

How I Became Immersed in ASMR — Until the Moment I Couldn't Feel it Anymore

By Paige Towers • July 15, 2016 at 11:50am

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You never forget your first time.

The night I discovered the video, I didn't get up from my roommate's futon for more than five hours. I sat there with my legs stretched out, headphones plugged in, laptop on my thighs, arms limp at my sides. The content of the video was harmless: in it, a woman sat flipping through a newspaper, purposefully crinkling the paper as she turned the pages and reading a few sentences in a pleasing, breathy whisper. But the effect was so good, and more importantly, there I was harnessing it when I wanted, instead of waiting for it to happen.

Later, it occurred to me that the experience was almost like getting high, or at least heavily buzzed off alcohol — the anxiety, depression and trouble sleeping I'd experienced since I was a teenager all magically vanished in the same way they did when I took a hit of weed, or downed several drinks.

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Tingles seeped out of my scalp, surrounding my head in an aura of pleasure, before trickling down my spine and into the nerves in my arms and legs. The sensation was reminiscent to that of being massaged: a release of tension and pain that occurs after someone skillfully touches and rubs your shoulders, your back, your feet. All this, but from someone's upload on YouTube.

An error occurred.

Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

It seemed I'd found an outlet for escaping from my life without having to leave the living room. And, as it turns out, this wasn't a singular effect. There were more videos — a lot more: portals to step through and experience that glorious sensation over and over again.

Click.

Here's a video of someone pretending to apply makeup to my face.

Click.

Here's a video of someone slowly brushing her hair in front of the camera.

Click. Here's me melting away into nothingness. <http://vanwinkles.com/howilostmyasmrandfounditagain> 2/10

Soon, when I couldn't sleep or found myself too depressed to tear myself from my bed, I was turning to the internet instead of my past vices. The same went for anxiety; I found that if I watched 1520 minutes of a video during a day when something as minor as a quick social interaction made my heart rate rise and my palms sweat, it had the same effects of entering a long, deep slumber. I came out of my video induced trance feeling calm, refreshed and unintimidated by situations which before had felt totally overwhelming.

Life changed quickly. I put myself to sleep every night with my headphones on and watched the videos for short stints throughout the day. There was some gift hidden in my DNA — a natural response that helped with my problems. And I became infatuated with it. But I found out later that this gift, which I later realized was called ASMR, wasn't sustainable. Within a few years, I was completely desensitized to its effects. It was gone.

For the uninitiated, ASMR

stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and is a response that presents itself as a pleasurable, unique, tingling sensation in the head or scalp that can also extend down the body through the spine and into the limbs. This phenomenon is triggered by specific certain triggers

(i.e. watching someone draw, paint or brush their hair, for instance), and the responses vary depending on the person and/or situation. Although very little research has been done on the phenomenon, judging from YouTube, there are millions

of people who experience it. Viewers range everywhere from the U.S. to the U.K. and from Kenya to

Japan; it's most everywhere, and available in dozens of languages.

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Many people who watch ASMR videos comment that they experienced it as a child. When I was young, specific actions and sounds used to instantly relax me. I used to decompress after school by watching videotapes of Bob Ross painting landscapes; I'd get "the tingles" from something as simple as my older sister brushing my hair or drawing me a picture; a cousin used to show me her newest beauty products and I was mesmerized by the whole process — the clinking of nail polish and foundation bottles, the careful explanations of each item, the rustling sounds as she reached into a bag for the next thing to display. I didn't have a name for it, but I knew it was special.

The night I watched the woman flipping through the newspaper was the night I discovered my secret response. ASMR videos — which are made by "ASMR artists," or "ASMRists" or "whisperers" as they're known within the

11/10/2016 How I Lost My ASMR and Found it Again | Van Winkle's realm — started popping up online around 2006 and they often mimic these same experiences that triggered me as a child. By the time I got to them, there were literally thousands of videos available to watch.

To an outside observer, ASMR videos look a little weird. They often involve everyday, mundane activities, or appear to stimulate tingles in other areas.

To an outside observer, ASMR videos look a little weird. They often involve everyday, mundane activities, or appear to be intimate in nature. And the ASMRist, many of whom are young women, stare into the camera and speak softly (or scratch or clink or crinkle) into a highdefinition microphone. Common themes include reading books outloud, painting nails, folding paper, or tapping on objects like wood or glass. Other popular videos are roleplays, where ASMRists pretend to be doctors, hair stylists, makeup artists or any other profession that provides oneonone, personal attention to a patient or client. Videos of people doing things as simple as doodling in a sketchbook are posted by everyday by hundreds

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of people, and they're watched by millions of viewers worldwide.

