

Not just for spa or yoga – ambient music is also a form of escapism



When I heard the news that my mother had suffered a stroke, the feeling that surfaced wasn't despair, but an impulse to problem solve. First, the doctor's medical jargon flooded into my brain like ticker tape: A cerebrovascular accident due to embolism of the left middle cerebral artery. Five milligrams of Eliquis and 50 milligrams of Losartan and 50 more of Metoprolol, in addition to four other pills at morning, noon and midnight.

My brother and I compiled passwords to medical insurance platforms, patient portals and bank accounts in a shared Notes app entry. We filled out paperwork for long-term disability payments. We consulted lawyers, wondering how to handle my mother's employer, which had threatened to fire her if she did not return to work. A month after the stroke, the night before my 29th birthday, we were in an accident that totalled my mother's car. In the hopes that she would eventually be able to drive again, I gave her a few thousand dollars of my savings toward buying a new one. The stroke wasn't the only crisis. There was the ceaseless drag of the pan-

dem; the expectation to complete my master's degree while I cared for my mother; and the reality that, as an immigrant family, our full support system was back home in the Dominican Republic. For the most part, my brother and I were on our own.

So, I Googled. I made playlists. I called one of them, if you need to breathe, all in lowercase. I populated it with the soft-focus synth tones and obliterating loops of ambient music. I scrolled through Spotify and stumbled upon dozens of playlists engineered for mood regulation and self-care: Peaceful Indie Ambient, Lo-Fi Cool Down, Ambient Chill.

On Headspace, a meditation app that costs US\$69.99 a year, I found curated soundscapes by savant producer Madlib and songwriter John Legend intended to conjure soothing atmospheres and facilitate productive workdays. It was clear that I was not alone. In recent years, ambient music has become an escapist salve for a planet coping with mass death, political instability, climate anxiety, the incessant culture of overwork and the dissociation these conditions cause. The tech world has

been quick to cash in: In 2017, critic Liz Pelly wrote about the proliferation of Spotify's "chill" playlists, referring to it as "an ambition to turn all music into emotional wallpaper". This is late capitalist Muzak, smooth-brain anaesthesia to pacify the mind.

But in the months after my mother's stroke, after I rematriated into her one-bedroom apartment in Chicago, ambient music was not just some commodified act of self-care. Listening to it demanded that I relinquish control. It asked me to dispense with progressive time. It forced me to slow down and confront collapse.

At the top of "if you need to breathe" is Alessandro Cortini's Inziare. Cortini, an Italian musician, who started out as a guitarist, keyboardist and bassist for Nine Inch Nails, is also known for his ghostly, narrative-driven synth music. On Inziare, Cortini arrests time. A single synth tone, at first bound to the earth, floats 40,000 feet in the air, spiralling into astral fragments. Ripples of electronic feedback crest into peaks and valleys of stretched echoes, decayed into hollowed abysses. Time becomes supple, pliant, disobedient. Lis-

tening to it, I am forced to close my eyes, to feel the way that sound travels over the body, shape-shifting into nonlinear drift. I am detached from any deterministic version of the future. In this place between lightness and darkness, pleasure and pain exist in equal measure.

I experience all the fragmentation of life, the reminders of trauma and uncertainty I have woken up to for the past four months. Here, I refuse to let grief become self-definition: I live unfettered from the speed of emergency. Ambient music has always contained a kind of subterranean knowing. British musician and critic David Toop, who wrote *Ocean of Sound*, the defining 1995 text on the music, recently argued that it has become severed from the philosophical qualities suggested during its genesis in the 1970s. Back then, ambient represented an alternate protocol for listening and music-making. In a 2019 essay, Toop refers to it as a musical form "committed (implicitly or explicitly) to an engagement with interpretations and articulations of place, environment, listening, silence and time". —*The New York Times*

A full-body strength-training workout at home – using only resistance bands



Not long ago, I impulsively bought a set of mini exercise bands – thick rubber loops designed to engage your muscles as you stretch them. I was seduced by ads promising they could improve my posture, which is lousy after years of slumping over a computer. They claimed a handful of quick exercises would unhunch my shoulders while I "tone my muscles" and "sculpt my physique".

