3 Reasons Why You’re Addicted to Heartbreak (And Why Sad Movies Feel So Good)

It’s not as bad as you think... probably.

Alex G Follow 3 min read · Sep 8, 2025

Tell me if you’ve been here. You just finished watching Titanic. It’s long, epic, a little cheesy, that door could have totally fit them both... but by the end, you’re still sobbing your eyes out. And yet, the next time a tear-jerker or a tragic love story hits Netflix, you can’t click in fast enough.

It feels like you’re going crazy. So why do we love sad movies?

Photo by Ron Lach : https://www.pexels.com/photo/two-women-crying-over-movie-9999344/

1. Emotional Catharsis

In real life, heartbreak is messy. Look at a breakup. It costs time, trust, sometimes even pieces of our identity. But if we're watching classic reruns of *Friends* and Ross and Rachel are on again, off again for the entire series run? Delicious. Sign me up. I'll eat it up every single time.

That's because watching those fictional breakups is, drumroll… *cathartic*. Aristotle originally described catharsis as the purging of the emotions of pity and fear that are aroused in the viewer of a tragedy.

So, basically, we're flushing out those bad feelings without needing them to be our own experiences: our own break ups, our own losses. Stories let us

bleed in a safe space, release pressure, and emerge lighter. The suffering isn't ours, but the release is real.

2. The Brain Loves the Rollercoaster

The drama, the tea, the hot goss… we love it all. Why, though? We can find the answer in neuroscience. Emotional swings trigger powerful rewrad systems.

So when Deepti told Shake "no" at the altar on Love is Blind Season 3, we're not just experiencing the tragedy. Our brains take a shot of dopamine and oxytocin when the next couple says yes.

It's the same trick rollercoasters use: the drop makes the climb thrilling. Without the lows, the highs wouldn't hit nearly as hard. That's why we keep returning to those big swings of emotion. The highs and lows heighten the contrast, and our brains lap it up.

3. Choice is Power

There's something profound about voluntarily *choosing* that heartbreak. We choose to read the Fault in Our Stars, we choose to watch Romeo and Juliet, we choose watch Titanic for the fifth time. We *know* a beloved character might die, and we press play anyway.

There's power in that choice. It isn't suffering we can't control, like real life. That act of agency deepens our bond with the story and makes the ache strangely satisfying.

So, Is it Bad?

Honestly, no.

In a lot of ways, fiction is like emotional training wheels. It lets us practice grief, longing, even resilience, without wrecking our actual lives.

The stories that crush us are the ones that stick with us. They crack us open and somehow leave us bigger than before.

The Takeaway

We are hooked on heartbreak because it reminds us we can feel. It sharpens the joy, deepens the empathy, and shows us that we can rebuild.

So watch the tragic finale. Pick up the tear-jerker. Stock up on popcorn, tissues, maybe some ice cream. Weirdly enough, you won't regret it.

What story broke your heart in the best possible way?

Psychology | Movies | Pop Culture | Storytelling | Sadness

Written by Alex G

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Lover of books, games, cats, and a bunch of other things

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The power of music: how music training in high school helps brain development

Alex Giacomini on July 27th, 2015 No Comments

It was my second year of high school and I was talking to a childhood friend. When I asked if she was taking any music classes she shrugged and told me, "They cut my choir this year." I wish I could say I had never heard of such a thing, but I knew it was common in public schools.

When budgets are low, music programs are often some of the first things to get cut – and it might be because those classes don't seem as important to the academic experience as other classes. But according to a recent study (subscription required) in the journal *PNAS*, they are.

In the study, researchers at Northwestern University showed that studying music promotes academic success and that brain development and language skills are especially strengthened. "Although learning to play music does not teach skills that seem directly relevant to most careers, the results suggest that music may engender what educators refer to as 'learning to learn,'" Nina Kraus, PhD, senior author of the study, said in a Northwestern release.

The researchers observed two groups of high schoolers: those enrolled in band classes, which involved music and instrumental instruction, and those enrolled in Reserve Officers' Training Corps, which focused on physical fitness. After three years in the same schools, the students in the music classes showed a stronger neural response to sound in comparison to the students in Reserve Officers' Training Corps. In addition, the music students were also more sensitive to auditory details than their peers.

It appears that cutting music classes from schools might leave students at a disadvantage. At the very least, it denies students the opportunity to increase their brain development and language skills. "Our results support the notion that the adolescent brain remains receptive to training, underscoring the importance of enrichment during the teenage years," the researchers said.

