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# ASMR

(Auto-Sensory Meridian Response)

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The tingle-inducing phenomenon that can send you to sleep, calm anxiety and even help depression. **Abbie Schofield** investigates YouTube's most fascinating community and meets talented creator Emma Smith, of ***Whispers Red ASMR***



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Imagine the gentle fizzing of champagne bubbles trickling down your back and a warm tingling sensation travelling from your scalp, down your neck and spine, inducing deep relaxation. It's almost as if a mild electrical current is passing through you from top to toe, a wave of calm washing over you in slow-motion.

Auto-sensory Meridian Response, or ASMR, is a bodily reaction often described as a low-grade euphoria that is produced by certain stimuli, or triggers, which are normally visual and acoustic.

Not everyone experiences ASMR and people that do have different triggers. Common triggers include whispering, crinkling, tapping and brushing sounds. However, some people can recreate the sensation of ASMR with no stimuli if they focus internally.

As a child, I had always felt a tingling feeling down my back whenever someone played with my hair, but I was 13 when I had my first memorable

experience of ASMR. I was at the Optician - not the most relaxing of environments - but there was something about the doctor's slow soothing voice as she tested my eyes that put me in an almost hypnotic state of calm whilst tingles spread across my scalp.

It wasn't until years later, when I had just started university, that I was introduced to ASMR videos. I was unwell in bed and feeling extremely anxious - then my flatmate showed me a YouTube clip. It was a makeup tutorial, something I was familiar with, but it wasn't like the content I usually watched. The woman, Maria of *Gentle Whispering*, was applying makeup towards the camera, not herself, and was speaking into binaural microphones. When I put headphones in, it was like she was there next to me, doing my makeup and whispering in my ear. The instant rush of tingles that I hadn't felt for years and subsequent relaxation was incredible. I fell asleep within minutes.

ASMR on YouTube began in the platform's early years with the 'Whisper Community', a small group of creators uploading videos of themselves simply whispering into microphones. This collection of YouTubers started to grow and incorporate a variety of sounds into their videos such as hair-brushing, rainfall and tapping. Viewers looking for relaxation were drawn to the videos which steadily garnered popularity.

Another form of ASMR is roleplay, where the YouTuber plays a doctor or a beauty therapist, for example, and the viewer is the client or patient. Combined with other sounds, these roleplays are thought to trigger ASMR as they mimic personal attention and care associated with comfort and intimacy.

ASMR is sometimes misunderstood as a sexual sensation or a fetish; its creators being predominantly female also adds to it being misconstrued as 'soft porn' and people occasionally refer to ASMR as a 'brain orgasm' due to the pleasurable feelings produced. >



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However, there is no link between ASMR and sexuality.

As YouTube's users increased, more people discovered ASMR videos and were inspired to make their own channels. Today, the community is thriving, with hundreds of creators producing content designed to give their millions of viewers these mysterious tingles and help send them to sleep or soothe their anxiety.

Videos such as 'YouTubers React to... ASMR' by *FBE* have also helped raise the profile of ASMR in the YouTube space.

Popular 'ASMRtists' include Maria of *Gentle Whispering*, whose channel has over 390 million views, Heather of *Heather Feather* and Taylor of *ASMR Darling*.

Emma Smith goes by the username *Whispers Red ASMR* and is one of YouTube's most celebrated ASMRtists, with 380,000+ subscribers, over 98 million channel views and a dedicated fanbase. She agreed to meet me and tell me about her experiences of ASMR and the online community.

"I don't have a first memory of ASMR," she explains, playing with a strand of her waterfall of red hair. "I remember

being at school and feeling it when the teacher read a story, going to the doctor, anyone giving me an eye test or a haircut. I tried to put it into words but no one understood. It turns out my brother always experienced it and calls it 'the golden feeling' which is nice. But I stopped talking about it, got on with life and enjoyed the feeling when it came."

After a serious car accident in 2010, Emma developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"I ended up feeling really depressed and couldn't sleep, so I searched for relaxation videos on YouTube. I found whale sounds and ocean sounds and stuff like that, and then ASMR videos began to come up.

"I was going to therapy to help with PTSD, but I needed the ASMR videos to help me sleep. It was great to find this community and know that there were people in the same position. I always felt like I was different from everyone else – a bit softer and more sensitive. "I find that people can hurt each other really easily, but I'm not like that. I'm really empathetic but I don't know many people who are the same way, so I've had to handle a lot of tough people throughout my life.

"Finding the ASMR community meant that I was surrounded by sensitive people like me," Emma continues, lighting up. "It wasn't just about finding videos to get this feeling, it was finding a whole community of a certain type of person. I recently discovered that I'm an HSP [Highly Sensitive Person - a personality type found in 15-20% of the population]. I think to feel the ASMR sensation you need to be in some way sensitive – to sound and to other people's feelings."

Emma started a Facebook group called ASMR UK and then decided to begin uploading videos herself in June 2013.

"I was scared, I thought people would judge me, I thought my voice would be horrible, I was really embarrassed. But I met more people, found more confidence and people left nice comments. What started off as a hobby has turned into a full-time job this year. It's a bit of a silly time to go full-time though because ASMR content creators now earn half as much as they used to."

