

# Achieving the Balance We Need

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BY NATHAN LANGFITT, LPC

In what now feels like another lifetime, I was a middle school band director in Texas. I worked the long days, I cared deeply about the progress of my students, and I spent every free moment advocating to people who didn't understand why music education was so important. On many days, it felt like the entire system was destined for failure. There weren't enough hours in the day, and like most music educators I know, I put all of the responsibility on myself when things didn't go well.

The stress and burnout I experienced and that I witnessed in others led me to leave my teaching career and return to school to become a therapist. I wanted to do something to help the profession I had loved so much. I continued to see too many incredible music educators spreading themselves too thin, prioritizing their programs over their personal health and wellness, and then, unsurprisingly, burning out. Improving the mental health and well-being of musicians and music educators became my life's passion. I strongly believe there are shifts to our routines and to our thinking that can help us be more balanced individuals and, as a result, forge more sustainable careers in music education.

## Burnout and Music Education

Burnout has been defined as a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that leads to a decreased effectiveness at work, as well as harm to an individual's mental health. Some recent research has shown that the effects of burnout are on a similar level to the symptoms of depression. As we look at each of the previously mentioned elements, it becomes clear how teaching—especially teaching music—can lead to burnout.

**Emotional exhaustion** is a natural byproduct of the intense amount of effort, energy, and passion we put into teaching. The first cars in the school parking lot each morning and the last to leave each evening often belong to music teachers. Pair this with the amount of enthusiasm and energy required to teach large groups of students (who often respond less than enthusiastically) and our emotions grow weary and exhausted. This can lead us to become less responsive in our relationships outside teaching.

**Depersonalization** happens when we feel like all we do at work is push and pull the proverbial buttons and levers of our job. This could look like going through the motions, being overly immersed in routines, or becoming rigid and inflexible in decision-making.

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When we become disconnected from the music and from the real essence of why we are music educators, it can be easy to feel like more of a bureaucrat, or just a person who

operates a metronome and responds to emails all day.

**Reduced personal accomplishment** takes over when we no longer believe we are making an impact. This is where the adversity and barriers around us seem insurmountable—as if we have lost the control we need to be successful. I think of many of my peers who sink into a deep rut and even reconsider their career choice based on a less than favorable rating at UIL. When our self-worth becomes entangled with the music our students make, we are setting ourselves up for burnout and other issues.

## Strategies to Reduce Burnout

When music educators think about ways to improve their mental health, the strategies I recommend are a mix of tangible exercises and tools, as well as broader, more systemic ways of shifting

our thinking about our role and life as a teacher. Any of these interventions may be helpful, but I want to preface that changing the way we think about taking care of ourselves is a marathon, not a sprint. There is very seldom a day when we are “fixed,” because taking better care of ourselves is a long-term investment in our well-being.

Some music educators tell me they feel hopeless, because they believe they are already so burned out there is no turning back. If these exercises seem impossible in your current lifestyle, simply increasing your awareness can be a huge start. I like to prescribe the three following daily exercises of *pause and notice*:

1. Pause and notice your breathing.
2. Pause and notice what is working and what is not with a non-judgmental tone.
3. Pause and notice how you take care of yourself, and how you talk with yourself about this.

Any efforts to reduce burnout and improve mental health start with increasing our self-awareness. Perhaps starting with these will help you move to a place where you begin to see that you deserve to take care of yourself.

### Creating a Self-Care Plan

Learning to take better care of ourselves is often an exercise in noticing healthful things we already do, and then doing them with more deliberate intention. Many music educators have hobbies away from music, enjoy physical activity, or find it relaxing to read a book or do something creative. Some of us do these activities already, but do we pause and acknowledge that we do them because we deserve to take care of ourselves?

A self-care plan is a deliberate and daily practice that can increase well-being almost instantly. To start, I encourage my clients to pick two or three things they can commit to doing daily. These can be activities that take anywhere from five minutes to half a day, based on available time. The key to an effective self-care plan is being flexible yet structured at the same time, because the goal is to commit to our plan not just on easy days, but on the difficult ones as well. Here is a sample self-care plan:

1. Read or write for 10 minutes (about a topic unrelated to teaching music).
2. Do something good for the body.
3. Remind yourself of something that is going well.

Based on how busy a day is, this self-care plan could be elaborate, or it could be fairly simple. The goal is not the amount of time spent in self-care, it is rather to be consistent and do it every day. Let's take the second point: *do something good for the body*. On a busy day that could be eating a healthy lunch. On a day with more free time, that could look like a long bicycle ride. This is an example of a plan having structure yet allowing for flexibility.

