

Mental Health and Music Educators

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From many perspectives, all of us are responsible for the health and wellness of all of us. In the context of what music education faculty can do to assist wellness for ourselves and our students, I have three points to make in brief.

First, we can “be the wellness.” Taking care of ourselves best prepares us for being good and effective teachers. So, an initial step is accepting the responsibility to model mental health. Through our example, we show students that we strive for mental and physical health and that we cultivate behaviors that contribute to wellness. Each day for each lesson, we can recreate classroom environments that stimulate healthy thinking, interactions, and behaviors. When we “be the wellness,” we often reap wellness.

Secondly, we can “talk the wellness.” By offering occasional “think alouds,” we share how we reorient or regain equilibrium after an unsettling experience. In formal (classroom, conference) and informal (spontaneous conversation) settings, our own strategies in striving for wellness can offer insight to students. Yet, striving is not necessarily arriving, when it comes to wellness. We are all “temporarily able-minded” and sharing our occasional struggles reveals the normalcy and perennial presence of large and small setbacks to mental health that life brings. When sharing personal perspectives with students, attention to the tricky area of boundary violation in professional relationships is warranted. Be cautious with dispensing advice and counsel.

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Finally, we can ask, "Does music *really* make us 'gooder'?" For hundreds of years, written and spoken words have touted the "goodness" of music. This goodness takes many forms and implies that the performance of music, in particular, is a balm, a tonic, an elixir, a mystical cocoon that somehow elevates music-makers from the mundaneness that permeates nonmusicians lives. By association, the deification of music anoints those who perform it.

Insidious as it may be, the notion that "music makes us 'gooder'" is worth a look. Consider this argument:

- If music is good, then the performance of music must make us gooder.
- If we are gooder when we perform music, then the goodest musicians may actually be the goodest people.
- If we cannot perform music the goodest, then by consequence, we must be less good: we are indeed badder.

The reality or preponderance of this reasoning is prevalent in our field and our society. Listen to the language used our schools of music when faculty or students talk about a musician (student or faculty) who is not as musically proficient as he or she "should" be or wants to be. Listen in the hallways for how the quality of the individual and the quality of the musical prowess get blended into one synopsis of the "person." Listen for the messages we give each other about whether or not we "measure up" as musician-people. Attainment of mental wellness seems destined for severe obstacles in schools of music under conditions that we may be unwittingly proliferating.