

Idea Bank

Stress-Reduction Strategies for Music Teachers

Margaret H. Berg and Megan L. Lewin



Margaret H. Berg
Photo courtesy of the author



Megan L. Lewin
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Have you found yourself feeling stressed but not sure how to incorporate stress reduction strategies into an already full schedule? We'd like to share with you some strategies we've used to reduce stress by intentionally attending to stress reduction both during and outside of the school day. We often remind ourselves that stress reduction is promoted by focusing on what can be controlled, and by making professional and/or lifestyle changes as needed.

Recent publications document some of the causes of teacher stress, many of which originate from factors a teacher cannot directly control, such as teacher shortages, increased class

sizes, additional student accountability measures, and teacher evaluation documentation requirements.¹ Music teachers experience additional stresses that other teachers may not due to larger class sizes, after-school performance events, isolation from music teaching colleagues, and changes in teaching assignments due to prioritizing "core" subject staffing.²

At the same time, teachers *and* students face daily stressors, such as schedule changes, test score pressure, and social confrontation. These stressors set off the stress response cycle in the body, starting with the sympathetic nervous system activating the fight, flight, or freeze mechanism. Unfortunately, escaping the

stressor does not mean that we have escaped the stress that physically manifests in the body.³ Holding onto stress can lead to not only tension and anxiety but also depression and self-induced isolation.⁴ Since stress is in essence stuck in the body, *the way to release the stress and complete the stress response cycle is to move.* Movement can include physical and focused-breathing activities. The following strategies demonstrate how "wellness is not a state of being, but a state of action,"⁵ promoted through the teacher and students engaging in physical activities designed to process physical symptoms in order to complete the stress response cycle.

During the School Day

Five-Minute Stress Reduction Strategies

It is imperative that the teacher engage in the activities introduced below so that students have a positive role model and the teacher has the opportunity to process stress throughout the day to remain as effective as possible. These activities take five minutes or less to complete and can be incorporated as a class warm-up or transition activity completed by the teacher and the entire class.⁶

- Physical activities include actions such as stretching, yoga, or light cardio that trick the brain into thinking the body has run away from a stressor. Any of these options can be

Margaret H. Berg is a professor of music education and the associate dean for graduate studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She can be contacted at Margaret.Berg@colorado.edu. Megan L. Lewin is director of bands at Westminster High School in Westminster, Colorado. She is also a clinician for MakeMusic. She can be reached at mlewin@wps.org.

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used in a chair if space is limited and do an excellent job of releasing tension and increasing oxygen flow.

- Breathing exercises are another way to complete the stress response cycle; these exercises naturally align with training young musicians to develop strong breath support. Slow, controlled breaths tell the brain that the body is safe, which signals the body to relax. The teacher can use a breathing ball to demonstrate the movement of the lungs to breathe in for four seconds and out for four seconds, then in for two and out for eight, and next in for two while raising the arms and sizzling out (a slow, hissing exhale) for eight.
- Deep belly laughter is a physical way to process stress, and it increases connections between students and the teacher. Watching funny videos on YouTube that bring joy to you and your students or telling jokes provides an opportunity to release tension as a community.

Beyond physically processing stress, teachers and students can emotionally process stress through positive social interactions, which can take the form of greetings at the door, scripted conversations, or icebreakers. Building connections with others for even a few moments releases endorphins and can occur via facial expressions and body language for students who get anxious talking out loud with others. A scripted conversation may include having the students walk around to music and, when it stops, reading a question off the board to get conversation flowing between students who are standing near each other, such as “What is your favorite part of the music we are playing, and why?” The teacher can have a bank of options for the answer if this would be helpful to students. Showing affection also completes the stress response cycle through words of affirmation, specific praise, and expressing gratitude in words or writing. Teachers and students are natural critics of their own performance, and a friendly reminder that you are doing well tells

the body to stop producing stress hormones. The reminder can come from another person in the room or from oneself. The more teachers and students practice showing praise, the safer and more supportive the learning environment becomes.

Last, teachers and students can complete the stress response cycle through creative expression. Music educators have a powerful tool at their fingertips every day and should challenge themselves and their students to engage in creative expression in the classroom by unlocking musical possibilities beyond what is written on the page. Discovering the possibilities as a class provides an opportunity for students to forge bonds with each other. Creative expression can also take the form of visual art, movement, and imagination exercises that push the mind to create pictures and stories related to the music. While this requires vulnerability, creative expression activities can foster deeper connections between students and promote community building.

No matter which five-minute stress reduction activities teachers and students engage in, the outcome can be decreased stress levels, increased focus, and closer community. Investing a small amount of time in stress reduction activities pays off later when students are able to independently process their stress in positive ways that lead to increased engagement during class.

