

Practical Tips to Help Prevent Health Problems in Performing Artists

Paying Attention

Many of these injuries can be prevented or the time away from practice can be decreased by just paying attention. It is much better to nip these problems in the bud than to wait until they become overwhelming. One musician quoted in the Musician's Way Blog, Janet Horvath, cellist, stated, "I continued to play with a sore arm with the rationalization that I could play through the pain and that the discomfort would just miraculously go away as I got into better shape as a cellist. But the pain did not go away, it got worse." Here are a few ways to pay attention:

1. **Watch out for overuse.** As a musician, at your level, you probably play very efficiently, but do you do this relentlessly? Take regular mini or micro breaks throughout your practice time and limit the repetition. There may be times when this is not possible, but in general, healthcare professionals recommend that you increase activity no more than 10-20% per week.
2. **Avoid misuse.** It is important that you develop and practice a strong technique. Some of your instructors may use Alexander technique or Feldenkrais method. Whichever technique that you use, practice it on a regular basis. Key points to take away are to use the wrist in midranges of motion, then align and lengthen your spine to minimize tension.
3. **Accidents.** Aside from avoiding accidents in daily life, take care when you are hauling your instrument or dealing in stressful performance situations. Please allow yourself ample set up time before practice and concerts.
4. **Be aware of your anatomy.** We all differ somewhat in proportion and how an instrument matches our physique. For example, a musician with shorter fingers may need extensions placed on selected keys for their wind instruments or may prefer a petite-size guitar. You may have already made these types of adjustments but they are important to consider as your musical career continues.
5. **Know yourself.** There may be time when you are particularly stressed or ill. We commonly use the following recommendations called the Neck-Up/Neck-Down Rule. If you have symptoms above the neck and you are not running a fever, you probably need a small amount of rest and avoid spreading this to other people. This is all that is needed. If you have symptoms from the "neck down" such as cough, associated with fever, chills and body aches, you should probably consult with a healthcare provider. You may also have certain medical conditions that needs monitoring. For example, asthma during a stressful performance or fasting blood sugar if you are a diabetic and have been practicing for long periods of time.

Ergonomics

Some of these maladies can totally be prevented by taking a few simple steps.

1. **Breathe – Move – Center.** Depending upon your music medium, you should do a few things to warm up before you practice. This would include moving your arms and shoulders in circles or rolls, yoga or even tai chi movements. It is important that you develop something for you, as an individual, and try to do it before every practice and performance.
2. **Set up goals.** What am I going to do today? Am I going to do speed building exercises? Am I going to practice high velocity music? Am I going to focus more on my repertoire? Don't try to do too much with each session.

3. **Be mindful.** As you unpack your instrument and set things up, start to focus in your artistic mindset – never blast through the steps in preparing. Affirm your passion for your art every day.
4. **Begin moderately.** Always start slowly and increase your tempo and speed as you go.
5. **Mix it up.** You might start with gentle improvisation one day and proceed to a variety of techniques or change your registry. If a particular technique feels odd, you might want to review and target a specific exercise.
6. **Finish fast.** If possible, try to conclude your warm up in 10-15 minutes so that you may be nimble and focused. Extended drills can lead to exhaustion during rehearsals and performances.
7. **Lastly, develop something called the “effort meter.”** This is something that you can use to identify how you are doing on any particular day. Concentrate on an imaginary meter in your head that measures the effort that you are putting forth on a scale of 0 to 10. Zero represents inactivity and 10 represents maximum effort. During your course of practice or performance, this effort meter may change rapidly. The issue is to try to not stay in the “red zone,” (above 8) for prolonged periods of time. For example, if you are playing an instrument very intensely, you might practice and apply less pressure with your hands to free up your shoulders until the effort meter drops to a manageable position. This can also be used in another way. If you are having a particular bad day before practice, you may walk in with your meter high. It is a good idea to relax. Possibly talk to someone before starting your session.