

How the Busiest People Alive Thrive

By Lisa Garner Santa and Shauna Kay Thompson

Do you often feel like you don't have enough time to get everything done or find yourself experiencing an overwhelming level of stress?

While we aren't medical doctors, physical therapists, or mental health care providers, we have explored and directly experienced enhanced wellness from a variety of practices and are pleased to share what we've learned. We hope it can help others who have demanding jobs with great responsibilities.

Burnout is prevalent among music educators. Dr. Lynn Cooper (Midwest Clinic, December 2004) cited discipline issues, school reform and change, curricular issues, lack of support, low pay, excess paperwork, and multiplicity of roles as the primary causes of burnout. Music educators are often led to believe that the harder and longer you work, the more you will accomplish. We believe that more intentional activities, coupled with self-care, will allow for more productive days, a longer career, and a more balanced life. Four essential elements require our focus to ensure better overall wellness: nutrition, sleep, exercise, and mental health.

Consider the following five-pronged strategy and some pragmatic approaches within each that can help bring these elements into your work life:

Wellness Tools to Fuel Teaching and Prevent Burnout



Set Appropriate Boundaries

These days, it's easy to allow students, parents, and colleagues to gain access to us 24/7. If we don't protect our personal time, we can quickly develop a feeling of burnout. To determine what's appropriate for you, first identify your priorities. Make a list of 3–5 priorities in your life and get specific. Rather than simply naming *family* as a priority, document something like “spend one hour of intentional, uninterrupted time with my family most evenings.” How you spend your time should reflect your list of priorities to create a more intentionally balanced life.

Sleep is an area where we all must build protective boundaries. Research tells us that adults need a minimum of seven hours of sleep each night and some people need more. Sleep is necessary for your brain to function at its highest capacity, your digestive system to run smoothly, and your muscles to recover from fatigue created by exercise or long work days. To protect your sleep, think whimsically and treat yourself like

a toddler! Determine your bedtime to ensure you get the needed amount of sleep, and set an alarm to remind yourself to begin your bedtime routine to support that schedule. Eliminate screen time, particularly on your phone and social media, right before sleep. Even if you haven't finished everything on today's to-do list, remind yourself it will be there tomorrow and that you need adequate sleep to work through it more efficiently.

Conversely, it can be helpful to acknowledge there will be periods when this balance is impossible. Instead of feeling like you're failing, plan for those times of intentional imbalance. For example, you may need to reduce family time during competition week, so commit to spend more time with them and less time at work the following week.



Make Nutritious Meals and Snacks

The food you put into your body turns into the energy that fuels your work day and mental thought processes. In our fast-paced days, many of us struggle to find the time to eat balanced meals frequently throughout the day. Here are three simple steps you can take this week:

Eat More Frequently: Whether you're trying to lose weight or can't seem to find time in your day, it is tempting to skip meals. When you sleep at night, your body goes into a state of fasting,

and your metabolism slows down. Your metabolism won't increase again until you eat your first meal of the day. This is why breakfast is critical! After you break your fast, your metabolism will rise, allowing nutrients to be broken down and used by your body and facilitating weight loss, if that is one of your goals. To maintain your active metabolism, eat at least every 2.5–3 hours throughout the day. This will also eliminate the "brain fog" or afternoon crash we often experience.

Prepare: When trying to eat more frequently, it might be tempting to grab the most readily available food. Do a little prep work the weekend or evening before to ensure the most accessible food isn't something out of a vending machine and instead contains balanced nutrients. Unless advised by your doctor to avoid some food group, try to eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, proteins, healthy fats, and carbohydrates throughout the day to allow your body to process the nutrients. You don't need to cram all your vegetables into one salad at lunch; eat them in smaller portions, several times through the day. Snacks are equally as valuable as sit-down meals! Some of our favorite snack ideas as we transition between classes include hard boiled eggs, baby carrots, cherry tomatoes, chopped fruit, nuts, and yogurt.

