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# Does ASMR really help with anxiety? A psychology expert explains the evidence

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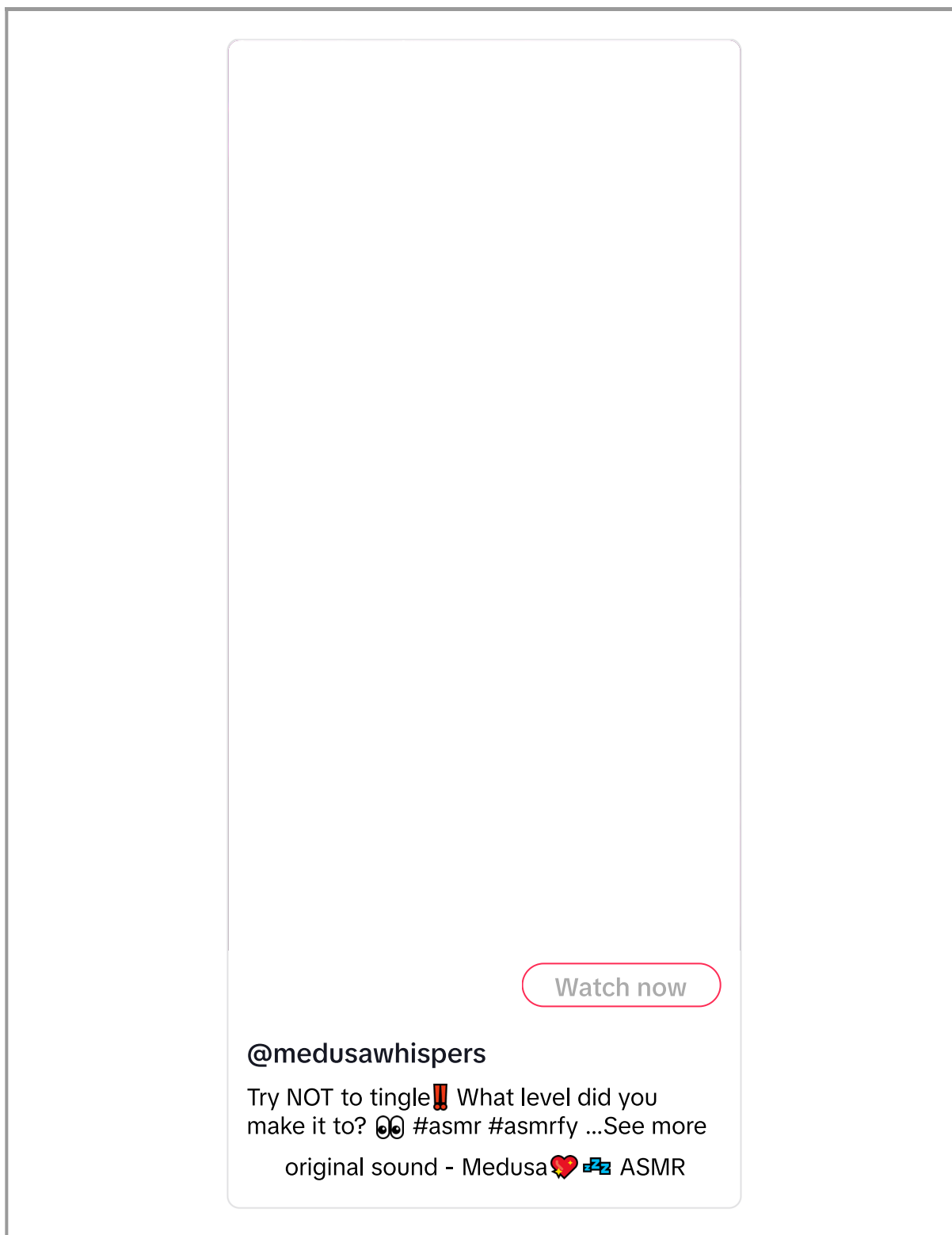
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Most of us have experienced tingling or “goosebumps” at some point, especially when we feel a strong positive emotion such as awe or excitement.

But some people have this response when they listen to certain sounds. [Online videos](#) which feature sounds of people whispering, crackling packets, and brushing or combing a microphone are all geared towards making you feel this positive tingle – the autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR.

Not everyone responds to ASMR content. But many who do say it makes them less anxious and helps them sleep. What does the science say?



## What is ASMR?

ASMR is an involuntary emotional and physical response, typically to a sound, which causes a reflexive tingling sensation on the scalp and back of the neck.

This multi-sensory experience can make us feel euphoria and “psychological stability”, meaning we experience less inner turmoil and feel more calm.

However, we still don’t have much evidence about what happens in the brain and the body when this occurs.

Some argue that ASMR is simply an example of *frisson* (French for “shiver”). This is when an intense emotional stimulus – such as a tender moment in a movie – triggers tingling or gives us “the chills”.

Research suggests these so-called “skin orgasms” are due to a sudden rush of the chemical dopamine in the brain’s reward centres.

However, the sense of awe or inspiration felt during a frisson experience is brief, (typically 4–5 seconds). In contrast, ASMR is usually described as inducing an enduring state of calm.

## **What triggers ASMR?**

Almost everyone will jump out of their skins if they experience a sudden and loud sound. This is because we’ve evolved to fear what is unpleasant or unexpected, to keep us safe from danger.

When it comes to sounds that can make us feel good, it’s not as easy to confirm whether there are universal triggers – that is, sounds that would make most people have the same positive reaction.

Research in ASMR has identified some common triggers, including whispering, tapping and crackling sounds. But we can’t say if these sounds would have the same effect on everyone.

ASMR videos often combine these sounds with video and role play known as “personal attention”.

This means treating the camera like it is the viewer, speaking and interacting directly with it, and even simulating activities such as brushing hair or applying makeup to the viewer.

Personal attention ASMR involves role play where the camera is treated as the viewer.

## **Why doesn’t it affect everyone?**

Not everyone responds to ASMR triggers, with some estimates suggesting only one in five people can experience ASMR.

Whether or not you do is likely due to personality type and your predisposition to susceptibility, meaning how easily others can influence you.

Studies have found those who respond are typically younger, experience more negative emotions, and are more introverted and critical. But they also tend to be more open to trying new things.

Some research has suggested “expectancy effects” could play a role. This is like a placebo – people who are invested in ASMR’s potential as a therapeutic tool may be more likely to feel its effects.

However, we still don’t know precisely how ASMR works to induce positive emotions.

More than a dozen studies have reported on how the brain behaves during ASMR. But the findings across them are inconsistent and many have a very small number of participants or no comparison group, so we can’t draw conclusions.

Studies looking at the body’s response during ASMR experiences have had similarly mixed results. Some have found people may experience both increased sweating (linked to the stress response) and decreased heart rate (linked to relaxation).

To describe this apparently contradictory state, some researchers have coined the term “arousing relaxation”.

Another theory is that the social or erotic aspects of ASMR videos are a more important trigger than sounds or other stimuli – basically, that it is a kind of sexual arousal. But we would need more evidence on this.

## **The bottom line**

Without being able to identify universal triggers, it’s also difficult to apply ASMR as an evidence-based tool in therapy. To date, there are no clinical trials that link ASMR with short- or long-term therapeutic effects.

Nevertheless, many people in the “whisper community” – those who produce and consume ASMR content online – claim ASMR helps them to relax, sleep better and reduce stress.

So, there’s no harm in ASMR if it helps you relax. But we would need more research to establish whether it’s effective as a clinical intervention for anxiety, insomnia or other conditions.