Like many YouTubers, ASMRtists have their videos frequently demonetised as part of YouTube's infamous 'adpocalypse', which strips creators of



their AdSense. Some YouTubers lost up to 80% of their normal revenue after a number of advertisers pulled out as their adverts were appearing on videos that were potentially inappropriate. YouTube has claimed that they are only removing adverts from “hateful, offensive, and derogatory content”, however ASMR videos as well as videos with LGBTQ+ themes are amongst those unfairly affected.

This is not the only obstacle Emma has faced in her online career. ASMR videos need to be recorded in complete silence, which isn’t easy to come by when you’re a mum of two living below a flight path.

“I would always film between midnight and four in the morning when the aeroplanes had stopped and then I had to stay up and edit and then go to work and then look after the kids. My eyes were always red and I’ve been through four years of YouTube with people thinking I’m stoned all the time,” she laughs.

As well as investing in state of the art recording equipment, Emma has now soundproofed her garden shed to allow her to record videos in it. “I’ve spent loads of money that I’ve made from

previous videos on this shed and I can work in the daytime now.”

Emma continues to put her all into her channel and enjoys the freedom it gives her to express herself.

“If you’re a quiet or sensitive person you have to learn how to survive in the world. You have to learn to shout, you have to learn how to speak up and push yourself forward when you don’t want to. You have to go to an interview and be confident and say how wonderful you are when you don’t want to behave that way. There are so many intricacies that come with being an HSP.

“But on YouTube and doing ASMR, I can put all that stuff away and be quiet and it’s accepted. In fact, it’s an advantage. So it’s really nice for that side of me to come out and just let it happen and give as much love as I can to everybody.”

It is only within the past five years or so that scientists have begun to investigate ASMR and its causes. One theory is that humans feel ASMR because our ancestors were primates; apes use grooming as a social activity to bond and show affection. This trait may have been passed on to humans and could explain why some

people feel pleasure from ASMR and the personal attention provided in a hairdressing role play, for example.

Overall, little research has been conducted on ASMR, despite the thousands of personal anecdotes describing the sensation. People who suffer from anxiety and depression claim it eases their symptoms and offers a relaxing escapism - and I can vouch that it even helps a hangover.

But whilst the biological process behind ASMR is unclear, Emma told me that there is scientific evidence that proves the benefits of sound therapy.

“I wanted to understand why sounds can heal, so I did a year-long course of Basic Sound Therapy learning different treatments using my voice and tuning forks in one on one sessions with people. It taught me so much and I’ve just got my certificate for another course where I learned how to use singing bowls, crystal bowls and Himalayan bowls. I also did a Reiki course.

“When I make sounds and I talk quietly to someone, I’m bringing their nervous system down to a nice quiet level, so I’m reducing the brain state. They might be in a high beta brain state and then they’re brought to a theta state >



which is when you relax. The vagus nerve in your brain tells your body to go out of Fight or Flight mode and into relaxation mode. So when people say 'sound healing' or 'therapy' that's what happens."

It is unknown why some people are affected by ASMR and others are not. Unsurprisingly, for those who are not susceptible to it or don't understand it, the whole thing seems quite bizarre.

"We're just normal people and I think that's why it's important to be open and show people what ASMR is," Emma says. "I'm not some alien that magically produces these quiet videos. I've always wanted to normalise it. I'd also like to show behind the scenes on videos because they look so easy but they're not and it's really interesting to see the amount of work that goes into them and all the equipment that is needed."

Whilst she is vocal about demystifying ASMR and its benefits, Emma is unsure whether more research should be conducted or not.

"There's this whole community online who already know that it's a therapy and they don't need to know any

more because it's working for them. It's not a big deal. And then there are people who think they'd rather not know because it would spoil the magic of it all. There are also people who think we should know because it could be used as a tool in mainstream therapies. But there's the risk that it could be commercialised and sold and then people who don't understand it could use it for personal gain and it could become really watered down."

Whilst scientific validation could help answer a lot of curiosities and bring ASMR as a therapy to more people in need, it could also jeopardise the online community's freedom and accessibility.

"I'm on the fence about the whole thing. I'd like to know what happens to the brain and what chemical comes out. But once we do know, what happens then? I found a company that make a headband and they market it mainly at war heroes with PTSD. It stimulates their vagus nerve and sends waves into their brain allowing them to calm down. I was watching the testimony video from a guy who benefitted from it and everything

he was describing was exactly what people say about ASMR. So they're making a product and selling it to people the government have put through war. It's not in that company's interest for ASMR to be around because it's a natural thing that can't be sold."

Whilst the world of YouTube grows, it seems so does the hate, with trolls festering under almost every video. But it's remarkable how positive the ASMR comment section is. ASMR on YouTube is about connecting with like-minded people just as much as the sensation itself. The ASMR community fosters an environment that encourages care and altruism, and its viewers aren't looking for drama and controversy unlike the clickbait we see on countless channels nowadays.

"I'm just going to carry on doing what I do," says Emma, "I want to give as much positivity and love as I can and see where it goes from there."

In our current socio-political climate, the ASMR community is a virtual breath of fresh air and a whisper of hope - whether you get tingles from it or not. ○