Prozac to My Ears

By Eugene Robinson
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Next time you take a walk, count how many faces are framed by skinny white wires that descend in a languid "y" before vanishing into pocket or bag. Innocent though they look, those wires -- which connect ears to iPods -- are like portable IVs dispensing a powerful antidepressant. They are the new Zoloft. To self-medicate, the patient just brushes a thumb across the iPod's selector wheel and it answers with a soft tattoo of clicks, a whisper that promises nirvana.

Forget the social implications of a world in which everyone walks around with his ears plugged, oblivious to the rest of humanity, lost in a private groove. That news is as old as the Sony Walkman, even as old as the transistor radio. But the iPod and its many imitators (and this is not a commercial for Apple, which does just fine in the commercials department) represent a quantitative leap so great it becomes qualitative.

The music is of your own choosing, and you can load a whole radio station's worth. For all practical purposes you can always hear just the right music, just when you want, and that is what's new. You have the ability to precisely program your aural environment, and thus program your mood.

"I do see it as a way to self-medicate," said Scott Johnson, a professor of psychology at New York University who studies cognition and perception. Early-adopter Johnson is on his second iPod, with some 1,700 songs loaded into the thing, about five solid days' worth.

"I used to be a musician, and I have a lot of rock music, some pop, some heavy metal," Johnson said. "A good deal of heavy metal, actually. When I get up in the morning and need to get going, I put on stuff that makes me go 'Grrrrr.' Probably some metal. To chill out, maybe Beach Boys."
He went on, "This is something that has really only been available in the past year. Somebody has to do some research. What does a person choose when they want to access a certain state? How does memory fit in?"

Psychologist E. Glenn Schellenberg of the University of Toronto has investigated the intersection of music and mood. Fast music boosts the listener's level of arousal, and music written in a major key is experienced with more "pleasantness" than music in a minor key -- nothing really counterintuitive there. Except that Schellenberg and his colleagues found that the two effects operate independently. "If I want to feel happy but relaxed, I might put on some folk music, not so fast but in a major key," Schellenberg said. "If I'm on the road late at night and want to be alert, maybe the latest Green Day album."

Say you're headed for a meeting with an important client and need to be bold, aggressive, pumped up. A licensed M.D. -- that would be "musical doctor" -- might prescribe Eminem's "Lose Yourself," with its driving, syncopated beat and its now-or-never refrain, "You've only got one shot, do not miss your chance" to seal the deal. Prepping for a job interview and need something to boost your confidence but also calm your nerves? "Smooth Operator" by Sade can make you feel like James Bond without the messy duty of killing archvillains and waves of henchmen. These selections work for me, at least. The point is that anyone can, to some extent, guide the way he or she feels.

Apple sold 5 million iPods this past Christmas season alone, which poses an obvious question: Why do so many of us need to block out the world and rearrange our moods this way? I think it's because our lives don't give us time to do it the old-fashioned way.

We're always plugged in: The cell phone rings. The PDA chimes an alarm. The BlackBerry buzzes in its awkward holster, or the Sidekick signals an incoming instant message that demands an equally instant response. We tote around our laptops and WiFi while we sip our lattes in Starbucks.

This is no Luddite yawp, mind you -- I can't imagine a world without cell phones, and the BlackBerry that lets me sit in a cab in Washington, exchanging gossip with an old friend on his farm outside London, is indistinguishable from magic.

But we should realize that constant interaction truncates the mental treks that once led us to our moods -- the sustained train of thought, the extended reverie, the day-long smolder, the can't-get-it-out-of-my-head anticipation, the lingering funk. It used to take a while to internalize a slight to the point where we reached a proper state of righteous indignation, or to reflect on our many blessings and soar into unbridled joy. But there's no time, and the cell phone keeps ringing. We plug in our ear-buds and whisper-click the wheel to shut out the world and get our heads where we need them to be, in a hurry.

We used to do this with long walks and quiet rooms, but not anymore. Designer noise is the new silence.

The writer will be available for questions at 2 p.m. today on www.washingtonpost.com. His e-mail address is eugenerobinson@washpost.com.
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