

**Self Care/Self-Management for
College-Age Music Students
-by-
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A number of recent studies have pointed to the almost epidemic proportions of performance-related disorders experienced by college-age music students in the United States. These disorders include debilitating stage fright, over-use injuries, chronic pain, depression, and substance abuse. Qualitative research (Montello, 1992) suggests that there are three main reasons why young musicians succumb to these disorders. First of all, for many students musical performance is a highly stressful activity that leaves no room for error. Music students are constantly being evaluated and many feel that if they do not play perfectly, they will be rejected and/or humiliated. For these students, performance itself becomes a major threat that can lead to debilitating anxiety (stage fright). Most students are unfamiliar with the psychophysiology of the performance anxiety reaction, a/k/a the “fight-or-flight” response that can leave them at the mercy of their seemingly uncontrollable fear-based thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations.

Another factor underlying the incidence of performance-related disorders in college-age musicians involves the act of leaving home. For many students, entering college or conservatory is often the first time that they have left home for a significant period of time. Most students are accustomed to relying on parents and/or caretakers for time management, nutritional guidance, and consistent love and nurturance. The majority of students have received little or no coaching on how to take care of themselves away from home, and thus feel lost and fearful when they find themselves in a stressful, unfamiliar environment.

The third reason involves the often-overwhelming demands of conservatory life – assignments, practice, rehearsals, juries, auditions, competitions, and roommate/inter-personal issues. These demands, along with normal adolescent developmental issues, can take their toll on the physical and mental health of young musicians, particularly when they lack coping skills for dealing with stressful situations.

In order to stay healthy and maximize their potential as individuals and as performers, music students can benefit from learning tools to facilitate self-awareness and expression, and for managing stress. The wellness model provides an appropriate format for this kind of training. Wellness is defined as an active, lifelong process of fostering health and wholeness through becoming awareness of the inter-relatedness of body, mind, spirit, and community. It involves the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own health and healing and to be pro-active in creating a balanced and fulfilling life. Since the act of performing music requires that the music student exert refined control over the body, mind, and emotions, while at the same time communicating with an audience, it appears that the wellness approach could be an essential ingredient for his or her success in the field.

(Note: Recent psychoneuroimmunological research (Coons, Montello & Perez, 1995) indicates that musicians who have high ratings for confidence and low levels for denial of stress-related feelings experience enhanced immunity after a mildly stressful performance, as compared to those with low confidence and high denial who had decreases in immunity post-performance. These findings suggest that personality factors – which can be altered and/or enhanced by the following self-care techniques - play a role in how music students perceive and cope with performance-related stress, both from mental and physical health perspectives.)

The following stress-management/wellness techniques have been clinically-tested (Wardle, 1975; Sweeney & Horan, 1982; Rovics, 1984; Kendrick, 1982; Appel, 1976, Montello, Coons & Kantor, 1990) with musicians and found to be effective in reducing stress and anxiety and enhancing musicality and performance mastery. For best results, the techniques are to be integrated into students' daily practice routines, and not just used sporadically. As every musician knows, practice makes perfect.

Breath awareness. Students first learn about the psychophysiology of the “fight-or-flight” reaction associated with stage fright. They learn that they can affect a measure of control over the bodily symptoms associated with sympathetic nervous system activation (arousal) through intentional breathing. The breath is the link between the mind and body. Music students are taught how to breathe diaphragmatically and to use the breath to activate the “relaxation response” (parasympathetic nervous system activation) when overly aroused in performance situations. A number of other yogic breathing exercises have been found effective in stress reduction. Two-to-one breathing doubles the length of the exhalation during the breath cycle. This provides grounding and centering when a student is experiencing acute anxiety. Alternate nostril breathing helps to balance the right and left brain hemispheres which allows for mental clarity and enhanced creativity.

Relaxation techniques. Two clinically-tested techniques have proven to be effective in facilitating relaxation, pain reduction, mind-body integration and coherence in stressed musicians. Progressive relaxation trains the musician to systematically tense and relax the major muscle groups throughout the body. Students learn to discriminate between tense and relaxed muscles and are encouraged to instantly “relax and let go” when they find they are holding tension in a particular body part.

Autogenic training teaches music students how to control autonomic functioning such as heart rate, breathing, and blood flow. Students learn that they have ultimate control over their own body-mind. This significantly reduces the fear of being overwhelmed by the symptoms of performance anxiety and allows them to stay calm in the midst of stressful situations.

Cognitive restructuring. Music students learn that maladaptive thinking is one of the root causes of performance anxiety. In this technique, students learn to become the observer of their thoughts and to root out negative, destructive thought patterns. Once they become aware of a negative thought such as “I’m not good enough”, they are asked to evaluate the thought and to change it to a thought that is more adaptive and rational (“I

accept and honor myself in performance situations.”). With practice, students learn to become the master of their own minds and to change maladaptive thoughts in the moment before they have a chance of negatively affecting behavior.

