

Australians are mostly watching TV during the pandemic, but music, singing and dancing do more for your mood

September 1 2021, by Frederic Kiernan, Anthony Chmiel, Jane Davidson



Cooking and baking was one of our favourite lockdown creative activities.
Credit: Shutterstock

How have you been passing the time during lockdown? Have you been

taking an online drawing class, or did you join an online choir? Perhaps you focused on gardening, or finally picked up that guitar in the corner to have a go?

We have long known creative activities [help us cope](#) during hard times. Engaging with the arts [enhances physical and mental well-being](#), can boost our sense of accomplishment and meaning, and strengthen our resilience to cope with life's challenges.

The arts help give life beauty.

So we wanted to explore how Australians turned to art during lockdowns in 2020. We wanted to know which art forms most appealed to Australians, and which ones were helping Australians cope with the lows of lockdown.

In our [newly published research](#), we found many Australians improved their mood using the arts. But the activities we turned to the most frequently weren't necessarily the ones which could most improve our sense of well-being.

What makes us feel better?

In an [online survey](#), we asked Australians which artistic creative activities they had been undertaking during the lockdown, and which activities they normally participated in but weren't under lockdown.

We also asked our participants to rank their activities from most to least effective at making them "feel better." Measures for anxiety, depression, loneliness and emotion regulation were taken to help us identify any relationships between mental health and well-being and arts engagement.

The most popular activities were watching films and television, listening to music and cooking and baking. Listening to music was ranked as the most effective activity at making our participants feel better—but watching films and television ranked more than halfway down the list, at 18 out of 27.

Of the most effective activities, singing took second place and dancing came in third.

The power of music

Three of the four most frequently undertaken activities (watching films and television, listening to music and reading) are usually considered passive or receptive activities: engaging with the artistic creation of others, rather than creating our own new art.

It comes as little surprise the most prevalent activities were receptive ones, since they could be easily done from home. But passive activities were often not the ones which were effective in helping us through trying times.

Active arts activities are beneficial partly because they involve seeking out novel ideas, experiences and possibilities, which in turn have positive [cognitive](#), [physical](#), [emotional and social](#) effects.



Most passive activities didn't improve our moods — but listening to music was an exception. Credit: Shutterstock

But listening to music seemed to be different from other passive arts activities.

Music has long been regarded as an [effective coping tool](#). We use music to [regulate](#) our emotions and to create [a refuge](#) for healing and imaginative play.

Listening to music can also accompany daily activities such as cooking or doing household chores much better than activities such as watching television or reading. Some of music's well-being benefits may originate

in this combination of aesthetic and practical elements.

We also found anxious and depressed Australians seem to be turning to music as a coping mechanism or emotional crutch significantly more than others. People [often report](#) specifically listening to sad music to help improve their mood.

While this might seem counter intuitive, listening to sad music while in a negative state can produce a positive outcome as a form of processing or catharsis.

(However, people living with depression should approach listening to sad or negative music with caution. [Emerging research](#) indicates those with [clinical depression](#) may find the outcome of sad [music](#) to be more negativity instead of positive release.)

Get up and moving

Participants who reported exercising more during the pandemic compared to their pre-pandemic routine fared significantly better in terms of mental health and well-being compared to those undertaking less or the same amount of exercise than prior to the pandemic.

This finding supports a [growing body](#) of research showing increased [physical activity](#) during lockdown is a robust method for maintaining mental wellness.

It also indicates why participants found dancing to be so beneficial. Not only is dance a form of artistic expression, it can be more effective than other forms of exercise at [reducing body fat](#) and is linked to numerous [physical](#) and [psychological](#) benefits.

Sadly, dancing was the activity most likely to have ceased under

lockdown, followed by theater rehearsals and performances, and singing.

Your own artistic helper

There are clear public health and [safety reasons](#) for why so many people had to stop dancing, singing and making theater during the COVID-19 pandemic. But these activities are very effective in helping us navigate difficult times.

With this in mind, artistic creative activities—and in particular active activities such as singing and dancing—warrant additional support and consideration as an important and efficient aspect of Australia's [mental health](#) response to COVID.

For those interested in incorporating singing and dancing into your [lockdown](#) routines, there is no shortage of inspiration for [how to do so](#) online. The arts always seem to find a way.

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