How intense experiences with music influence people’s way of life

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ABSTRACT

Background
Music is one of the most frequent triggers of intense and outstanding experiences that contrast strongly with ordinary everyday experiences. These intense experiences have long been investigated in psychology—most prominently in the course of humanistic psychology where they were called peak experiences. They are not only experienced as very pleasant but they are also thought to have long-term effects on people’s lives. Stirred through music, these experiences occur suddenly and unexpectedly and they overwhelm the listener with unusual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

Aims
Although intense experiences with music have been thought to have a long-term impact on the listener, there is no empirical evidence on that. We set out to investigate the long-term effect of these experiences on the way people think about, plan, and live their lives. What does really happen while the experience is going on, which psychological variables change, and by which processes do they affect people’s way of life?

Method
Using a qualitative approach, 13 interviewees were asked to remember intense experiences with music that they had while listening to or making music. They were to describe what happened in detail during the experience, how thoughts, feelings, and perceptions changed, and how all this affected their life in the long run. Interviews were analyzed using Grounded Theory in order to arrive at a theoretical model about the structure and the effects of intense experiences with music.

Results
Analysis of the subjective reports revealed the following pattern: intense experiences with music appear to be similar to altered states of consciousness and they strongly affect thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. These alterations result in a deep feeling of harmony, which is the exceedingly pleasant core of the experience. Lasting psychological resources are built. Right after the experience, the feeling of harmony starts to diminish and leaves a strong motivation to experience a similar kind of harmony in the everyday life as well. To gain the feeling of harmony, people change their way of life—they scrutinize their values, look for meaningful activities, get more creative, and intensify their social relationships.

Conclusions
Intense experiences with music are extremely pleasant experiences that leave wholesome resources and help people to shape a way of life that leads to a deeper sense and a higher degree of self realization. The understanding of these effects is important for both music therapy and the grasp of the psychological power of music in general.

Keywords
peak experiences, intense experiences, altered states of consciousness, way of life, grounded theory