My goto ASMRist for getting the most tingles was always Maria of GentleWhispering

. In one of my favorite videos, she is sitting at a table, smiling, whispering into microphone and strumming her long, manicured nails against her iPhone screen. The sound — that soft and round but still crisp “tap tap, tap tap” that used to make my face tingle, my limbs feel ‘floaty’ and my thoughts come slower, almost as if I’d been given a small dose of painkillers — not only failed to relax me, but also irritated me. So I took my headphones off, and fastwalked to the bar.

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After “discovering” ASMR videos in late 2011, they became a substancefree means of relaxing, escaping my anxiety and falling asleep. I started an ASMR group in NYC so others with my generous affliction could meet up and share their experiences. I even attempted the daunting task of organizing an ASMR conference. I was so infatuated with the subject

11/10/2016 How I Lost My ASMR and Found it Again | Van Winkle's that I even began writing a book on it. This meant that not only did I watch the videos for release, but I began spending countless hours a week researching and thinking about ASMR. I was obsessed.

In order to write my book and organize the convention, I started up correspondence with many of the ASMRists responsible for causing my reaction. I went directly against the advice of that great fake wizard and started looking for the men and women behind the curtain. And with that, I inadvertently broke down the wall of anonymity that the Internet so comfortably provides.

It wasn't like I just woke up one morning and it was gone. But the intensity of my responses to past ASMR triggers started to fade over time.

Although before all this started, it felt

as though I knew some of my favorite ASMRists because I religiously watched them crinkle and clink, I of course didn't. This very important distinction made a huge difference. While the vast majority of ASMRists I communicated with were wonderfully kind, a couple proved to be quite different than the person they presented themselves as in the videos. The soft smiles and

11/10/2016 How I Lost My ASMR and Found it Again | Van Winkle's whispers I grew accustomed to on Youtube became harsh words about convention times or accusations that I was trying to exploit the community. Although their distrust of me — a stranger — was understandable, these reactions changed how I perceived the videos. Now, that which once calmed me and put to me sleep every night was marred by looming deadlines or personal gripes. And that's when I began losing my ASMR.

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After that, my methods of relaxation took on different forms. Instead of falling asleep to ASMR videos every night, I turned on Netflix and streamed episodes of “

30 Rock” or “Broad City”

because I couldn't quiet my mind without some sort of distraction. The act of falling asleep became more of a skill than a natural process, and I began staying up later and

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11/10/2016 How I Lost My ASMR and Found it Again | Van Winkle's later. I picked up drinking and smoking again, too. Every once in awhile when I reached an extreme emotional low, I'd try to watch a video. But my brain wouldn't react to it, and I'd just feel worse. Not even Maria could help. The portal had closed.

I quit watching ASMR videos completely and forgot about the book manuscript. A few months went by and I started to worry that I'd never get the feeling back; after nearly a year of the same, I no longer worried. I'd binged on something good and now it was gone. I was certain of it.

As time went by I lessened my drinking and smoking and managed my anxiety and depression with exercise and occasional therapy. Then, several weeks ago during my morning commute, a woman sitting next to me was applying makeup and, within seconds, I became utterly relaxed. The sounds of her tapping makeup brushes and opening and closing cosmetic cases made my shoulders loosen. When she pulled a sticky mascara wand out of its tube, my breathing slowed. I could have been lying on the beach instead of sitting in that packed, overheated train car.

Perhaps I got 'my tingles' back
because I'd given my brain enough
time to recharge, or maybe because
I hadn't tried to

force my response to the videos.

In fact, I was so immersed in the experience that it didn't even occur to me until after I'd gotten off at my stop that my ASMR was back. The experience had been just as organic as any I'd had when I was a young child. Perhaps I'd given my brain enough time to recharge, or it happened because I hadn't tried to force it. Or both, I don't know.

I've experienced small feelings of ASMR many more times. I cautiously began watching videos again — once or twice a week, no more. And although I haven't experienced strong tingles yet, I do achieve a sense of calm sleepiness again. I don't know when exactly I'll start writing and revising my book again, but I've been feeling so positive about ASMR that I decided to read over my halffinished manuscript the other day — something I hadn't done for months.

After I finished reading, I laughed out loud. The story, I realized, hadn't really been about Internet trends or the artists who selflessly create and upload videos. It was about me all along.

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