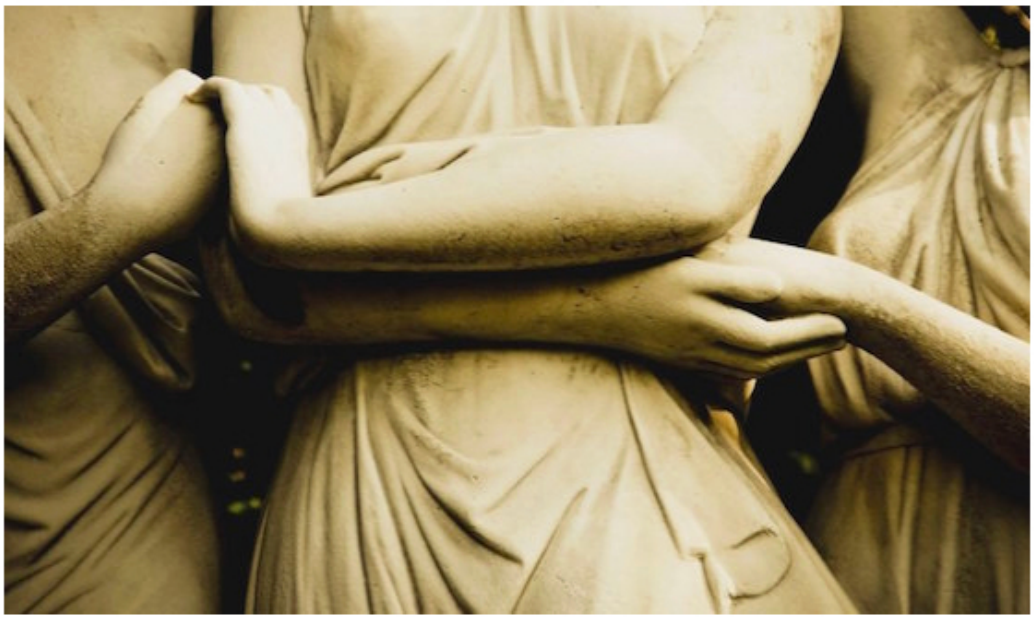
Alex Giacomini is an English literature major at UC Berkeley and a writing and social media intern in the medical school's Office of Communication and Public Affairs.

Previously: Excessive homework for high-performing high schoolers could be harmful, study finds, Music in the brain: A report on rare auditory hallucinations and Stanford researchers gain new insights into how auditory neurons develop in animal study
Photo by Monica Liu

MENTAL HEALTH, NEUROSCIENCE, RESEARCH, WOMEN'S HEALTH

When dementia hits home: The global impact of dementia on women

Alex Giacomini on June 12th, 2015 | 1 Comment



A report released last week by Alzheimer's Disease International calls attention to the disproportionate effects of dementia on women worldwide.

As noted in the report, women are more at risk for dementia than men for two primary reasons: age and genetics. Women's longer lifespans leave them more vulnerable to the age-related condition. In addition, there are biological factors that make women more likely to suffer from dementia.

Women are also more likely to be the caregivers to those with the disease. Women care not only for family members — they're often also employed in low-paid caregiving professions. This is particularly true in lower income countries, where as many as 62 percent of people with dementia live, according to the report.

The burden of dementia strains family structures and community dynamics in these disadvantaged nations. In the report, Faraneh Farin, who is involved with the Iran Alzheimer Association, describes the situation in countries like Iran:

> Nowadays, more women are working to support their families but should they need to care for a family member, then it is expected that they quit their jobs resulting in their marginalization. It seems that either way, whether a woman has dementia or she cares for a loved one, she is trapped in the cycle which has been constructed by the society. Dementia is an issue that engages a woman's entire life.

The global costs of dementia amount to more than $600 billion, yet many sufferers, caregivers and programs lack adequate funds. The report calls for additional resources for female dementia victims and caregivers, and it highlights the need for additional research on dementia's effects, especially in countries with lower incomes. These countries also need to develop national strategies that consider the needs of women, the report states.

Alzheimer's Disease International aims to elevate the awareness of dementia's impact on women globally and to spur national efforts to improve care. As Executive Director Mark Wortmann wrote in the Foreward: "I hope the report will find its way onto the desks of policy makers to help improve the quality of life for women living with dementia, as well as the millions of women all around the world who provide care and support for them."