We are much more likely to commit to self-care when our plan is written down. I encourage many of my clients to put their plan on a card and keep it in their wallet or purse. Even better, they can create accountability by telling a friend or colleague about their plan and encouraging them to make one of their own. I realize this may seem far-fetched in the hustle and rigors of a school day, but can you imagine a world where you tell one of your colleagues that you need to step away for just *10 minutes* to work on self-care? I would argue that shifting the workplace culture is as important

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for the success of a self-care plan as is the activity itself. We all deserve to take care of ourselves, even on the most stressful days of the school year. What if some of the effort we spend on improving the lives of our students were turned inward, even just for a moment each day?

### Creating Boundaries and Balance

The nature of music educators' work can seem almost *designed* to knock down boundaries between professional and personal. When you spend over 10 hours a day working at school and more on weekends, it can be easy to lose yourself.

Being an effective teacher involves a high level of emotional engagement and passion. To show students musical concepts, showing vulnerability can often be a valuable and necessary technique. Letting our guard down in this way can also blur our boundaries.

Developing more deliberate boundaries is an essential step to increasing well-being and reducing stress, but for many it can be challenging. It is challenging at first because many music educators think that being in teacher mode all the time is simply part of the job. This can be even harder to recognize as deleterious when colleagues exhibit similar behavior.

It can be most difficult to set boundaries in the moments when you come to and go from school. I suggest establishing *entering and exiting rituals*: something you commit to doing every time you travel between your work space and home life. Picture this as the moment you take off your superhero costume for the night. Maybe it is a specific music playlist in the car, or a mantra you recite to yourself as you take off your ID badge for the day. You are creating a ritual to remind yourself that work has ceased, and it is now time to connect with loved ones and take care of yourself. Little tools like this can hold us accountable and keep us from sliding into a habit of perpetually being in teacher mode.

### Identity and Self-worth

Most of us decided that music was going to be our life's work at a much younger age than our friends did in their other professions. For many, joining band, orchestra, or choir was the activity that gave us a sense of identity for the first time. This passion manifests into an all-in culture in college: most of our friends are music majors and it is completely normal to practice into the early hours of the morning. In music school, it becomes common to sacrifice our well-being; instead of spending those years developing an independent identity, we spend them developing a uniquely *musical identity*.

When our musical identity and personal identity bleed into one another, our musical successes and failures in the professional world often become our personal successes and failures. For example, imagine a performance that went poorly. Maybe the musician cracked some notes or had intonation issues that had never happened before. Instead of thinking, “That was



In 2016, TMEA surveyed its active members to better understand how music teachers perceive their work load and its effects. Those results included strategies from teachers about healthy eating, exercise, and achieving balance in your work and personal life. Learn from them at [www.tmea.org/balanceresults](http://www.tmea.org/balanceresults).

terrible,” he thinks, “I am terrible.” Self-worth and musical ability have become interwoven in a way that doesn’t allow us to process failure in a healthy way. This becomes even more problematic for music educators, as, every year, we essentially place our self-worth into the hands of a group of children.

It is easy to believe the only way to improve and grow as a musician is to be hard on ourselves. As teachers we are trained to dole out just the right amount of tough love, but when we do this for ourselves it is mostly *tough* with hardly any *love*. Simply noticing and attempting to shift our self-talk is a first step toward taking the sting off of harsh self-criticism.

### Caring for Ourselves and Our Profession

Any of the exercises or shifts in thinking I’ve suggested are just the start of looking inward and taking better care of yourself. Once we decide we deserve self-care and that we deserve to live a life free from needless suffering, the amount of personal growth can be astounding. I often catch clients off-guard when I tell them *they*

*don’t have to do anything to deserve happiness, kindness, and self-care.* We deserve all these things simply because we are alive, not because of how hard we work or how much we teach.

It may also be helpful to work through these topics with a therapist in your community. Working with a therapist can add a trained and objective voice and can help you identify individual hurdles preventing you from focusing inward and taking better care of yourself. With the Affordable Care Act’s mandate that therapy be covered by health insurance, working with a licensed therapist has become more accessible.

I often think about how it might only take a handful of educators to begin to shift the culture on mental health within the profession. Many educators believe the only way to be effective is to neglect their own needs. Once this is addressed, and once we remove the stigma around these conversations, I believe every music educator can live a healthier and happier life. 🎵

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