Getting a full-body workout with a set of US\$20 elastic bands was enticing, since I lack the budget or space for fancy fitness equipment.

The benefits of resistance training – workouts that build strength and muscle – are well known. It reduces your risk of diabetes and heart disease. With more muscle, you burn more calories and are less prone to injury. It has also been shown to strengthen bones and reduce age-related decline in muscle mass. Could resistance bands, which are relatively cheap, portable and easy to use, be a worthwhile alternative to a gym membership?

BANDS BUILD STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE The idea of stretchy workout bands is over 100 years old. Some are long, thin tubes; some, like mine, are thick, flat loops with colours designating resistance levels. And they've seen a recent resurgence during the pandemic home-fitness boom. Like weights, exercise bands put stress on the muscle, which over time makes the muscle adapt and get stronger. The farther you stretch the band, the greater the resistance. There are some

key differences though. Bands do not rely on gravity, so people cannot use momentum to jerk the weight into position, which can overload the joints and ultimately works less of the muscle, said David Behm, a professor and exercise scientist at Memorial University of Newfoundland's School of Human Kinetics and Recreation. Bands also allow for movement on a number of different planes and axes, he said, whereas free weights limit you to mostly up-and-down movement. Bands can engage the body's major muscles just as well as weights, providing a full-body strength and endurance workout, said Todd Ellenbecker, a physical therapist at Rehab Plus Sports Therapy in Scottsdale, Arizona, and an author of the book *Strength Band Training*.

Research supports this. One study of middle-aged women compared 10 weeks of twice-weekly training sessions using elastic bands with a similar programme that used weight machines. The women were tested for upper- and lower-body strength before and after the programme, and results showed that muscle mass, strength and endurance improved at a similar rate in both groups. A systematic review of 18 studies also found no significant difference in muscle activation levels between those using elastic bands and those using free weights. Ellenbecker said he works with athletes at all levels, who exclusively use bands for resistance training, "and they are successful and injury-free". —*The New York Times*

In conversation: Why climate change matters for human health

The consensus among scientists is that we are in an era of global heating and extreme weather events, primarily due to the devastating effects of human action on the environment. Why are researchers concerned, and what are the implications for health?

The Lancet Countdown team is a group of over 120 leading experts on climate, public health, economy, and political science — among others — who have committed to monitoring climate change, particularly its impact on global health.

Since 2015, the year of the Paris Agreement, the experts affiliated with the Lancet Countdown commission have published yearly reports Trusted Source assessing this situation and keeping signatory governments and decision-makers accountable for the commitments they

have taken on following the Agreement. The latest report, which appeared in *The Lancet* Trusted Source in October 2021, records "deepening inequities" across all regions as global heating remains a concern. The report discusses the impact of climate change in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it emphasizes the concern caused by extreme heat events and related natural disasters that have occurred over the past 2 years.

Among the issues outlined in the Lancet Countdown report 2021, there is the impact of climate change on the livelihood of communities around the world, its direct and indirect effect on mental and physical health, and the way in which it contributes to the spread of infectious diseases.

These findings largely coincide with those outlined by another set of landmark reports on climate change — those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The reports show that weather extremes related to climate change have affected the productivity of various food sectors — including agricultural, forestry, and fishery sectors — around the world, thus exacerbating food insecurity. They also emphasize the impact of climate change on mental health, and the ways in which it contributes to the spread of vector-borne communicable diseases. In our latest installment of the *In Conversation* podcast, we discuss these aspects at length with two key experts. One of them is Prof. David Pencheon, honorary professor of health and sustainable development at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, and founder of the Sustainable Development Unit for National Health Services England and Public Health England. —*Agencies*

Why is gut health taking over TikTok?

