to markers of successful group living." In other words, music makes us affiliate with groups.

But how does music do this? Some researchers believe that it's the rhythm in music that helps us to synch up our brains and coordinate our body movements with others, and that's how the effects can be translated to a whole group. Research supports this thesis, by showing how coordinating movement through music increases our sense of community and prosocial behavior. Indeed, one study found two year olds synchronized their body movements to a drumbeat—more accurately to a human they could see than to a drum machine.

This tendency to synchronize seems to become only more important as we grow. In another study, adults listened to one of three types of music—rhythmic music, non-rhythmic music, or "white noise"—and then engaged in a task that involved cooperating and coordinating their movements. Those who listened to rhythmic music finished the tasks more efficiently than those who listened to the other types of sound, suggesting that rhythm in music promotes behaviors that are linked to social cohesion.

In another study, people seated side by side and asked to rock at a comfortable rate tended to coordinate better without music, but felt closer to one another when they didsynchronize while listening to music. In a study by Scott Wiltermuth and Chip Heath of Stanford University, those who listened to music and coordinated their movements to the music were able to cooperate better and act more generously toward others when participating in economic games together (even in situations requiring personal loss for the good of the group, such as in the Public Goods Game).

All of this evidence helps confirm music's place in augmenting our social relationships. Perhaps that's why, when you want people to bond, music is a natural resource for making that happen. Whether at concerts, social events, or awe conferences, music can help us connect, cooperate, and care for each other. This suggests that, if we want to have a more harmonious society, we would do well to continue to include music in our—and our children's—lives.