Welcome to the holiday season, a whirlwind of parties, gift-giving, an overabundance of food and drink, and the ever-present sound of jingle bells.

Everyone loves the holidays—they’re fun and festive. However, the season may also elicit anxiety and stress. Research has shown that more than 80 percent of us find the holiday season to be “somewhat” or “very” stressful. We still have to make a living and keep up with our daily lives. Then we add shopping for gifts, wrapping the gifts, decorating, entertaining, or attending parties. We become frazzled, experiencing too much of a good thing with the crowds, tinkling bells, and the musical sounds of the season. It can be tiring and even annoying—and yet, it is the heartbeat of holidays.

Along with the candy canes and mistletoe, there we are surrounded, day and night, by Christmas carols, intended to put us in a festive mood. In the six weeks running up to Christmas, individuals who work in environments that play background music will hear “Jingle Bells” an average of 320 times during a 40-hour week. This repetition can make these beloved tunes irritating and annoying.

The Impact of Music
Most people don’t realize the vast impact music has on our everyday mental, physical, and spiritual health. For example, music creates changes in metabolism, circulation, blood volume, pulse, blood pressure, and our moods. Up until 1970, most of the research done on music studied the effects of the beat of the music. It was found that slow music could slow the heartbeat and the breathing rate as well as bring down blood pressure. Faster music speeds up the same body measurements.

Today, scientifically planned music plays in hospital delivery rooms and dentist offices to help calm providers and patients. Therapists say music often helps bridge the gap between reality and fantasy for mental patients and can be an effective tool in controlling moods. Even when minds are closed to all else, music will often break down barriers. In the working world, background music has been found to increase production and cut down on boredom, fatigue, and tension.

Music can make us laugh or cry. It can calm us or whip us into an emotional foot-stomping frenzy. Playing “our song” can trigger memories and nostalgic moods. When we sing together our brains release oxytocin, a hormone that increases feelings of trust and social bonding.

Researchers believe that music gets to us because we are rhythmic beings, with rhythm in respiration, heartbeats, brain waves, gait, and speech. The impact of music appears to be in the way musical sounds reach and affect the brain.

The Elements of Music
When you listen to a piece of music, you’ll notice that it has several different characteristics; it may be soft or loud, slow or fast, combine different instruments and have a regular rhythmic pattern. All of these are known as the “elements of music.” Rhythm is, by its simplest definition, musical time. The origin of the word is Greek, meaning “flow.” Harmonic “patterns” are established from notes and chords in successive order.

The key component of music that makes it beneficial is order. The order of the music from the baroque and classical periods causes the brain to respond in special ways. This includes repetition and changes, certain patterns of rhythm, and pitch and mood contrasts. These key ingredients are realized by the body, setting the human mind to perform better when listening to ordered music.

The fact that music can get stuck in our heads is a key to understanding how human nature evolved. Evolution selected music as an information-bearing medium precisely because it has this stick-in-your-head quality. Our ancestors used music to capture important information. For thousands of years before there was writing, information such as which plants were poisonous or where to find fresh water was encoded in song. Setting words to music made it easier to remember. Songs are therefore memorable because they are meant to be, no matter how irritating the alphabet song, the jingling bells, or the “pa-rum-pum-pum pum” may be.

The holiday season holds many exciting events, surprises, and blessings for us; but it can also be challenging and even frustrating. We often generate much of our own stress by trying to create the perfect holiday. We experience too many things to do, limited time to do them and we

Heartbeat of the Season
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Wellness Milestones
feel especially harassed trying to cram activities into already busy schedules. Many find it really hard to cut themselves any slack and they judge themselves more harshly. If you are spending the holiday season in a panic, exhausted by too many activities, you may want to examine your priorities, pick a few favorite activities, and really enjoy them.

The holidays are about cheerfulness, wonder, and hope. Take the time to drive around and enjoy the incredible displays of lights, attend a special holiday concert, make snow angels with the kids, or just take a long, hot bath. Your holiday stress will drop considerably.

Enjoy the beauty of the first big snow, the warmth and festive spirit, decorations, and twinkling lights, old and new holiday music, and all those yummy treats. Most importantly, enjoy that magical energy that seems to circulate in the air causing grumpy individuals to become loveable and kind, even if only for one moment.

Music and the Holidays

Music contributes to the joy and wonder of the season. Because we tend to hear these songs only during this season, they serve as unique memory cues, unlocking a neural flood of holiday-related memories. A recent study examined if music could treat stressed adults in the pre-Christmas period. Using organ music, usually played on the occasion of important life events and for many people, the study found that listeners experienced significant reductions in tension, depression, anger, and fatigue.4

Christmas carols and bell ringers are a rich part of Christmas history, dating back to the 13th century. Today’s Christmas carolers often visit nursing homes and hospitals to bring a bit of holiday cheer to those who may be feeling under the weather.

Ringing of bells can be traced back to pagan winter celebrations. Bells announce the coming or arrival of an event, activity, or occasion. They toll for good times. They toll for bad times. They ring out warnings. Bells herald in the New Year. They are rung during Christmas to announce the arrival of the season. Sleigh bells remind us of Santa Claus.

Scientists also have confirmed that music is one of the few activities that involve the whole brain. It is intrinsic to all cultures and can have surprising benefits. Music creates an esprit de corps, creating a common bond and provoking memories to the point where we don’t even have to hear a song—we just think of it and the memories flood in. And yes, it can be irritating. A simple song with lots of repetition and an unexpected shift is among the most likely to bedevil you. It creates a “cognitive itch,” replays again and again, and is the reason why Christmas music can be annoying.

The Heartbeat of the Season

During the holiday season, you cannot turn on the radio, go to a store, or wait in the dentist’s office without suffering the seasonal onslaught of Christmas music. However, every once in a while, a song hits an emotional chord deep within, and you find yourself humming along, filled with holiday cheer.

Despite all, if we did not have music, many of us would feel impoverished. The holidays are a time of tradition, combining the powerful elements of religion, culture, family, and the winter solstice. As annoying as rituals and the songs of the season may be, they are as essential as the beating of the heart.