Mindfulness meditation. Meditation is a focusing technique that helps musicians to strengthen the witnessing aspect of the mind. The student learns to become the observer of the modifications of the mind and in time settles into a state of “no-thought” which can lead to higher levels of creativity and vibrant health. Regular practice of meditation can facilitate the state of “flow” that is highly desirable for musical performers.

Imagery training. Students learn how to use their imaginations to produce relaxing images and thoughts with the goal of reducing and controlling mental anxiety. Once they have developed their ability to create pleasant mental images, the students are encouraged to visualize themselves in a series of successful performance situations. Visualization helps to transform anticipatory performance anxiety and can also be used to allay related feelings of dread and powerlessness. Imagery techniques can also be used by students for coping with pain associated with over-use injuries.

Music Therapy. Research shows that music therapy techniques can be especially beneficial in treating and preventing performance-related disorders in musicians. Musical improvisation, in particular, has been used to reawaken the original joy of “playing” music in stressed musicians. Improvisation helps musicians to connect with the essential elements and meaning of music (melody, rhythm, texture, form, etc.); fosters spontaneity and self-expression; develops intuition and imagination; activates “essential musical intelligence” – the innate ability to use music as a source of healing for self and other; facilitates inner listening; and keeps the musician focused in the present moment. Music students can develop emotional intelligence through exploring the spectrum of emotions through improvisational games such as “musical charades”. In this technique, students form small groups (3-4 members each) and one member randomly selects a folded piece of paper from a hat. Inscribed on the paper is a title of an emotionally-laden scenario that the students are invited to portray musically to the rest of the class (i.e. “Belonging; “She’s Gone”). The students discuss their interpretations of the scenario and decide how to convey its emotional tone and meaning through improvised music and pantomime. Students may use their own instruments or choose from a variety of instruments for improvisation (drums, recorders, xylophones, Tibetan bell bowls, etc.) provided for them. Once the musical scenario is performed, the remaining class members are asked to use their emotional intelligence in ascertaining the exact title. Along with emotional awareness, this music therapy technique helps students to develop a deeper aesthetic sensibility, spontaneity, group sensitivity, and joy and levity in musical performance.

Group musical improvisation helps music students to experience and understand the diverse roles and relationships that form within the musical context. While improvising together, musicians are encouraged to explore the typical roles that they play in groups and to try out new roles, particularly those that are threatening or offputting. Here students learn to trust in their innate musical intelligence, creativity, and authority, and, with time, become more able to trust fellow musicians. Group improvisation helps to

harmonize the polarization of authority and subordination and empowers musicians to be more assertive and risk-taking.

Renowned psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott wrote that it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. In summary, music therapy capitalizes on the “playful” approach to musical expression and helps stressed music students to connect with and honor the beauty inherent in their unique musical voices.

Disarming the “inner critic”. For those students with debilitating stage fright, it is important to understand how internalized negative voices from past traumatic performance experiences can sabotage the good feelings and self-confidence that enhance musical expression. Students are asked to allow these past negative criticisms and related feelings and images to emerge, and to express this disturbing energy in the form of a composite “inner critic” through spontaneous drawing. The student thus externalizes the negative introjects that get in the way of the “flow” experience and, at the same time, gains some distance from it. The student is then encouraged to creatively take back the power that was granted to the internalized critic through engaging in an improvised musical dialogue with this previously estranged part of the self. After the student has reclaimed split-off feelings relegated to the former internalized critic, he or she is then asked to perform a piece of music from this now unencumbered place. Most students experience a significant reduction in fear during this post-performance that usually transfers over to future performance situations.

Assertiveness training. Many creative individuals have difficulty communicating their feelings and needs to others. Students first learn the four styles of communicating: passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. They are then taught to discriminate between the different styles, and are offered a number of opportunities to practice assertive behavior in “real life” situations. Additionally, students learn empathic listening techniques, along with a variety of ways to say “no” effectively. (Qualitative research [Montello, 1992] suggests that many anxious musicians tend to be compliant in relational situations and find it difficult to stand up for themselves and say “no” when appropriate.) Finally, students are taught how to give constructive criticism and to cope with negative feedback.

Emotional intelligence. According to psychologist/author Daniel Goleman, emotional intelligence includes self-awareness and impulse control, persistence, zeal and self-motivation, empathy and social deftness. Most of the above wellness techniques facilitate emotional intelligence and can be extremely valuable in fostering health, creativity and performance mastery in college-age music students. In conclusion, the following 10 Steps to Emotional Wisdom taken from the book “Raising Your Emotional Intelligence” by Jeanne Segal nicely summarize the performance wellness approach:

1. Make care of your body a priority.
2. Search for feeling in your body, not your head.
3. Build emotional muscle every day by taking time to focus on emotional experience.
4. Be accepting of all that you feel.

5. Open your heart to others
6. Take action - do things that make you feel useful and relevant.
7. Listen with your empathy.
8. Tell them how you feel.
9. Use change as an opportunity for growth.
10. Take a dose of humor with you wherever you go.

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Website

Musicians' Wellness, Inc. – www.musicianswellness.org