Beware of Added Sugars: In our American diets, there are many packaged foods, even some claiming to be health foods, that contain excess amounts of added sugar. Different from naturally occurring sugars in foods such as fruit, added sugar has an addictive quality. One of the ways we most frequently consume these added sugars is through soft drinks. Whether real soda with sugar or diet soda with artificial sweeteners, these drinks keep us addicted to sugar and cause sweet cravings all day. Try replacing

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soda with carbonated water or black coffee. It might take some time to break the habit, but once you do, you will notice fruits and vegetables tasting much fresher and sweeter.



Incorporate Fit Breaks

Taking 5–10-minute exercise breaks can change your physical and mental state and help prevent injury from the repetitive movements often experienced by conductors and instrumentalists. It's easy to find an excuse not to exercise (it's too hot, I'm out of shape, I'm not flexible, I'm too busy). With short fit breaks you'll build basic strength and mobility without even breaking a sweat! Here are a few ideas:

Breath of Joy: Inhale (not fully) through the nose as you swing the arms forward and parallel to the earth, inhale through the nose more as you swing the arms open to the sides, and finish inhaling through the nose a third time as you swing the arms up and overhead. Exhale through the mouth in one big sigh as you fold your body over. Repeat several times at a pace that feels appropriate for your fitness level. This exercise saturates the blood with oxygen while releasing tension in the shoulders and hips, leaving you feeling energized and mentally alert.

Empty Coat Sleeves: Imagine you have a raincoat on that is about three sizes too big. Inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth as you rotate your torso to the right allowing the arms to spiral out from the body and then flop around and onto it. Then immediately rotate left, allowing your floppy arms to follow. This breathwork, along with the twisting in the torso, will help improve the natural detoxification processes of the body while also providing an energetic pick-me-up.

Neck and Shoulder Mobility: From a seated or standing position, reach your left fingertips toward the ground as you take your right ear toward your right shoulder—for a deeper stretch, apply gentle pressure to the left side of your head with your right hand. Repeat on the other side. While standing, interlace fingers in front of you, and then rotate the palms away from the body. Press through the palms as you round the torso, broadening the space between your shoulder blades in your upper back. Return to neutral. Clasp your hands behind you. As you straighten your arms, draw the shoulder blades toward each other, opening your chest.

Hand and Wrist Health: Rotate wrists in circles, alternating directions. Gently flex the wrist—assist the stretch by gently drawing the back of the hand toward the torso with the opposite hand. Gently extend the wrist—assist the stretch by gently drawing the fingers toward the body with the opposite hand. Repeat on the other side.



Three Minutes of Silence

This simple practice is like restarting your computer. Find a quiet place, and if that's not possible, use noise reducing head-

phones. Set a timer for three minutes. Sit comfortably upright or lay flat on the floor in silence. You are likely to notice that your mind races, perhaps even listing all the things you need to get done. This is okay. Don't try to limit your thoughts or stop them. Just bring your awareness to your breath. Notice your breath and all the sensations related to it. If you notice that you've returned to your other thoughts, just gently come back to the breath. Three minutes may feel like a long time at first. As you become comfortable with being still for even a few minutes, your body and mind will learn to easily relax and release tension. Just three minutes of silence can help clear the mind and renew a sense of energy.



Make Positive Affirmations

Inviting positive affirmations into your day doesn't mean that you have to accept a Pollyanna mindset. Positive affirmations are a way to focus your thinking and your action toward creating a productive and supportive internal environment.

If you notice yourself complaining about a situation or assuming others have negative thoughts about you, take a moment to craft a statement that inspires a positive outcome. For example, if you're prone to thinking that you are a disappointment, think instead, "I enjoy developing my skills as an educator." If you find yourself craving fast food, consider thinking, "I choose to eat foods that nourish my body and mind." Start affirmations with an "I" statement, followed by an action that moves you in the direction you desire to go. Write statements on cards that you can keep in your wallet or purse or display them where you can easily refer to them when you are in the moment of choice.

Putting It into Practice

Every month is busy for educators, but May offers its additional challenges, with end-of-year activities and the task of keeping your students and yourself fully engaged through the last day. During this final month of the year, practice at least one of these ideas offered. Then, over summer break, take advantage of the slower pace to incorporate more of them into your daily life. Your break from the classroom should be an opportunity for restoration, so take that time to focus on improving your overall wellness to help lessen future feelings of burnout.

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