Every few months, like clockwork, hundreds of videos promising tips and tricks to "hack" your gut flood TikTok. In March, influencers pushed shots of aloe vera juice: "My digestive system, like my gut health? Never been better", one gushed in a video with one million likes while tapping on a purple bottle of the drink. Another, with the username "oliveoilqueen" advocated drinking extra virgin olive oil every day in a video viewed more than 3.5 million times, claiming that doing so cleared her skin, made her periods less painful and fixed her frequent bloating. Videos tagged with #guttok have garnered nearly 400 million views. They're crammed with suggestions for cucumber-ginger juices and boiled apples, bone broth in the morning and sludgy sweet potato soups at night.



There's not enough data to prove whether any of these supposed fixes improve digestive functions, gastrointestinal experts said. Some purported gut-health helpers, like coconut oil, have high fat content that can loosen stool and irritate

your stomach, said Beth Czerwony, a registered dietitian with the Cleveland Clinic's Center for Human Nutrition. Others, such as aloe vera juice, may cause diarrhoea in some people. And since the Food and Drug Administration largely does not regulate supplements, gastroenterologists are reluctant to recommend the pills, powders and products promoted by influencers. "If somebody is claiming to have something that will immediately turn gut health around, you should be skeptical of that," said Justin Sonnenburg, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Stanford. Instead, his research points to long-term lifestyle habits that can benefit the gut — ones that rarely go viral or make their way to social media acclaim.

HOW GUT HEALTH WENT MAINSTREAM The online obsession with gut health is just one example of self-transformation content, said Stephanie Alice Baker, a senior lecturer in sociology at the City, University of London, who studies online wellness culture. What you see is this trend of self-optimisation," Dr Baker said. The most popular #guttok videos tend to feature before and after pictures — the swell of bloating under a crop top becomes toned abs. In a culture that sometimes bristles at mentions of dieting or weight loss, framing these changes around a topic like gut health might be more palatable to an influencer's audience, she said. There's also an inherent intimacy that comes with talking about the gut, Dr Baker said. Authenticity attracts an audience — and it's hard to get more personal than talking about bowel movements. "That's what people are referring to when they say gut health," said Dr Rabia De Latour, a gastroenterologist at NYU Langone Health. "They want to stamp a nice, pretty name on it, but it's about pooping."

There's evidence to suggest that gut-related health conditions, particularly irritable bowel syndrome, have spiked over the past few decades, said Dr Sonnenburg, a surge he attributes to the rise of processed and packaged foods. A global survey published in 2021 of over 73,000 adults from 33 countries found that more than 40 per cent of respondents had gastrointestinal disorders, like irritable bowel syndrome or constipation. Chronic, unexplained abdominal pain, constipation and diarrhoea are all signs of poor gut health, experts said. People may also feel sluggish, or "blah". If you're concerned about your gut, pay attention to the consistency of your stool, Dr De Latour said; you want them to be soft, smooth and sausage shaped. The Bristol Stool Chart, a medical classification of seven groups of poop, can help determine whether or not your stool is healthy. Gut health can have long-term health consequences, doctors said. The gut is linked to the immune system and heart health, and emerging research is examining the link between gut flora and neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease, said Dr Rezwana Chowdhury, an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins Medicine. Eat more fibre: Two kinds of fibre can aid your gut: Soluble fibre — the

gummy fibres we get from foods like oatmeal and apple skins — and insoluble fibre, which serves as a laxative that helps push food through the digestive system. Nuts, whole grains, beans and legumes can be good sources of insoluble fiber, Czerwony said. Be careful not to introduce a lot of fibre too quickly, though. You want to ease into any dietary changes, experts said, and steadily increase the amount of fibre-rich foods you add to your meals over a period of weeks. Limit processed foods: Emulsifiers that help keep packaged foods shelf-stabilised can erode the mucus barrier in your gut, Dr Sonnenburg said, and artificial sweeteners found in many processed foods