Alex Giacomini is an English literature major at UC Berkeley and a writing and social media intern in the medical school's Office of Communication and Public Affairs.

Previously: Study suggests yoga may help caregivers of dementia patients manage stress, Stanford neuroscientist discusses the coming dementia epidemic, and Science Friday explores women's heightened risk for Alzheimer's
Photo by Valerie Everett

CHRONIC DISEASE, IN THE NEWS, PEDIATRICS, RESEARCH

A picture is worth a thousand words: Researchers use photos to see how Type 1 diabetes affects kids

Alex Giacomini on June 3rd, 2015 | No Comments

The impact of Type 1 diabetes can be a trying and forceful one, especially for children. To better understand the disease's role in young patients' lives, Ashby Walker, PhD, and colleagues at University of Florida conducted a study in which they gave 40 kids cameras and asked them to take photos representing what life with diabetes meant for them.

A university press release discussed what the researchers found:

> The most common pictures were of diabetes supplies, with 88 percent of youth taking at least one picture of needles, syringes, meters, pumps, insulin, ketone strips, test kits, and other materials for managing diabetes.
>
> The accompanying captions focused mainly on the unavoidable presence of these supplies in the youths' lives and the annoyance surrounding that fact. For instance, one white male participant wrote: "Diabetes means the burden of supplies," and another wrote, "Because this is my life now. Needles and medicine, needles and medicine."
>
> Approximately half the adolescents also took pictures of their bodies with bruises, calluses, and pricked fingertips to display the physical pain and bodily evidence of diabetes and wrote captions that illustrate the pain and burden of the disease. For instance, one white female participant wrote: "This is a scar. Diabetes is about learning to get used to what hurts."

The researchers also saw key differences in the types of photos taken by children in different socioeconomic situations:

> ...[Y]outh from more affluent households were more likely to take photos with symbols of resistance. The resistance photos and captions showed how the adolescents overcome the hardships associated with diabetes and sought to show how they would not be defined or limited by their diagnosis. More than half the adolescents took at least one resilience photo, but affluent youth were more likely to take these pictures than those from lower socioeconomic levels.
>
> For instance, one white male wrote: "This shows that diabetes does not limit what you can do in your life," describing a photo of a map with red dots on places he had traveled during the summer months.

"These photos demonstrate the importance of assisting low-income youth by providing them with resources and perspectives that encourage them to not be defined by their diagnosis," Walker concludes. Her work appears in the journal *Diabetes Spectrum*.

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GLOBAL HEALTH, HEALTH POLICY, MEDICINE AND SOCIETY, PUBLIC HEALTH, STANFORD NEWS

The battle against big tobacco hits the classroom

Alex Giacomini on June 17th, 2015 | No Comments

In Malawi, children as young as five years old work in tobacco fields. Here, in the Silicon Valley, five-year-olds compete to attend top preschools. Stanford communications major Minkee Sohn highlighted that dramatic contrast with a parody video, "Fresh Recruits," for a new Stanford anthropology class. Taught by Matthew Kohrman, PhD, the class, "Smoke and Mirrors in Global Health," aimed to raise awareness about the global tobacco industry and was the subject of a recent Stanford News article.

Simply acknowledging that "smoking is bad for you" is no longer enough to halt tobacco's spread. As noted in the piece, the tobacco industry remains a powerful global force and produces three times as many cigarettes as it did during the smoking heyday in America in the 1960s; it's also the source of millions of preventable deaths. Kohrman encouraged his students to develop original communication strategies and to take on hard-hitting issues, such as the use of underage labor.

For their final projects, Kohrman's class presented a slew of web-based videos, exposés and written critiques exploring little known facets of the global tobacco industry, including:

- Chinese academia's involvement in the tobacco industry
- Philip Morris' use of child labor in Africa
- South Korea's flawed approaches to tobacco control

Overall, Kohrman, an associate professor of anthropology, deemed his experimental class a "great success." The course uncovered many little-known aspects of global tobacco, and taught students to "understand the sociocultural means by which something highly dangerous to health such as the cigarette is made both politically contentious and inert."

Alex Giacomini is an English literature major at UC Berkeley and a writing and social media intern in the medical school's Office of Communication and Public Affairs.

Previously: A call to stop tobacco marketing, Cigarettes and chronographs: How tobacco industry marketing targeted racing enthusiasts and How e-cigarettes are sparking a new wave of tobacco marketing
Photo by Jo Naylor