Core Reflection

Teachers can engage in core reflection during planning by being conscious of their character strengths, felt reactions to classroom events, goals for student learning, and teaching mission.⁷ Rather than approaching planning as merely problem-solving, begin by noticing any tension you are feeling in your body when thinking about today’s class, and then articulate your goals. Incorporate a positive view of the situation, which includes reminding yourself of your particular strengths that can be applied to a challenge. The core reflection

approach can decrease physical stress in teachers as they become aware of tension and mitigate it via stretching or mindful breathing before making decisions about the plan for the next day’s class.

Here is an example of a teacher engaging in core reflection at the end of the school day. Notice the teacher’s awareness of tension in the body and how she attends to what she is feeling along with student learning goals. This leads to considering positive moments in the rehearsal, the teacher’s deeper goals, and her core qualities or character strengths that she can apply to the situation.

“The first violins still aren’t quite together on their eighth-note entrances in the first measure of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*,” Ms. Smith said to herself as she collapsed into her office desk chair. Ms. Smith takes three deep breaths, followed by a body scan from her feet to her head. During the body scan, she notices tension at the nape of her neck. Ms. Smith then asks herself a series of questions, each followed with a response. “What am I thinking right now? Clearly I’m thinking about the first violin entrance in the first measure! What am I feeling? I’m feeling tension and frustration. What do I want in this situation? Well, obviously, I’d love uniform entrances from the first violins in the first measure!”

Instead of thinking about various rehearsal strategies used in previous rehearsals, she next takes a few deep breaths, pausing to think about what went well in today’s rehearsal. “It was really great to see the looks in their eyes, especially from the students in the back of the sections, when they heard for the first time how it sounds and feels to have *everyone* begin together, playing softly at the tip of the bow. It took several tries, but they hung in there with each other, as did I with them, for us to sound like ‘one big violin’.” Ms. Smith says to herself, “That’s what I want.” “I’m patient and persistent, and I have a gift for building community in my orchestra classes.” Ms. Smith then returns to thinking about the first violin eighth-note entrances in the first measure.⁸

Outside of the School Day

While some stress reduction strategies can be applied during the school day—just prior to a class,⁹ during a class or rehearsal, or during a planning period—other strategies require a longer block of time, which is likely outside of the school day during an extended break or the summer. Since teachers have varying extracurricular commitments, these strategies can be used on a monthly or quarterly basis. What is most important is committing to a schedule of when you will devote time to using the strategy.

The Teacher Wellness Inventory

A first step is to inventory your occupational, emotional, financial, spiritual, and physical wellness by responding “true” or “false” to ten items for each wellness area. An example physical-wellness item is “I am satisfied with my current energy level.” Teachers then prioritize wellness areas that received a lower total score. The next step is to commit to making specific changes that will result in increased wellness for a chosen wellness area. For each wellness area, priorities are set and specific associated actions created. For example, a teacher who will focus on physical well-being may prioritize nutrition (“I am changing my nutrition”) with a specific action (“by making healthful lunches for the next day each evening”). Committing to making specific changes can keep you from feeling overwhelmed while also helping to create realistic goals. You can find the Teacher Wellness Inventory and a “Change Organizer” in the book *The Power of a Teacher: Restoring Hope and Well-Being to Change Lives* by clinical psychologist Adam L. Sáenz.¹⁰

For the strategies introduced in this article, the teacher needs to both create an action plan and regularly review progress toward goals. Ideally, this review occurs with a trusted colleague or group of colleagues, a mentor, or a friend. Reviewing our progress with others provides a way to hold ourselves accountable for and committed

to making progress on our plans and goals, even if we’ve accomplished less than we anticipated. At the same time, talking with others about our challenges and goals fosters community and connection with others, thus serving as an antidote to the isolation experienced by many music teachers that can lead to career dissatisfaction, burnout, and teacher attrition.¹¹

Restore and Reflect

Another strategy is to reflect on accomplishments from the previous grading period or school year. This “restore” approach to reflection begins with the teacher as the source for ideas. It is important to focus on growth and successes, rather than on disappointments or mistakes, thus fostering a positive mindset and seeing the good in situations.¹²

Teachers can also participate in extended core reflection activities, both individually via journaling and by talking with other teachers. The book *Practicing Core Reflection: Activities and Lessons for Teaching and Learning from Within* by education professors Frits G. Evelein and Fred A. J. Korthagen includes many prompts that can be used to learn how to integrate core reflection into your teaching.¹³ It is also possible to work with a core reflection coach, who can help the teacher learn how to apply the five-phase core reflection model to specific teaching experiences.¹⁴ The development of a deeper understanding of core reflection, coupled with applications to teaching challenges, can help mitigate underlying stress. This stress is often experienced as unease that may be the result of lack of awareness of a teacher’s particular teaching vision and mission.

By incorporating strategies that take a short or extended amount of time to implement, you will be able to better handle stress. Our hope is that by using some of these strategies with your students, with your colleagues, or on your own, you’ll not only mitigate the negative impacts of stress but also

realize sustained commitment to and satisfaction with your work, relationships with students and colleagues, and music-making.

NOTES

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